

POPULISM AND INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS: A COMPARISON OF SPAIN AND ITALY

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This paper argues that, in the realm of international politics, populism in Southern Europe contains thick ideological elements, and that identifying these elements can help us to make sense of some of their foreign policy preferences. It aims to support this argument with a focus on populists in Spain and Italy, namely Podemos, Vox, the 5SM, and the League. It also highlights how populists in both countries are constrained in implementing their vision due to the medium power status of their respective countries and their nations' economic dependence on partners in the EU. The paper concludes with suggestions on future research.

Key Words: *Populism, Foreign Affairs, Spain, Italy*

POPULISMO Y ASUNTOS INTERNACIONALES: UNA COMPARACIÓN ENTRE ESPAÑA E ITALIA

Este artículo sostiene que, en el ámbito de la política internacional, el populismo en el sur de Europa contiene elementos ideológicos densos, y que la identificación de estos elementos puede ayudarnos a dar sentido a algunas de sus preferencias en materia de política exterior. Se pretende apoyar este argumento centrándose en los populistas de España e Italia, a saber, Podemos, Vox, el 5SM y la Liga. También destaca cómo los populistas de ambos países se ven limitados a la hora de poner en práctica su visión debido al estatus de potencia media de sus respectivos países y a la dependencia económica de sus naciones respecto a los socios de la UE. El artículo concluye con sugerencias sobre futuras investigaciones.

Palabras clave: *Populismo, Asuntos Exteriores, España, Italia*

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Introduction

Populism continues to be an important and growing phenomenon around the world, in the West and in parts of the global south. The outcomes of the French legislative elections on 19 June 2022, and the presidential elections in Columbia on the same day, as well as the vote in Brazil on 22 October 2022, highlight populists' continued capacity to win large numbers of votes and/or to take the reins of power. In government, they can implement decisions which flow from their distinctive understanding of the world, namely that society is fundamentally in a state of conflict between ordinary people and the corrupt elite, adding that the former must recover national sovereignty which, populists claim, was usurped by domestic elites colluding with and international ones. Both left-wing and right-wing populists share a variant of this worldview (Carrillo 2017, Gomez 2022, Marramou 2020, Rojas 2017, Tarchi 2017), and it leads to certain predictable foreign policy positions, such as the primacy of national or the "people's" sovereignty as an organizing principle of international affairs (Formenti 2016), the consequent suspicion of, or opposition to, multilateral governance institutions (Alvaro 2019), preference for a multipolar world (Giurlando 2021), and, particularly in Southern Europe, sympathy towards, or support for, Russia and/or China (Feroci 2019). Scholars around the world have noticed, hence the burgeoning literature on the intersections between populism and international affairs (Wajner 2022, MacDonald et al 2019, Plagemann and Destradi 2019, Chryssogelos 2022, Wehner and Thies 2021).

This paper contributes by attempting to answer questions relevant to the field, such as: what are some the ontological features of populism in some contexts, such as Southern Europe and potentially beyond? Is it a thick or thin ideology, a discourse, a logic, or a style? Here it is argued that Southern European populism, vis-à-vis the realm of international affairs, contains thick ideological elements, and that identifying these elements can help us to make sense of some of their foreign policy preferences mentioned above. The present work aims to support this argument with a focus on populists in Spain and Italy, namely Podemos, Vox, the 5SM, and the League. It also highlights how populists in both countries are constrained in implementing their vision due to the medium power status of their respective countries and their nations' economic dependence on partners in the EU.

The essay will begin with some theoretical reflections on the character of ideology, supposed differences between "thin" and "thick" ones, and why populism, in some contexts at least, can be consistent with the latter. Next, the paper recounts the rise of populism in Spain and Italy, as this shows how both grew in support in part as a result of a crisis representative democracy, including the convergence of mainstream parties which, temporarily at least, blurred or effaced ideological categories of left and right as foci of political contestation. This is followed with a presentation of the foreign policies that flow from a populist core, arguing that this core can usefully be called a thick ideology. In so doing, the paper raises questions about the dominant

understanding of populism as a thin ideology and, it is hoped, will further spur debate on the subject. In the last section, there will be a discussion on the major constraints in both countries to enacting a foreign policy rupture, namely, their medium size geopolitical status and economic dependence on the EU. The paper concludes with suggestions on future research.

Section 1. Theoretical reflections on character of thick ideology

Populists are often on the opposite sides of the political spectrum; it is for this reason that many claim that populism is a ‘discourse’ (Lasalle 2017, Villar 2021), a ‘political logic’ (De Benoist 2017, Zarzalejos 2017) or a ‘thin ideology’ (Betti 2021a, Osterman and Stahl 2021) which can attach itself to other, thicker ideologies such liberalism, socialism, conservatism, or environmentalism. A different group of scholars argue that populism has distinct ideological elements which distinguish them from traditional parties (Mosetti 2021, Nardiz 2017, Eatwell and Goodwin 2019, Giral 2019). The study of populism and international affairs in the two countries under investigation is more consistent with the latter position for the following reasons.

Freeden (2003) has outlined features that, in general, ideologies share: a recurring pattern of ideas, beliefs, or opinions, and a consequent pattern of policy preferences which contest existing political arrangements. Schroeder (2020) helpfully adds that another feature of ideologies is that they are usually born as a result of historical or social changes which give rise to new conflicts which the existing system of representative democracy does not adequately accommodate. This sociological underpinning is crucial to understanding the persistence of ideologies (Schroeder 2020). In the case of populism, crises related to globalization, financial and/or migratory, and consequently of representative democracy, lead to new conflicts and political programs which can transcend left and right. Scholars have noticed this pattern in many different contexts. Mosetti (2021) focuses on populism in Italy, particularly the crises which gave rise to it, and the sociological features of voters of both the 5SM and League and on this basis develops what he calls an “organic theory of populism”, by which he means it arose in part out of new conflicts in Italian society which the existing system did not adequately represent. Chryssogelos (2018) analysis of the populist coalition of Syriza and ANEL in Greece in 2015 is evidence of what he calls a “core populist logic” which transcended left and right and which, in that case study at least, the thin ideology thesis does not fully account for. Lastly, Schroeder (2020) observed how Trump’s foreign policies represented a populist core which transcended left and right.

The conclusions in this paper are similar to the ones made by the scholars above, even though the terminology is somewhat different. Using the term “thick ideology” may be helpful for several reasons. First, it challenges the dominant understanding

of populism as a thin ideology, at least in the realm of international relations. The identification of this core logic, or thick ideology makes sense of foreign policies that populists of the left and right tend to adopt. This conclusion does not deny differences between populists, particularly in the realm of domestic policy, where the left-right divide may be more prominent. But on some crucial international questions, particularly ones related to globalization, multilateral governance, and regional hegemony, populists' positions are often not dissimilar, suggesting that they possess a shared logic. This pattern is made visible during those times when mainstream left and right parties converge on crucial international questions and, in so doing, blur or efface this ideological divide as a font of political conflict.

Most scholars agree that a core element of populism is the contention that the main division in society is between the "elite" and the "people". Those who defend the thin ideology thesis claim that this division lacks an objective sociological basis, since, they argue, this Manichean divide between two ostensible homogenous blocks denies the pluralism inherent in modern society. Populism, consequently, usually attaches itself to underlying thick, or host, ideologies, with purportedly clearer or more rigid social bases of support, mainly extreme right or extreme left (Osterman and Stahl 2021, Verbeek and Wojczewski 2023), but also Hindu nationalism (Destradi, Jumle and Santiago 2023). The implication, of course, is that underlying "thicker" ideologies have a more precise, stable, or identifiable sociological bases with clear programs of action which involve distributional consequences, economic and/or political, that are favourable to supporters. The left would be expected to pursue policies which favour the disadvantaged, the right would do the same for the privileged. Populists' discursive or thin-ideological elite-people divide, goes the reasoning, would then attach itself to one of these thicker ideologies if circumstances are propitious.

Upon closer examination, however, we may see that populism contains many of the same elements as ideologies which, by common agreement, are considered thick. The first is the circumstances, usually social structures and crises, which give rise to new ideological paradigms. Liberalism, for example, emerged as a response to the inequalities generated by feudalism and aristocracy; Marxism, in turn, arose out of the inequalities generated by capitalism; conservatism is often a reaction to the perceived excesses of both. Second, all these ideologies, like populism, have "Manichean" features in that they posit the existence of some central conflict between two entities. Liberals say it is between the individual and the state; for Marxists, between capital and workers; conservatives, between progressives and traditionalists. We can apply similar reasoning to populism. It usually arises out of a crisis of democratic representation, which itself is often driven by crises, financial and/or migratory, which exacerbate inequality and highlight that globalization has distributional consequences, economic and/or political, with winners and losers who correspond with empirically identifiable social groups (Goodhart 2007). The "elite-people" divide is an interpretive scheme which gives meaning, and a program of action, to these crises. (Below will show how these processes were visible in Spain

and Italy, both of which experienced increases in deindustrialization and inequality connected to integration into global markets, a financial crisis which brought these inequalities to the fore and, in Italy at least, a migration crisis).

In the two cases under discussion, moreover, in order to ensure solvency, governments were pressured to enact austerity by foreign actors, particularly financial markets, the IMF, Brussels, Berlin, and Frankfurt, with whom mainstream parties cooperated. This convergence between domestic and international elites represented an ideological hollowing out of traditional parties of right and left—Partido Democratico (PD) and Forza Italia (FI) in Italy, Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE) and Partido Popular (PP) in Spain—and during this crisis at least these ideological categories were emptied of substantive meaning (or “thin”, if you will). Austerity and the need for (neoliberal) “structural reforms” were presented by centre-right *and* centre-left in depolitical technocratic terms, as a kind of scientific conclusion among experts which could not be challenged. In reality, these parties were enacting the ideological program of technocratic liberalism. Under these conditions, populists’ claim of a societal conflict between the people and the elite served to politicize this process.

In this context, the people–elite divide is more than just a discourse. It is a politicized analysis that posits a clash of interests between sociologically distinct groups. On one side are the “elites” understood as cosmopolitan technocrats, actors in supranational agencies, the financial industry, and perhaps most importantly mainstream members of legislatures and executives; on the other are “ordinary” citizens who face rising precarity, joblessness, and neighbourhood decay. There is also often a geographical element: “elites” tend to live in cities, while the “people” live in the periphery (Goodhart 2017). This clash of interests informs preferences for policies, domestic and international, with distributional consequences unfavourable to the beneficiaries of globalization and favourable to those more likely to be lower on the social hierarchy. And it is this which partly explains why populists of the left and right at times agree on some foreign policy positions, such as the primacy of national or the people’s sovereignty, rather than the International Liberal Order, as an organizing principle of international relations, the consequent suspicion of multilateral and supranational forums, and preference for a multipolar and state-centric order. The preference for sovereigntism is shared by Russia, which helps to account for populists’ sympathy with Moscow. Another contributing factor in sympathy towards Russia is that for populists the “enemy” is the Western liberal technocratic elite, domestic and international, and not Russia. These positions, moreover, are opposed by the “establishment” who tend to favour globalization underwritten by American hegemony and the International Liberal Order, in part because they have benefited from global markets, and who tend to see Russia as a threat.

Identifying shared foreign policy positions as a methodological tool to identify a shared underlying ideology is frequently used in the literature on populism and foreign policy. For example, Osterman and Stahl (2021) identify the shared positions of Populist Radical Right parties in France and Germany to argue that they arise

out of shared thin and thick ideological elements. Coticchia and Vignoli (2021) map the similarities and differences between the 5SM and the League to draw inferences on ideological elements possessed by both parties. This paper adopts a similar comparative methodology but applies it differently: by identifying broadly similar positions among the four parties, we can identify a core populist logic which transcends ideological categories of left and right, at least in some situations, particularly related to globalization, global governance, and counter-hegemony. This analysis does not presume that the differences among the parties are unimportant. The left-right axis, as will be shown, is operative and visible particularly in the realm of domestic policy. It also shifts depending on whether the country is passing through a period of crisis or instability, and on relations of power, domestic and international, which provide important constraints.

In the next section the four populist parties' paths to success will be sketched, as this will reveal shared historical and social changes which created new conflicts inadequately accommodated in arrangements existing at the time. Subsequently, their shared understanding of international affairs will be highlighted, even while taking account of some important nuances, and the evidence will be drawn from the secondary literature. Then, the main geopolitical and domestic constraints to enacting a rupture will be accounted for. Implications for future research will follow.

Section 2. The Parallel Paths to Pitchforks

Many readers may be familiar with Spain's main populist parties, Vox and Podemos, but populism in the country precedes them (Tardio 2017). The first and second waves petered out (Casals 2013) in part because the country's democratization, enshrined in the constitutional settlement of 1978 after the death Franco, and its integration into the European project, contributed to almost three decades of a stable biparty system characterized with alternating centre-right (PP) and centre-left (PSOE) parties, as well as increased living standards. Italy's golden era, in contrast, occurred prior, in the post WW2 era, and was presided by the Christian Democrats who held power and governed during this mini-golden age characterized with generalized increased living standards. However, economic recession and scandals occurred in 1992 which revealed the deep and widespread corruption of the system. Strikingly similar to the U.S. prior to the rise of Donald Trump, in Italy a television personality, property businessman, and political outsider, Silvio Berlusconi, rose to power in part as a response to widespread contempt and disgust towards established politicians. He took the reins of government from 1994 to 1995, 2001 to 2006, and 2008 to 2011.

In Spain the mini-golden era began to frail at the seams with the onset of the financial crisis in 2007, which included the collapse of a housing bubble and the consequent need for international assistance to finance bank bailouts. Subsequently unemployment and economic inequality rose in Spain more than elsewhere (Sola

and Rendueles 2019, Casals 2013), and the left-wing government of Jose Zapatero's implementation of austerity demanded by creditor countries was perceived as a betrayal (Barbier and Marti 2018, Judis 2018, Llosa 2017). His successor on the centre right, Mariano Rajoy, continued to implement the demands of international creditors and was plagued by corruption to boot. Under these circumstances, the two main parties were perceived to be unrepresentative (Casals 2013, Cuenca 2014, Llamazares 2020, Rivero et al, Sanchez 2020). Similar processes occurred in Italy after it, too, was struck by the debt crisis which began in 2007. There, the crises became acute by 2010; at the time, the democratically elected government of Silvio Berlusconi was pressured by markets, Berlin, Brussels, and Paris to resign (Giurlando 2021) and he was replaced by a technocratic government led by Mario Monti who enjoyed the support of the major parties, particularly the centre-left and centre-right. However, Monti failed to stem the economic tide and there was the impression that he was following the diktats of foreign capitals rather than the people he was sworn to represent (Giurlando 2020).

This sense of powerlessness, on top of the economic distress, led to revolts in both countries. In Spain, it manifested as a spontaneous uprising and occupation of public squares in Madrid, known as the 15-M (Aleman and Cano 2016, Ema and Ingala 2020), whose main slogan was "they don't represent us!" (Zohonero 2020). Facts on the ground bore this out: polls showed that 81% of Spaniards agreed with the demands made by the protesters, while 75% lost confidence in the PP and the PSOE, the country's two main parties (Renduelez 2022). Consequently, they went from obtaining 80% of the vote in 2011 to 49% in 2015 (Galindo and Waldon 2016). In a similar vein, traditional parties in Italy, FI on the centre-right, and PD on the centre-left, also lost much support, in part because of their support for the Brussels friendly technocratic government led by Monti, whose austerity policies hurt society's most vulnerable.

In Spain, Podemos was able to channel widespread frustration with a populist diagnosis of what went awry. The cause, said Podemos, was the clash of interests between "las casta" and "la gente". This message resonated not only because of the widespread economic distress; there was also a not inaccurate perception that the country was being effectively governed by international financial markets (Liria 2016, Villacanas 2015) and the power of creditor countries in Northern Europe while wealthy insiders continued to prosper (Iglesias and Juliana 2018). A group of progressive professors at the University of Complutense in Madrid who had experience with populist politics in Latin America (Sola and Renduelez 2018) saw this as an opportunity and formed Podemos. Led by the charismatic Pablo Iglesias, Podemos' first breakthrough occurred in the European elections in 2013, and by 2015 it had gained an unprecedented 20.7%, a few points shy of second place. In 2019, its support had waned, in part because the Catalonia crisis dominated the political agenda (Tamames 2021), but it won enough to enter government as the

minor coalition partner of the PSOE, with which it will govern until the general elections of 2023.

Vox rose to prominence later. The party was fuelled in part by opposition to the independence movement in Catalonia, but equally important were the accumulated grievances resulting from the financial crisis (Gonzalez 2022, Renduelez 2022). When the party emerged, it displayed typical right-wing free-market preferences, but with the passage of time it went into the direction of other right-wing populists, particularly Marine Le Pen's *Rassemblement National*, and promoted various forms of protectionism for workers (Gonzalez 2022). This strategy paid off in electoral terms, and a breakthrough occurred when they entered the regional assemblies of Madrid in 2019 and Castille-Leon in 2021. In the 2019 general elections they won an unprecedented 52 seats in the legislature and have been polling between 13% and 19% ever since. This trend contributed to the end of a biparty system in Spain, and in the national elections of 2023 there is a distinct possibility that Vox will enter government as the minor coalition partner of the PP led by Alberto Núñez Feijóo.

In Italy, the 5SM became the channel of popular protest against the establishment. The term "casta" so effectively used by Podemos was, in fact, coined by Beppe Grillo (Mosetti 2021) as a way to rhetorically encase and capture the class of political, economic, and media elites who stood accused of usurping the people's democratic agency and exploiting its economic resources. Their breakthrough occurred in the European elections of 2014, when they obtained 21%. At the national level, their support reached an unprecedented 34% in the elections of 2018.

The League's trajectory was somewhat different. Unlike Vox, and similar to Catalonia's independence party, it emerged as a regionalist party demanding autonomy or independence from the country's capital, which was accused of taking resources via taxation and distributing them to clients in less developed regions in exchange for votes. Italy's financial and migratory crises propelled the League towards becoming a standard nationalist party fighting against Brussels, migration, and globalization, and Matteo Salvini, the architect of this change, became, like Beppe Grillo, an anti-establishment icon (Brunazzo and Gilbert 2017). This strategy was successful, and it led to the League gaining the most votes, or 17%, among the Italy's three right wing parties in the elections of 2018. Although support was concentrated in the North, he made major gains in the South too.

In Italy, this outcome led to an unprecedented and previously unimaginable political experiment of progressive and right-wing populists governing together in a coalition government. The main reason was that, at this particular historical moment, other political coalitions were not feasible, in part because traditional parties had lost legitimacy. Another technocratic government, led by the former IMF economist Carlo Cottarelli, was proposed as a way to overcome the impasse, but this would not have worked given the failure of the previous technocratic government and the populists' strength in the legislature, which would have undermined or paralyzed the

government's agenda. Negotiations between the League and the 5SM began in April 2018, and an agreement was reached by summer of that year. Their idiosyncratic cooperation lasted only 14 months but it provides immense value as a case study to distil some deeper lessons about a populist core which transcends political categories of left and right. Systematic comparisons with Spain's populists will further assist in distilling lessons about some of the ontological features of populism.

Section 3. Ideology and Foreign Policy

Although Vox, the League, Podemos and 5SM all can be considered populists, there are important differences, particularly regarding domestic policy. One is peculiar to Spain, namely, the question of Catalonia and the Basque country: Vox is unambiguously nationalist, while Podemos has expressed sympathy for their demands for independence. Another is on social issues, such as the rights of sexual and racial minorities, which reflect differences on the classical right-left axis. On domestic economic policy, the differences between Vox and Podemos are more ambiguous, given that both oppose the tourist-based economy that Spain has become as globalization and European integration proceeded, and that both want to reindustrialize the country (Wheeler 2020, Gonzalez 2022, Iglesias and Juliana 2018). Important in this regard are shifts in policy proposals, particularly Vox's adoption of the protectionist positions of right-wing populists elsewhere in Europe to gain the support of workers who have lost from deindustrialization and economic globalization (Ugarte 2021, Gonzalez 2022).

Similarly, the League and 5SM differ on some important domestic policy questions which reflect different positions on the classical left-right axis. For example, one of the latter's signature domestic policies was the minimum income to fight poverty, a policy which was opposed by most of the other parties, populist and non-populist, including the League. Another is measures to enhance eco-sustainability, which was a much higher priority for the 5SM whereas the League's pro-business orientation made it more reticent towards policies which raised the cost of energy. The League has been more pro-active on the migration file, although here it is somewhat more ambiguous, given that 5SM voters also supported reducing the number of new arrivals, perhaps for different reasons. Important leaders of the 5SM like Alessandro Di Battista are emblematic: they opposed open borders because, they said, migrants mainly benefited or become tools of the corrupt establishment or domestic oligarchy (Mosetti 2021).

In the realm of foreign policy, we can see more important similarities. Similar to their populist cousins elsewhere, for Vox, Podemos, the League and the 5SM, national or popular sovereignty should be the foundation of international relations (Bercerra 2018, Parde et al 2016, Verstryngge 2017, Zarzalegos 2017, Feroci 2019, Taggart et al 2018). This makes them suspicious of international organizations, as a key

element in their worldview is that these institutions are often staffed by elites who are disconnected from ordinary people, although there is some nuance on who the elites are: for Podemos, 5SM and the League, they are agents of creditor countries and austerity (Ortiz 2021, Otorola 2021, Mosetti 2021). Vox and the League are more likely to say elites are orchestrating a multiculturalist agenda. The connecting ideological thread is anti-technocratic-liberalism (Mosetti 2021, Fernandez-Vazquez 2019, Delsol 2015, Simeoni 2015, Hermet 2001, Waisbord 2014). This does not exclude the tendency to attempt to use multilateral institutions to promote domestic objectives. Vox and the League, for example, have demanded more European action to stem irregular migration (Europa Press 2022, Open 2021), while 5SM and Podemos have called for a more social Europe (Roch 2021). Nonetheless, Brussels is often interpreted through the lens of the elite-people divide or as an agent of German hegemony (see Roch 2021, Abascal 2019, Feroci 2019, Taggart et al 2018).

All the parties under discussion were, or have been, sympathetic towards Russia (Gratius and Rivero 2021, Feroci 2019), a position which flowed from their opposition to domestic and international elites, although here too Russia's role in the elite-people divide was interpreted differently. For Podemos and the 5SM, Russia was a bulwark against Western and particularly American imperialism (Fassin 2018); another non-trivial aspect of Russia is its close ties with countries of the Global South, particularly visible in the invasion of Ukraine (Arlacchi 2022, Fuentes 2022), where most of Africa, Latin America, and Asia declined to join the West's attempts to isolate Russia via sanctions. For Vox and the League, Russia symbolized a country that defends its civilization and national sovereignty against the machinations of globalists (Chrysosgelos, Giurlando and Wajner 2023).

All parties condemned the invasion of Ukraine, although a closer look reveals some nuance. Podemos opposed the decision of the PSOE to send offensive weapons to that beleaguered country. Podemos also opposed the NATO summit of June 2022 held in Madrid and the decision demanded by NATO partners to increase defence spending to 2% of GDP, although as a minor member of the coalition government its margin for manoeuvre is limited. Vox, meanwhile, used the invasion tendentiously, as a tool with which to bludgeon Brussels, accusing it of inordinately focusing on environmental and gender issues rather than energy security, and to attack Berlin for its energy dependence on Russia (Vox 2022). In Italy, the 5SM and the League both voted for sending aid to Ukraine, but evidently without enthusiasm, as they rhetorically opposed, against the wishes of all their colleagues with whom they were supporting the technocratic government led by Mario Draghi, sending offensive weapons to Ukraine. Of course, their public justification was that they wanted peace, but sympathies towards Putin cannot be excluded from their calculations. Moreover, by then a majority of Italians, frustrated with the skyrocketing energy bills, turned against the effort to aid Ukraine with offensive weapons (Mow 2022), even while most of the "establishment"—mainstream parties, media outlets and experts—continued to favour alignment with Mario Draghi and NATO. Under

these conditions, populists were channelling and reflecting the shifting popular sentiments which happened to align with their favourable attitudes towards Putin.

Unlike in Spain, the Italian populist coalition took full executive power, but it faced numerous constraints to the enactment of its political program. At the domestic level, it faced resistance from the bureaucracy and the president of the Republic, Sergio Mattarella (Ferozi 2019, Giurlando 2021); the latter intervened multiple times to avert crises with Paris, Brussels, and Berlin. The most important constraint was economic dependence on its EU partners (Chryssogelos, Giurlando and Wajner 2023). A break with them in the form of defiance of the rules of the Eurozone and consequent exit from the currency union risked bankrupting millions of Italians whose savings were denominated in euros. An important difference in the domestic politics of Spain and Italy is that Europe is much less contested in the former. For example, during the height of the Eurozone crisis, Italian populists were unambiguous about their wish for a referendum on the euro and their willingness to return to the previous national currency, the Lira. In private conversations, members of Podemos conceded that their critiques of the euro implied the desirability of defiance and possible exit (Judis 2018, Ortiz 2021), but they could never publicly state this in part because Spanish voters were much less likely to countenance the possibility of defying Europe (Tamanes 2021).

Further demonstrating the power of Europe is that all the populists under discussion radically changed their discursive tune after France and Germany made the breakthrough agreement, in May of 2020, in response to the economic fallout of the Covid-19 pandemic, to mutualize debt and emit bonds which would generate revenue with distributional consequences favourable to Spain, Italy, and other countries in the European periphery (Giurlando and Monteleone 2023). The funds would be raised and distributed by the European Commission, and under these conditions it became harder to depict Brussels as some distant and uncaring technocratic agency. Populists consequently shifted their rhetoric to disputes on how European largesse would be spent. In Italy, the 5SM preferred the funds be allocated for investments in digitalization and eco-sustainability, while the League endorsed more investments to ensure cheaper energy for firms. Vox wanted the funds to go to small business rather than large corporations, while Podemos shared the ecological concerns of progressives elsewhere. Thanks to the Recovery Fund, or Next Generation EU, talk of Italexit has virtually disappeared from Italian political discourse, while Vox and Podemos have moved in a more Europeanist, or less Euroskeptic, direction. One reason is that NGEU had a discernible effect on public opinion (Betti 2021).

Section 4. Implications for research

This paper's conclusions are in accord with the work of Mosetti (2021), Chryssogelos (2018), and Schroeder (2020), which, in all cases find evidence of a core populist logic which transcends right and left, at least in some circumstances; here, the thin ideology thesis carries less explanatory value. One determining factor of this outcome is the behaviour of mainstream parties of right and left. When they converge and adopt policies consistent with the ideology of technocratic liberalism, left-right categories are blurred, and underlying social conflicts generated by globalization are not adequately accommodated by the system. Populism often fills the gap. Whether we call this phenomenon a core logic, or organic, or a thick ideology, is not as important as the recognition of a pattern which can help make sense of populists' positioning on foreign affairs in a way that is distinctive to their political families and that transcends left and right. The added value of calling it a thick ideology is to explicitly raise questions about the thin ideology thesis on which there is a near consensus in the literature on populism and foreign policy.

Another benefit is to recognize that populism is historically rather similar to other ideologies, like socialism, liberalism, and conservatism, that are by common agreement understood to be "thick". All arose out of historical and social changes which created new conflicts inadequately accommodated in existing arrangements; all developed Manichean divides to make sense of these new conflicts and guide action; and all adopted political positions in accord with their perceived Manichean divides. Another important similarity is that all evolved in new directions as circumstances changed, making them very flexible. Liberalism became, on the left, welfare liberalism and on the right, libertarianism. Socialism mixed with liberalism to become social democracy, or with Christianity (as in Liberation Theology in Latin America), creating new ideological forms. Conservatism of the left became "compassionate," and on the right "paleo". Few would say these changes mean they are thin ideologies; only that they adopt to new circumstances while preserving an identifiable core.

When examining populist foreign policies, it may therefore be helpful to assume that they are like other political families with an identifiable sociological basis, and propose policies with distributional consequences, political and economic, which are more favourable to their supporters than their opponents. Just as, say, liberals' Manichean divide between the individual and the state makes sense of their tendency to prefer policies which favour globalizing processes, populists' Manichean divide between the people and the elite helps to make sense of their positions against technocratic liberalism. Sympathy towards Russia (and sometimes China) similarly flows from this because these countries are not the "elite" enemy of populists; rather, it is more likely to be countries which are perceived to be agents of globalization or technocratic liberalism—the US and Germany in particular. These elements distinguish them from mainstream parties. Future research could further compare

populists and mainstream parties' interpretations of, or positions towards, actors and processes in the international system. Where the similarities between left and right populists clearly distinguish them from the positions adopted by the mainstream, it would be evidence of an underlying populist core. Conversely, where there are more similarities between, say, right-wing populists and mainstream conservatives, or left-wing populists and social democrats, it would present evidence of populism as a thin ideology.

Populists, like other parties, must contend with relations of power, domestic and international. Whether they are in government or in opposition makes an important difference, but also important is status in the international system. India's great power status, or at least its endeavours to obtain that status, shape Modi's populist foreign policy (Destradi and Plagemann 2019). Donald Trump had more agency, or a greater margin of manoeuvre, to implement his populist vision of international politics in part because of the US's superpower status (Löfflmann et al 2023). Greece's periphery status plus its economic dependence on the EU seriously constrained the populist coalition's action vis-à-vis actors in Brussels and Washington. Spain and Italy are medium powers, but as members of the EU and the eurozone they share similar constraints as Greece of economic dependence on Brussels. Future research could examine the observed patterns in a broader array of countries, and in so doing, identify the situations where populism is constrained, or has more opportunities to realize its distinctive vision of international affairs.

On the disciplinary plane, there is the potential for fruitful collaborations and cross-fertilizations between scholars of IR and comparativists. The latter tend to be concerned with democratic institutions or lack thereof, while the former focuses on political outcomes in the international system. The study of populist foreign policy highlights the artificial separation of these two realms, as the crises in liberal (representative) democracy leads to the rise of political forces who attempt—with various degrees of failure or success—to alter the international orientation of their countries and, in so doing, transform the international landscape. Fruitful lines of inquiry include examining cross-national similarities among populist groups which transcend geography, culture, level of economic development, and partisan divide (see Rivera 2021, and Giurlando and Wajner 2023); another helpful approach would be systematic comparisons of the domestic conditions—other branches of government, electoral systems, judicial organs—which constrain and at times enable populists' attempts to implement a revolutionary rupture.

Conclusion

Populists may win or lose elections, but the phenomenon is here to stay for the foreseeable future. There are different mixes of underlying causes in various parts of the world, but some patterns which influence all, to various degrees, include the rise of economic inequality (Garicano 2019, Guilluy 2019, Sanjuan and Berlanga 2018), and rapid cultural change induced by globalization, immigration and technological shifts (Reno 2020, Vallespin and Bascunan 2017, Eatwell and Goodwin 2019). Both contribute to the crisis of the institutions of liberal democracy (Ministero de Defensa Espanol 2019), and as these trends will continue, there are strong possibilities that populists will continue to make major gains; likely candidates include the American presidential elections of 2024, the French ones of 2027, and the Spanish general elections of 2023. Moreover, this pattern is visible among populists in other parts of the world, not only in Europe or the Global North (Wajner and Giurlando 2023). In this regard, a notable recent development is that Russia's invasion of Ukraine has shown a certain alignment between populists in Western Europe and North America and countries in the Global South. The latter, for example, neglected to join the West in trying to isolate Russia (Arlacchi 2022, Fuentes 2022), while populists in some Northern countries have been similarly calling to stop sending Ukraine offensive weapons, a position not unrelated to their pro-Russia sympathies. One reason for this alignment is a shared suspicion of US hegemony, commitment to sovereigntism and to a multipolar world, trends which will help to make sense of the future of international politics.

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