

**Euro-Mediterranean Populism:  
Navigating Populist Foreign Policy around the Mare Nostrum**

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**Abstract**

Populist politics in Southern Europe displays several distinctive patterns related to a shared history, geography, culture, and economy, while being subject to similar geopolitical pressures. In the last decade, moreover, the Euro-Mediterranean region has been struck by destabilizing shocks: the Eurozone crisis and the refugee crisis, which led to a realignment of party politics, with populist parties of both the left and the right enjoying high levels of popular support and taking, or have gotten close to taking, governmental power. These patterns make Southern Europe an interesting case for the study of populism and foreign policy through a (sub-)regional comparative approach. This article applies a structured, focused comparison of the populist foreign policies (PFP) of France, Italy, Spain, and Greece, seeking to explain how populist leaderships have shaped foreign policy in these countries and the conditions under which their PFP were translated into action. After putting Euro-Mediterranean populism in context, we examine four structural themes of catalysts or constraints that populists face when ‘navigating’ PFP around the European Mare Nostrum: international power distribution, ideological underpinnings, domestic political system, and policy domains. The comparative analysis reveals how, while populist performances are often aimed at executing a rupture and, as a result, gaining legitimacy, the implementation of PFP in Southern Europe has ultimately been affected by structural pressures to discard these revolutionary impulses and align with the mainstream.

## **Introduction**

The European Mare Nostrum has experienced a populist ‘tsunami’ in the past two decades. In Italy and Greece, populist parties took full control of government in previous years through unorthodox or idiosyncratic coalitions of progressive and right-wing parties. In Spain, on the other hand, populist parties of the far left and right complicate the government formation strategies of mainstream parties, while in France, both left-wing and right-wing populists are the major opposition to a centrist liberal government.

Within this variation, populist politics in Southern Europe display several distinctive patterns. Where populist parties entered government, they adopted largely pragmatic foreign policies, contrasting with other experiences of populist governments in Europe and beyond. How to explain this singularity? One possible reason is that Southern European countries share some fundamental features, including history, geography, culture, political and economic systems, while being subject to similar geopolitical pressures. In the last decade, moreover, the four mentioned countries have been struck by similar destabilizing shocks: the Eurozone crisis, the refugee crisis, the covid pandemic and their vicinity to geopolitical crises in Ukraine and the Middle East. The first two shocks had already led to a realignment of party politics, as centre-right and centre-left lost legitimacy, and populist parties of both the left and the right enjoyed high levels of popular support and took, or have come close to, governmental power.

Similarities and differences in these four countries’ shared experience of external events and in their historical narratives in dealing with hegemonic and contending powers invite us to analyse populist foreign policies there through a comparative perspective. In this article, we seek to explain the ways in which populist leaderships in the European Mare Nostrum have shaped foreign policy, as well as the conditions under which this formulation was translated into action. To accomplish this, the article frames populism primarily as a discursive strategy based on antagonizing between (‘the will of...’) ‘the people’ and (‘the will of...’) ‘the elites’, and populist foreign policy (PFP) as a practice which aims to project transnationally this ideational struggle between these two alleged opposite wills (see Hadiz and Chryssogelos 2017; Giurlando and Wajner 2023; Stengel et al 2019; Wehner and Thies 2020).

Naturally, while PFP performances are aimed at executing a rupture and as a result gaining legitimacy, they are ultimately affected by structural catalysts and constraints. On the one hand, this concerns the systemic distribution of international power, affecting interactions with hegemonic (such as United States and the European Union) and contending powers (such as Russia and China). On the other hand, it concerns domestically the relative strength of parties

and institutions. In Greece, Italy and Spain, these constraints ultimately forced populist parties to remain aligned with the Western mainstream. A similar process of partial normalization of foreign policy positions has taken place in France, although populists have not taken power there (but show increasing popularity). Hence, a systematic intra-regional comparison between populists with similar cultural characteristics and structural constraints, but also different national relative power and different domestic institutional environments, could potentially generate constructive insights about PFP.

The article proceeds as follows. First, we introduce the developing knowledge about populist foreign policy, including the theoretical lacunae that drives this study, followed by the rationale for research design and the selected methodology. Second, we put Southern European populism into context, providing an empirical background of the historical presence of populist leaderships and attitudes in the region. Third, we examine the singular characteristics of ‘navigating’ PFP around the European Mare Nostrum, through a structured, focused comparison of the four case studies based on four specific themes. Finally, we summarize our conclusions and delineate several ideas for further research on the features of European populist foreign policies and its impact on geopolitics, regional integration processes, and governance in Europe.

### **Navigating Populist Foreign Policy between Catalysts and Constraints**

Populist Foreign Policy (PFP) is one of the emerging fields in contemporary International Relations (IR) and Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA) (Chryssogelos et al 2023; Hadiz and Chryssogelos 2017; Giurlando and Wajner 2023; Stengel et al 2019; Wehner and Thies 2020). Vast empirical knowledge and rich theoretical insights have been accumulated based on PFP cases studies, with a huge variance in terms of geographical scope, from North America (Boucher and Thies 2019; Löfflman 2019; Skonieczny 2019), Latin America (Doval and Colalongo 2021; Farias, Casarões, and Magalhães 2022; Fouquet 2022; Guimarães and Silva 2021; Wajner 2021; Wehner 2022), Western Europe (Bonansinga 2022; Chryssogelos 2020; Diodato and Niglia 2019; Giurlando 2021, Verbeek and Zazlove, 2015), Central Eastern Europe (Cadier and Szulecki 2019; Visnovitz and Jenne 2022; Özdamar and Ceydilek 2020; Söderbaum, Spandler, and Pacciardi 2020), Southeast Asia (Plagemann and Destradi 2018; Wojczewski 2019), and the Middle East (Özpek and Yaşar 2018; Taş 2020).

However, despite this progress, we contend that the conditions under which PFP is implemented have been overlooked, making it difficult to assess its potential impact. Indeed,

we assume that, when populist leaders come to power, they are faced with multiple factors that may constrain or enhance how they originally planned to implement their foreign policies. Therefore, we affirm that PFP is largely conditional on structural and contextual factors, including the national political system, external power structures, ideological origins of populists and the different policy domains in which decisions are made. In other words, when deciding whether to project the struggle between the ‘people’ and the ‘elites’ transnationally, populists need to manoeuvre between catalysts and constraints. To survive politically, they need to ‘navigate’ their foreign policy in a way that is consistent with the preferences of their political bases, while taking care not to put too much pressure on structural, contextual, and political conditions.

In terms of research design, our study follows a regional-comparative approach. Intra-regional comparison is especially useful for validating and enriching generalizations, either by highlighting limitations or by identifying further cultural, ideological, and political features, which can also contribute to identifying theoretical and empirical gaps for further research (on the benefits of regional comparative approaches, see Katzenstein 2005; Haftel 2012; Press-Barnathan et al. 2018). Systematic comparative analyses within the same (sub-)region—where geopolitical, economic, and cultural features tend to be shared to a greater extent—are crucial for the growing populist foreign policy research program to advance.

In terms of methodology, we apply a structured, focused comparison (see George and Bennett 2005, 67-77), in which we address a set of four specific, standardized aspects in each of the four countries in which populist leaderships are under study (France, Greece, Italy, and Spain). Accomplishing this task includes presenting observations primarily from secondary sources. Indeed, the populist parties under discussion have generated a large literature, but mostly in the form of single-country case studies that are rarely placed in a broader (sub)regional comparative context. Insights from these individual cases will be complimented with selected findings from primary sources such as party platforms, speeches, memoirs, and comments to the media.

Regarding the specific aspects to be delved into as part of the focused, structured comparison—and after a contextualization of the different populist parties—we focus on four elements that we consider key for PFP, either as catalysts or constraints, of populists’ transnational projection of the struggle between the ‘people’ and the ‘elites’:

- 1) *International power distribution*: Structural variables restrict a country’s options in its international interactions (see Alden and Aran 2016:82-100; Breuning 2007:141-162).

The material distribution of military power, geopolitical pressures and economic capabilities affect the way populist leaderships formulate, plan and implement their foreign policies (Chryssogelos 2022; Giurlando 2021, Destradi and Plagemann 2019). Perhaps partly for this reason, populists in the Global South often display different foreign policy stances than populist governments in the Global North (Dodson and Dorraj 2008; Sagarzazu and Thies 2019). Yet power structures not only constrain or catalyze PFP towards hegemonic powers with status quo approaches; for instance, through this lens we can address PFP relations with Russia and China, and to a lesser extent Iran. Closer ties to contending global or regional powers serve to soft-balance opponents historically viewed as predatory enemies (Giurlando 2021, Henke and Maher 2021; Wajner and Roniger 2019). Moreover, long-standing historical legacies of alliances, geopolitical rivalries and regional dynamics play a key role in how power relations are interpreted and translated into autonomy, cooperation or competition.

- 2) *Ideological characteristics*: The ideological orientations of political leaders generally influence the formulation of foreign policy, for example the divide between progressivism and conservatism, or socialism and liberalism, more popularly described as ‘left’ versus ‘right’. Next to priorities and styles of foreign policy, these ideological affinities influence the search for potential allies abroad. Furthermore, these ‘thick’ ideologies also limit the malleability of ‘elites’ and ‘people’ as discursive articulations (see Destradi and Plagemann 2021; Chryssogelos 2020). Indeed, the ‘empty signifier’ of the ‘people’ is never infinitely ‘empty’. That said, on some issues of international politics, populism of far left and right do not differ substantially but find common ground in specific struggles (see De Cleen et al 2021; Soderbaum et al 2021; Wajner 2022).
- 3) *Domestic political system*: Populist governments are constrained by domestic variables that, to varying degrees, condition their ability to implement the promised revolutionary break in their international interactions. From this perspective, PFPs are intermediated by local institutions and agencies, which explains the gaps between how political leaderships articulate foreign policy and their actual results. Among these domestic constrainters or catalysts, we can highlight the nature of government regimes, the type of electoral systems, and the institutional norms of political parties. Indeed, PFP’s scope

can be affected by the regime's position on the democracy-authoritarianism axis (see Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Muller 2017; Norris and Inglehart 2019; Zurn 2021). Presidential and parliamentary systems also have implications for the ways populism translates into international politics, given the need to maintain a political coalition and respect check and balances (see Pappas 2019; Weyland 2020). In addition, issues such as electoral system (proportional or not), party system (two- or multi-party), bureaucratic powers, parties' institutional traditions and the media structure also impact the leaderships' ability to execute their populist foreign policy preferences (see De Vreese, et al 2018; Löfflmann 2019, Krebs 2020; Moffitt 2016; Roberts 2006).

- 4) *Policy domains*: The policy domain can also constrain or catalyze PFP patterns. Indeed, the processes of formulation and implementation of foreign policy differ greatly depending on the place that the issue occupies in the national hierarchy of priorities and the need for international cooperation. Among these policy domains, we can refer to regional integration, international security, international economy (including industry, trade, and finance), global governance (for instance, climate change or pandemics). The importance of each of these domains is often related to structural and contextual conditions, including the distribution of power among state bureaucracies, security and socio-economic legacies, historical narratives, and the weight of social institutions (see Stengel et al 2019:366-369; Wajner and Giurlando 2023:15-18).

## **Populist Foreign Policy in the Euro-Mediterranean region**

### ***Contextualizing Mediterranean Populism: Global and Domestic Sources***

Euro-Mediterranean populism did not emerge in a vacuum. It developed alongside a populist outbreak around the world, affected by several global crises that erupted in the post-Cold War context: the financial crisis of the Global South in 1998-2002, the Eurozone crisis since 2009, the global financial crisis 2008-9 and the migration crisis since the 'Arab Springs' of 2011. The combination of crises gradually highlighted the representation deficits of national governments and the legitimation deficits of the technocratic “establishments” behind regional integration, international cooperation, and global governance (see Mudde 2007; Zürn 2004). Several shocking events subsequently reinforced this populist 'zeitgeist', including the terrorist waves promoted by Al Qaeda and ISIS, the military operations of Vladimir Putin's Russia, the victory of the Brexit referendum and the presidential victory of Donald Trump in the United States.

In this context, populist leaderships in France, Greece, Italy, and Spain were able to politicize, contest, and mobilize, and thus gives expression to a sense of grievance that resulted from the socio-economic and political crises of the past two decades (Clements et al 2014; Katsanidou and Otjes 2016). Populists consequently seized full governmental power in Greece and Italy, in both cases made up of idiosyncratic coalitions of right-wing and left-wing parties. Populist parties emerged from these crises as the bearers of popular discontent with austerity, ultimately leading to the creation of unorthodox all-populist governing coalitions: the government of the radical-left SYRIZA after the double parliamentary elections of 2012 and the right-nationalist ANEL in Greece between 2015-19; and the government of the progressive populist Five Star Movement and the far-right Lega in Italy between 2018 and 2019. Despite their diverse ideological backgrounds, all these parties successfully framed these events in terms of the systemic failure of the political regimes in their countries (Bosco & Verney 2021).

Meanwhile, in France, the Rassemblement National (RN) (heir to the historic Front Nationale, FN) and La France Insoumise (LFI) shared the interpretation of these crises as a systemic failure of national and European democratic institutions, but failed to seize government power. The crises certainly catalysed existing populist trends, both on the right and on the left; they led to the progressive strengthening of Marine Le Pen's presidential candidacy in May 2012 until her participation (and defeat) in the April 2022 presidential ballot, as well as the creation of Jean-Luc Mélenchon's La France Insoumise since 2016 (Giurlando 2020), which came third with 22% of the vote in the 2022 Presidential elections (see Bonansinga 2022). Their support at the level of public opinion has widened significantly since

then, resulting in major breakthroughs during the 2022 legislative elections and giving them enough seats to potentially obstruct President Emmanuel Macron's agenda.

Spain, for its part, also experienced a significant rise of support for populists following the 2011-2012 crisis, sharply deepening anti-establishment attitudes and putting an end to the "Iberian exceptionalism" regarding populism (see Alonso and Rovira-Kaltwasser 2015). Following the 15-M movement, which mobilized citizens angry about austerity and precariousness in an unprecedented way, a new anti-establishment party in the far left, Podemos, captured their mood and rode the rising tide of opposition. Podemos achieved major electoral gains in the European Parliament in 2014, while coming close to seizing power in the Parliamentary elections of 2015 by gaining 21% of the seats. In 2016, the party became Unidos Podemos (later Unidas Podemos and finally Sumar), after its alliance with more traditional far-left parties around Izquierda Unida. Although Podemos had lost steam by 2019, they managed to join the government in November 2019 as a minor member of the PSOE-led national coalition, although with relatively little influence on foreign policy decisions (see Manfredi, Amado, and Waisbord 2021; Sola and Rendueles 2018). In parallel, Vox, a far-right populist party that had split from the Popular Party (PP) in December 2013, disenchanted by the PP's supposedly "cowardly" stances in terms of conservatism, nativism, and nationalism, saw a surge in electoral support later than Podemos. Vox eventually gained substantial power in regional and national legislatures in 2018-19, where it became the third largest parliamentarian power in Spain, while also gaining control of local administrations by 2023 (Rama et al., 2021; Turnbull-Dugarte et al 2020).

After the end of the Cold War, and before the populist wave, centre-left and centre-right parties in the Mediterranean countries had mostly accepted alignment with Washington and Brussels and formulated their foreign policies within the framework of NATO and the EU. Therefore, when populists began to openly challenge the priorities of the Euro-Atlantic framework and sympathize with counter-hegemonic forces, many commentators expressed alarm (Kouskouvelis 2012; Zakaria 2019). Since populists in Greece and Italy won enough votes to govern without needing the support of the mainstream parties, they could in principle independently execute a rupture in their countries' foreign policy trajectory. The Syriza-ANEL coalition, for example, in 2015 pursued closer relations with Russia, China, and Venezuela, to signal its willingness to loosen financial dependence on Western sources. This naturally raised concerns about Greece's imminent break with the Eurozone and perhaps the Atlantic alliance (Chrysogelos 2021). Similarly, the 5SM-Lega government stood up to Brussels, Paris, and Berlin despite the risks of exiting the common currency (Giurlando 2021). One of the more

controversial moves by the populist-oriented Italian coalition was to sign on the Belt and Road initiative promoted by China (see Pugliesi, Ghiretti, & Ansisi 2022). In addition, like their Greek cousins, the Italian populists were sympathetic to Putin's assertive Russia, as were the French and Spanish populists. To varying degrees, populist leaderships in all four countries invested in closer ties with other populists across Europe and other parts of the world, including North and South America (see Wajner 2022).

In the end, however, various restrictions deterred attempts by populists to carry out a radical rupture. In Greece, the Syriza-led coalition buckled to the demands of creditors soon after the majority of Greeks voted 'no' in a referendum in the summer of 2015; eventually, Syriza and its coalition partner aligned very closely to the priorities of Brussels and Washington (Chryssogelos 2021). Meanwhile, the Italian populists were seriously constrained by Sergio Mattarella, President of the Republic, as well as by the pressure of financial markets (Giurlando 2021). A major contributor to the eventual weakness of the Italian populist regime were increased tensions between coalition members as public opinion began to shift in favour of Lega, leading its leader, Matteo Salvini, to demand more influence in the government. Similarly, Podemos's positions on Russia, Venezuela, the Middle East, and Western Sahara took initially a back seat to the PSOE's interpretations of these files. Meanwhile, Vox, FN, and LFI remained in opposition and could preserve a certain degree of 'purity' in their populist rhetoric. In practice, their Eurosceptic noises did not impede them to further their agenda in the European parliament (see Iglesias and Alonso 2021; Turnbull-Dugarte et al 2020; Sola & Rendueles 2018). Seeking to explore the conditions under which populist foreign policies in the Mediterranean evolved, we now delve into how the attempts to transnationally project the "peoples versus elites" struggle were catalysed or constrained according to the four aforementioned elements.

### ***International Power Distribution***

The rise of populism in Southern Europe, together with the result of Europe's "polycrises", can also be understood as a regional expression of the passage from an international system characterized by US hegemony to one of multipolarity. But the geopolitical shift away from the West was particularly propitious for these populists to show that their countries' position in the international system compromised national democratic sovereignty. Certainly, a major advantage in terms of mobilization and building support was that populists gave political expression to mass-level feelings of democratic exclusion, a sense of betrayal, and political frustration (Giurlando 2019, Rinaldi 2018).

An emblematic example is Italy in 2011, just before the rise of the country's second populist wave. Silvio Berlusconi, under pressure from Brussels and financial markets, resigned and was replaced by the candidate preferred by financial markets, the technocrat Mario Monti (Middelaar 2017). Similar sentiments were visible in France when, after the financial crisis, democratically elected heads of state, such as Nikolas Sarkozy and Francois Holland, broke their campaign promises because of pressure from foreign actors in Berlin, Brussels, and financial markets (Streeck 2018, Delaume 2018, Lordon 2015, Melanchon 2015, Tavel 2013, Odent 2014). During the same period, the mainstream parties in Spain, Partido Popular (PP) and Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE), increasingly appeared to be following the diktats of foreign agents demanding austerity on top of the consequences of the economic crisis (Alonso & Rovira-Kaltwasser; Fassin 2018, Iglesias & Juliana 2018). Under these conditions, for all the countries under discussion, foreign actors in Washington, Brussels, and Frankfurt could be presented as part of the "corrupt elite" along with the domestic actors doing their bidding. Suddenly, alternative power centres represented by China and Moscow appeared more appealing, especially since they embodied an ideology of "sovereignism".

In this context, Russia appealed as an alternative power centre to populists in Greece, in part because under Vladimir Putin it represented a sovereign country with a mode of governance which sharply contrasted to the EU's technocracy (Chryssogelos 2014). Similarly, Podemos, LFI, 5SM, League, and the RN expressed views that suggested the desirability of pivoting towards Putin's Russia. Populists in general were somewhat more ambiguous in their views on China, although Italy's 5SM heavily invested political capital in the country as part of a soft-balancing strategy (Giurlando 2021). Moreover, despite all the progressive populists examined in this article showed some ideational affinities with Hugo Chávez's and later Nicolas Maduro's Venezuela, the case of Podemos stands out for the degree of imitation, solidarity and cooperation. This had its roots in the academic background of several of Podemos's first political and intellectual leaders, which found guidance in the grassroots organizational models and programmatic ideas of Latin American "Pink Tide" populists (see Kioupkiolis 2016; Wajner and Roniger 2022).

The internationalization of the "corrupt elite-pure people" scheme in Greece and Italy was manifested in other ways. Large parts of the left in both countries viewed the US negatively because of their Cold War experiences. Much more so in Greece, but not absent in Italy, after the Cold War elements of the nationalistic and religious right shared the left's distaste for the US, but for cultural reasons, as a threat to traditional values. This further strengthened the conceptualization of the United States as part of the international "corrupt elite". On this theme,

populists in Greece and Italy were broadly aligned with populists in France as viewing US hegemony as a threat to national democracy. At the same time, the anti-US position could, and did, co-exist with more favourable attitudes towards the EU, particularly in Italy, where many on the left favoured European integration as a way to balance against the US.

Based on this constellation of systemic factors – a structural turn towards multipolarity that gave credence to various perceptions of global elites retreating in favour of new power centres – populist parties in the Euro-Mediterranean found space for their conceptions. Starting with Greece, populist sentiments there rose in tandem with increasing support for closer ties with emerging powers (see e.g., Kotzias, 2010). In the post-Cold War period, the precursors to populism on the far left and right displayed ideological commitments to an anti-Western agenda. Yet, during this period, mainstream thinking, at both the party and mass levels, accepted the close alignment with the West and Brussels. The above-mentioned crises, however, undermined the association between Europe and economic well-being, and also raised questions about whether EU membership compromised national democratic sovereignty (Verney 2014).

In response, from the late 2000s attempts were made to deepen ties with non-Western powers. 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 an instrumental perspective of foreign policy in the service of debt renegotiation and freeing Greece from austerity (SYRIZA 2012). Some of the first moves of the Syriza-ANEL coalition in 2015 were towards closer ties with non-Western powers. During tense negotiations with Brussels, Tsipras and members of his team travelled to Moscow evidently to solidify ties. A similar approach was adopted towards China, Venezuela, and Iran. However, the signing of the new bailout package in July 2015 once again placed the centre of geopolitical gravity in Brussels and the Western alliance (Chryssogelos 2021). Flirtations with China continued, as demonstrated by Tsipras's two visits to Beijing. Often, these moves were framed with populist themes of global justice and the value of multipolarity over Western hegemony (Vima 2016) Yet Western foreign policy priorities continued to exert their gravitational pull, and consequently, four years of populist rule in Greece did not change its Atlanticist and Europeanist trajectory even as the world moved away from unipolarity.

Similar patterns, *mutadis mutandis*, are observable in Italy. In the 2010s, the rise of the 5SM and the Lega represented Italy's second wave of populism, and initially at least both had a somewhat ambiguous relationship with the EU. Under their influence, Italy also made some

moves away from its firm alignment with Brussels and Washington and began to flirt with Moscow and Beijing, a trend that was greatly accelerated by the Yellow-Green populist coalition in 2018-2019. In Italy, after the general elections of 2018, and similar to what occurred in Greece, populists of the right and left aligned on their shared distaste of foreign actors, accusing them of working with local political and financial interests to enact policies which harmed “ordinary” people. Flirtations with Russia and China flowed from this understanding of the elite enemy being found in Rome, Brussels, Berlin, and Paris rather than Moscow or Beijing (Giurlando 2021). The League and the 5SM publicly expressed their wish to remove sanctions against Russia (Bianchi 2018), and yet twice they voted with their European partners to extend them for a period of six months, perhaps because at the same time there were tense negotiations with Brussels over public spending, which took precedence. In any case this did not prevent the coalition from signing the BRI; one reason is that the senior partner in the coalition, the 5SM, saw closer ties to Beijing as a way to maximize leverage vis-à-vis perceived rivals in Western capitals (Il Fatto Quotidiano 2020).

Spain also went from having a near consensus on alignment with the West to the rise of movements which challenged it. Most notably, Podemos channelled the ‘anti-yankee’ currents of Latin America, a strategy which involves soft-balancing the US hegemon via closer ties with Russia and China (Dodson & Dorraj 2008; Wajner 2021:672; Wehner & Thies 2021).

Meanwhile, Podemos’ Euroscepticism, which was initially based on a harsh criticism of neo-liberalism and globalization, soon led to reformative proposal (“Plan B for Europe”) and subsequently softened, while increasing cooperation with Syriza and La France Insoumise, as well as with Portugal’s Bloco de Esquerda and Germany’s Die Linke. Despite agreeing with criticism from Brussels, Spanish right-wing populists disagreed with Podemos’ views on the United States, particularly when the latter was led by a leader, Donald Trump, with whom Vox had an ideological affinity. At the same time, it fostered closer ties with other powers, including Putin’s Russia, as well as with former Spanish colonies and emerging powers in the Global South. On the European plane, they sought alliances with Hungary’s Fidesz, Poland’s PiS, and Italy’s Lega, pushing the political coalition of “Identity and Democracy” in the European Parliament (see Gonzales 2022; Rama et al. 2021; Sola & Rendueles 2018).

Populists in France, finally, although strengthened by the Eurozone and refugee crises, have to navigate a different geopolitical environment which includes, inter-alia, the delicate balancing act of the Franco-German motor (Giurlando 2019). Nonetheless, both LFI and RN have expressed in different ways the need to disobey European treaties which limit French sovereignty, and to give the French people more say, including in the realm of international

affairs, via support for the *Referendum Initiative Citoyen*. Moreover, they have harshly critiqued NATO and promoted closer ties with Moscow (see Bonansinga 2022).

Therefore, in Italy, Greece, and Spain, populist ideas took a back seat to the blunt force of economic and political power in their regions. *Ipsa facto* this suggests that a potentially populist government in France would have to bow to the same systematic pressures, although Europe's power hierarchy places France as the leader of Southern European countries, which in principle would give it more leverage in any future clash with Brussels over, say, public spending. Whether a Jean Luc Mélenchon or Marine Le Pen presidency would buckle as occurred in Italy and Greece, or whether they may be willing to further align with Moscow and/or Beijing, may be the basis of interesting future studies on the topic.

### ***Ideological Characteristics***

PPF in Southern Europe has distinct ideological features, as in two countries at least, parties entered coalition governments with erstwhile and ostensible ideological foes. Despite Syriza's heritage of the radical left, the 5SM's alignment with the left on many issues, and ANEL's and the League's radical right-wing origins, there was a shared perception of being subjected to the imposition of austerity by regional foreign capitals of Frankfurt, Berlin, and Paris. This shared belief that the predatory enemy was closer to home rather than overseas perhaps influenced shared preferences for a policy of soft balancing via closer ties with Moscow and Beijing. As this transcended each parties' distinct ideological origins, it suggests the possibility of an independent role of populist ideology (Giurlando 2021). However, other evidence points to the importance of pre-populist ideological currents in the formulation of concrete positions in foreign policy. For example, the hard left in both Italy and Greece has had a history of interpreting the US led order as a neoliberal project to undermine workers. In a similar vein, right-wing parties across Europe, including in Greece and Italy, have often been favourable to Russia for civilization reasons (Ellinas 2012).

If this is true, it may be more fruitful to view populism in foreign policy more as a distinct discourse or way of articulation of positions that flow from other ideologies. This logic suggests that populism aided radical parties in reaching out to a larger pool of voters via anti-establishment messages packaged as pro-democratic reactions against authoritarian excesses of European and domestic interests. Consequently, the radical left's anti-Westernism and the national right's affinity for Russia could be formulated to mean giving power back to the people. From here it was a short leap to claim that relations with Europe needed to be

recalibrated so that the people could recover its democratic dignity (see Busher, Giurlando, and Sullivan 2018), a framing which allowed the message to resonate with a much larger audience.

This discursive strategy allowed Syriza and ANEL to be more agile as the geopolitical winds shifted during their stint in power. For example, the priority to fight austerity permitted Tsipras to soften or jettison some previously held hard core left-wing positions, such as opposition to NATO membership or criticism of Israel's policies in the Palestinian territories (SYRIZA 2012). In a similar vein, the US—usually considered in the past as 'imperialists'—now were seen as a counter weight to German power, especially as Obama was sympathetic to big government and critical of Germany's rigid ordoliberalism. At the same time, closer ties with Israel were sought to enhance Greece's geopolitical importance in the region, including in relation to the Cyprus conflict, and to cooperate in relation to newly discovered gas deposits and possible new gas routes (Chryssogelos 2021). This transition was complete by 2018-19, when Tsipras decided to resolve the Macedonia name-issue, repositioning SYRIZA as a progressive and anti-nationalist party of the left, distancing itself from a rhetoric that often used sovereigntist and nationalist tropes during the Eurozone crisis (Chryssogelos and Stavrevska 2019).

### ***Domestic Political System***

It is well known that the party politics of foreign policy are closely entwined with political strategies and the effort of parties to tackle multiple cleavages and issues that determine their interests in party competition. The same is true for PFP, as the dynamics of domestic politics condition the strategies of populist parties around foreign policy as well.

In Spain, the nature of the political system, which in terms of political representation and regulatory framework incorporates the particularistic characteristics of regions with a central national government in Madrid, both catalyzed and constrained PFP. Populists in Spain responded to the country's main conflicts—the secessionist attempts of Cataluña and the Basques—in a way that flowed from underlying pre-populist stances. During the 2017-2018 Spanish constitutional crisis, Podemos adopted a more favourable stance towards Cataluña's independence movement, while Vox, consistent with its nationalist orientation, took a hard-line approach, thus influencing the positions of mainstream parties PSOE and PP, respectively (Wheeler 2020). Vox has, in addition, adopted Trumpian sloganeering and a rhetoric of imperial restoration, as in its use of "make Spain great again." This interpretive scheme accounts for Vox's approach towards Morocco over the disputed territories of Ceuta and Melilla. Following US president Donald Trump's official recognition of Morocco's claims to

Western Sahara, Vox deputies abstained from the parliamentary vote over the area once known as the Spanish province of Africa. Meanwhile, Podemos' sympathy laid with the Sahrawis, putting the party in conflict with the PSOE's attempts to challenge the active neutrality between Morocco and the Polisario Front Combatants.

When Greece's center-right party New Democracy adopted the Troika's harsh medicine in 2011, Kammenos and several comrades abandoned the party and established ANEL. Subsequently, Kammenos became the undisputed leader of ANEL, which at that point transmogrified into a classical populist party of high personalization and low formal organization. When the Syriza-ANEL coalition was formed, Kammenos received the ministry of defense, permitting the political posturing of patriotic protector of Greece's patrimony. After the coalition buckled under the pressure of the Troika's demands, Kammenos' populist credentials were compromised, contributing to his party's rut in the 2019 elections (Chrysogelos 2019; 2021). Tsipras's appointment of Nikos Kotzias as foreign minister initially appeared to cohere with assumption of the government's pivot away from the West and towards multipolarity, not the least of which because Kotzias himself advocated these positions (Kotzias 2010). As it turns out, Kotzias was largely non-partisan and did not stray from Greece's traditional trajectory. This supports the notion that the confrontational approach with the EU and the Troika in the first half of 2015 was, at its core, an example of populism being instrumentalized for other domestic-strategic purposes (Chrysogelos 2021).

Italian populists, despite enjoying a majority of public support, buckled under pressure of various actors, domestic and international, to place relatively unthreatening technocrats, Giovanni Tria and Enzo Milanese, in the key cabinet positions of finance and foreign affairs respectively (Giurlando 2021). A result was that the populist coalition government's decisions in key foreign policy portfolios, such as sanctions against Russia and negotiations with Brussels, were characterized by the peculiar situation of non-populists in a populist government; these technocrats had to face the Scylla of satisfying populist colleagues who demanded rupture and the Charybdis of external actors pressuring Italy to align with the mainstream. Ultimately, they adopted the latter. In the end, Matteo Salvini increased the pressure for his agenda as he became increasingly popular among the electorate, and the reduced need for unity after the stand-off with Brussels calmed down further motivated him to demand more sway in the executive. Just a little after a year of its formation, the coalition collapsed under its own contradictions.

Lastly, LFI and RN's have both been entangled by France's domestic politics. The former was very much the project of Jean-Luc Mélenchon, who was a member of the Socialist

party's hard left-wing and splintered off due the perceived betrayal of the party's socialist roots, a divide made particularly evident when the *Partie Socialiste* ignored the result of the referendum in 2005 against the Constitutional treaty (Delbouys 2005). Meanwhile, the RN's base includes many who have been frustrated by the centre-right's *Les Republicains* embrace of positions associated with France's *bête noire*, globalization. Of course, unlike the other countries discussed, neither the LFI nor the RN have taken power, but in several of the issues, such as the Eurozone crisis and sanctions against Russia, patterns in France confirm the cleavages seen in Greece, Spain, and Italy between populists and mainstream parties.

### ***Policy domains***

Populist foreign policies in the Euro-Mediterranean have been largely conditioned by the type of policy domain; for instance, the economic and financial realm showed its own catalysts and constraints. Indeed, in all four countries, the policy debate around populisms' stances in international politics largely revolved around austerity measures, the restructuring of the economy, the refinancing of the national debt and the country's place in the Eurozone.

Already around 2010-11, in the initial period of the crisis, several anti-establishment movements and populist parties from both the left and the right began to elaborate policy proposals that underpinned a different policy orientation for Greece's economy, with an alternative vision of the role of 'the people' within the regional and international 'system' (Sotirakopoulos & Sotiropoulos 2013, Lapavitsas 2012, Sanchez-Cuenca 2014; Verney 2014, Barbeito and Alonso 2021). When these sentiments to (Gr-)exit from the Eurozone went against the brick wall of domestic institutions, particularly after Syriza's winning power in 2015 and engaging in tense negotiations with Brussels and Frankfurt, the proposals were toned down.

Similarly, both in Italy and Spain, a key structural constraint was economic dependence on the EU and other traditional Western allies, as it was clear that the potential economic consequences of leaving the Eurozone could not be offset by potential economic and financial assistance from China or Russia. Regional diffusion in this regard also played a role, certainly following the Brexit. For instance, following the acceptance of Greek Prime Minister Tsipras of the creditors demands, even after a Greek majority voted against the austerity measures in a referendum, both right-wing and left-wing populist parties in Italy expressed their outrage (Giurlando 2016). Matteo Salvini and Luigi Di Maio, the respective leaders of Lega and the 5SM, accused the Eurozone of a betrayal and called for a rupture through an Italian referendum on its membership in the currency union, but the coalition government ultimately did not

manage to overcome the structural constraints to this objective (Giurlando 2021; Savona 2018).

In France, both Rassemblement National and La France Insoumise shared the criticism of the Eurozone and their call for a potential referendum on (Fr-)exit, but could not pursue this due to their lack of governmental power (Giurlando 2019). Podemos' critique against the Eurozone for its pro-German, neo-liberal, technocratic bureaucracies was virtually identical to those of populists in Greece and Italy; although the Spanish party never openly endorsed an exit from the currency union, behind closed doors the leadership of Podemos expressed the desirability for a referendum (Judis 2016).

A different, but related, policy domain with singular constraining patterns was energy. Throughout the Eurozone crisis, energy policy became a very prominent area of PFP in the Greek public debate, not only due to the material implications for its local economy and for paying off its financial debt, but also as a symbolic way of protecting national sovereignty – whether Greece will be ‘allowed’ by the EU to exploit the energy resources in its soil. Indeed, energy policy embodies different models of Greece's foreign policy orientation, and fits with the popularity of Russia and other non-Western powers during the crisis as Greek populist parties of both the right and the left accused international elites of limiting Greece's independence (see To Vima 2015). Therefore, once the SYRIZA-ANEL coalition acceded to government, the national energy ministry, the leader of SYRIZA's far left anti-euro wing, Panos Lafazanis, immediately tried to stress Greece's independence from the EU's energy policy by deepening cooperation with Russia.

Meanwhile, the destabilizing policies in the Middle East led by the US, and Brussels' inability to manage the consequences, led to the migration crisis in Italy which exacerbated the sense that the country was losing control (Lazar and Diamanti 2019, Socci 2018, Goodhart 2017). The League focused its formulation of foreign policy and regional integration on immigration issues, which helped turn Salvini into an anti-establishment icon all-around Mediterranean Europe (Mosetti 2021), and more recently helping to bring Fratelli d'Italia's Giorgia Meloni to the role Prime Minister in October 2022. Here, the President of the Republic Sergio Mattarella was less likely to intervene to subdue populist excesses. Meanwhile, unlike in the realm of fiscal and economic policy, Brussels has fewer levers of influence to constrain populist policies in the management of migration flows. They therefore have a freer hand to implement their sovereigntist vision.

## Conclusions

This article sought to explore the growing phenomenon of populism in the Euro-Mediterranean region, particularly looking at how populist leaders navigated their populist foreign policy. One central research goal was to identify patterns in PFP among four key Southern European countries—Greece, Italy, Spain, and France. This does not negate either their important structural differences, such as relative economic and military strength, or the fact that only in Greece and Italy did populist leaderships take full executive power. Indeed, in Spain populists entered government but only obtained posts associated with domestic politics, while in France they remained in opposition, although the latter is qualified by the fact that support for anti-establishment parties is very high: in the 2022 presidential and legislative elections, a majority of French voters selected non-mainstream political candidates.

These important differences among the four Southern European countries also do not detract from considerable background similarities. On the economic field, Euro-Mediterranean countries are generally more statist, collectivist, highly indebted, and regulated. This tends to contribute to shared ideological visions, as was evidenced by the Mediterranean bloc, led by France, which, during the Eurozone crisis, pushed for a more redistributionist solution to counter the *ordo-liberal* inspired austerity prescriptions preferred by the Northern bloc led by Germany (Giurlando 2021). In addition, as members of the common currency, all four countries lack monetary and fiscal sovereignty, which, as it turns out, is an important brake on populist politics. Lastly, the migration and Eurozone crises strengthened both left and right wing populists in all four countries, and despite some important oscillations, support remains generally high for them.

This article relies on the conception of populism as an ideational strategy to expand the base of voters when a crisis of representation occurs as a result of the perception (not necessarily mistaken) that mainstream parties and non-majoritarian authorities are executioners of a foreign, elitist will, rather than the sovereign will of ‘the people’. Mainstream right and left may converge on the need of “structural reforms” demanded by Brussels, Berlin, or Frankfurt, leaving a void that is filled by discursive constructions of the elite-people dichotomy, and thus seducing voters who previously would have selected mainstream parties. Observed patterns in the four Euro-Mediterranean countries bear this out, as Syriza, 5SM, the League, Podemos, LFI, and RN considerably expanded their appeal beyond the original base of extreme left and right to include many sectors who previously voted for mainstream parties (Vandyke 2022). A similar strategy is used for their PFP when projecting internationally the antagonism

between ‘people’ and ‘elite’, seeking similar purposes of legitimation and political mobilization (albeit abroad).

The four countries under discussion also shared a PFP vision of whom the international corrupt elite was: Berlin, Brussels, Washington, the IMF and “globalists.” This vision informed their strategy to counterbalance via establishing or deepening ties with Russia and China, as well as with countries of the Global South which shared their outlook on the character of international elite enemies. This pattern confirms the claim, first made by Dodson and Dorraj (2008), that in the realm of international politics populists often pursue soft-balancing strategies as hard balancing poses too much risk of direct and costly confrontation.

Another finding relevant to future studies is that the execution of PFP is catalyzed and constrained by domestic and international pressures. Notably, economic entanglement with the EU—and its underlying economic power hierarchy led by Germany—represents a significant constraint and pressures populists to align with the mainstream. At the domestic level, other branches of government similarly nudged and cajoled populists towards more pragmatic positions. This was particularly evident in Italy where President Sergio Mattarella exercised his veto multiple times to reassure markets, Berlin, and Brussels. Meanwhile, in Spain, being a member of a coalition government limited Podemos’s margin of manoeuvre. French populists will likely have noticed these constraints that they would face in the event of taking power.

The Covid-19 pandemic represented an addition to the seemingly endless array of crises which have afflicted Europe. The economic fallout of the pandemic struck Southern Europe particularly hard, and threatened to tear apart the Eurozone until the game changing agreement on a Recovery Fund was reached by France and Germany in May 2020. Around the same time, the ECB went in a more redistributionist direction via the increased purchasing of distressed states’ sovereign bonds. These moves represented what Euro-Mediterranean countries had long demanded, and as a consequence the discursive strategy of depicting Brussels, Frankfurt, and Berlin as the international elite enemy less and less resonated. A result is that populists aligned further with the mainstream right and left, although France is an important exception, as demonstrated by Jean-Luc Mélenchon continued demand to disobey European treaties which constrain France’s fiscal policy.

The invasion of Ukraine, and skyrocketing energy prices and inflation, signified another addition to Europe’s polycrises, and here populists generally joined their mainstream colleagues and condemned the invasion. However, there are important exceptions. In Italy many members of the League and 5SM are sympathetic to Russia (Di Battista 2019, La7 Attualita 2022), in Spain Podemos opposed its coalition partner’s decision to send weapons to

Ukraine, while Marine Le Pen and Jean Luc Mélenchon often try to change the subject when it is raised, opting for bland denunciations of Vladimir Putin, while neglecting, unlike their mainstream colleagues, to affirm their country's commitment to NATO. These patterns indicate the potential for future cooperation among left and right populists in Southern Europe.

In a broader perspective, the evidence collected and the analytical insights developed regarding Euro-Mediterranean populism confirm the value of using (sub-)regional approaches and methods of comparative analysis to bridge the theoretical and empirical gaps in the study of populist foreign policy. The strength of populist parties and their subsequent behavior in the international arena is largely influenced by the contextual background in which these parties operate, which includes shared historical, geographic, and cultural underpinnings. Furthermore, not only do PFP sources have a regional dimension, but also their implementation and consequent impact must be approached in similar terms, considering the substantial role that PFP had in catalyzing or constraining contemporary geopolitics in the Mediterranean Basin, processes of European integration, and shifts in European stances towards global and transcontinental cooperation. In this sense, further research should analyze the unique features of PFP around the European Mare Nostrum compared to other sub-regions in Europe and abroad, as well as delve deeper into the impact of populism on different issue-areas at the international level, including security, trade, migration flows, climate change, and the management of other public goods.

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