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The effects of global populism: assessing the populist impact on international affairs

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Over the past decade, contemporary politics has gradually entered an era of global populism. Although populist phenomena have been examined in the social sciences for more than a century, it is only recently that populist leaders have simultaneously formed governments in such a wide range of countries, in both the global North and the global South. Moreover, the 2016 Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom and the political attention garnered by new types of populist parties and movements in Europe, the Americas, and Asia bear witness to claims of an emerging ‘global rise of populism’.¹

At the same time as there has been renewed interest in the domestic drivers of populists’ success and their consequences for national societies, a growing number of studies have addressed the international dimensions of populism,² focusing on issues like the international components of populist discourse and performance,³ or collecting rich empirical evidence of populist foreign policy in single cases.⁴ In

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¹ Carlos de la Torre, ed., *Routledge handbook of global populism* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2018); Ronald F. Inglehart and Pippa Norris, *Trump, Brexit, and the rise of populism: economic have-nots and cultural backlash*, Working Paper No. RWP16-026 (Cambridge, MA: John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, 2016); Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How democracies die* (New York: Crown, 2018); Benjamin Moffitt, *The global rise of populism: performance, political style, and representation* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016).

² See Sandra Destradi, David Cadier and Johannes Plagemann, ‘Populism and foreign policy: a research agenda (introduction)’, *Comparative European Politics*, vol. 19, 2021, pp. 663–82, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41295-021-00255-4>; Philip Giurlando and Daniel F. Wajner, eds, *Populist foreign policy: regional perspectives of populism in the international scene* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2023); Georg Löffmann, ‘Introduction to special issue: the study of populism in International Relations’, *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 24: 3, 2022, pp. 403–15, <https://doi.org/10.1177/13691481221103116>; Frank A. Stengel, David B. MacDonald and Dirk Nabers, eds, *Populism and world politics: exploring inter- and transnational dimensions* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2019).

³ Angelos Chrysosogelos, ‘State transformation and populism: from the internationalized to the neo-sovereign state?’, *Politics* 40: 1, 2020, pp. 22–37, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263395718803830>; Daniel F. Wajner, ‘The populist way out: why contemporary populist leaders seek transnational legitimization’, *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 24: 3, 2022, pp. 416–36, <https://doi.org/10.1177/13691481211069345>; Michael Zürn, ‘How non-majoritarian institutions make silent majorities vocal: a political explanation of authoritarian populism’, *Perspectives on Politics* 20: 3, 2022, pp. 788–807, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592721001043>.

⁴ See Erin K. Jenne, ‘Populism, nationalism and revisionist foreign policy’, *International Affairs* 97: 2, 2021, pp. 323–43, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iaa230>; Feliciano de Sá Guimarães and Irma Dutra de Oliveira e Silva, ‘Far-right populism and foreign policy identity: Jair Bolsonaro’s ultra-conservatism and the new politics of alignment’, *International Affairs* 97: 2, 2021, pp. 345–63, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iaa220>; Sandra Destradi

parallel, the issue of populism has been raised in debates about the contestations to the 'liberal script' and the crisis of the liberal international order (LIO),⁵ drawing attention to how populists have been trying to hollow out such order from within and have been promoting illiberal alternatives.⁶ So far, however, this thriving new research area has produced somewhat scattered findings, pointing to populism's various effects on international politics, but without convincingly explaining the reasons for the observable variations. Foreign and security policies differ between different populist governments, and so do the implications of populism for global cooperation and regional integration. In other words, we still lack a systematic and theory-led understanding of the different impacts of populism on foreign policy and international order.

This special section of *International Affairs* aims to bridge these theoretical and empirical gaps by systematically examining three types of international effects that populism has on *politics*, *policies* and *polities*. The evidence presented in the contributions which make up this section is geographically diverse and thereby does justice to the global character of populism. In the remainder of this introduction, we propose a theoretical framework that helps us make sense of variations in populists' foreign policies and in the approach of populists to international institutions. We then summarize the findings of the contributing articles, and we conclude by discussing their policy-related implications as well as identifying remaining unanswered questions and avenues for further research.

Variants of populism and their international effects

The literature on populism from comparative politics and political theory offers several different understandings of and approaches to populism. Some scholars see it as a strategy for the acquisition and subsequent maintenance of power.⁷

and Johannes Plagemann, 'Populism and International Relations: (un)predictability, personalisation, and the reinforcement of existing trends in world politics', *Review of International Studies* 45: 5, 2019, pp. 711–30, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210519000184>; Bertjan Verbeek and Andrej Zaslove, 'Populism and foreign policy', in Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser et al., eds, *The Oxford handbook of populism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 384–405; Erik Voeten, 'Populism and backlashes against international courts', *Perspectives on Politics* 18: 2, 2020, pp. 407–22, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592719000975>; Daniel F. Wajner, 'Exploring the foreign policies of populist governments: (Latin) America first', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, vol. 24, 2021, pp. 651–80, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41268-020-00206-8>; Leslie E. Wehner and Cameron G. Thies, 'The nexus of populism and foreign policy: the case of Latin America', *International Relations* 35: 2, 2021, pp. 320–40, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0047117820944430>.

⁵ Emanuel Adler and Alena Drieschova, 'The epistemological challenge of truth subversion to the liberal international order', *International Organization* 75: 2, 2021, pp. 359–86, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818320000533>; Francis Fukuyama, 'The populist surge', *The American Interest* 13: 4, 2018; G. John Ikenberry, 'The end of liberal international order?', *International Affairs* 94: 1, 2018, pp. 7–23, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iix241>; Markus Kornprobst and T.V. Paul, 'Globalization, deglobalization and the liberal international order', *International Affairs* 97: 5, 2021, pp. 1305–16, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iia1120>; Benjamin Miller, 'How "making the world in its own liberal image" made the West less liberal', *International Affairs* 97: 5, 2021, pp. 1353–75, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iia1114>; David A. Lake, Lisa L. Martin and Thomas Risse, 'Challenges to the liberal order: reflections on *International Organization*', *International Organization* 75: 2, 2021, pp. 225–7, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818320000636>.

⁶ Tanja A. Börzel and Michael Zürn, 'Contestations of the liberal international order: from liberal multilateralism to postnational liberalism', *International Organization* 75: 2, 2021, pp. 282–305, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818320000570>; Fredrik Söderbaum, Kilian Spandler and Agnese Pacciardi, *Contestations of the liberal international order: a populist script of regional cooperation* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

⁷ Kurt Weyland, 'A political-strategic approach', in Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser et al., eds, *The Oxford handbook*

Others focus more on its discursive aspects, as with the Laclauian approach, which addresses populism as a political logic or a 'logic of articulation' that simplifies the political space by creating a dichotomy between the 'people' and a power bloc.⁸ Research is also paying increasing attention to the stylistic aspects of populism, focusing on the performative role of leadership, communication practices and emotions in attracting audiences and followers.⁹ Recent years have also witnessed the development of new, still understudied approaches to the study of populism, such as intersectional and gender approaches.¹⁰ Over time, the ideational approach, which suggests studying populism as an ideology, became dominant.¹¹ In particular, the idea of populism as a thin ideology that is usually combined with thicker host ideologies plays a key role in the analysis of contemporary populism.¹² Such a thin ideology 'considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, "the pure people" versus "the corrupt elite", and ... argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people'.¹³

Assessing the effect of populism on foreign policy and international institutions depends on such conceptual decisions. For instance, adopting a Laclauian discursive approach to populism makes it hard to expect a high degree of foreign policy commonality between different populist leaderships.¹⁴ Since a Laclauian approach separates populism sharply from nationalism, authoritarianism and anti-pluralism, a broad set of quite different actors come into focus, thus affecting the identification of their impact. Similarly, the strategic approach and a slim ideational approach are open to a wide array of different 'host ideologies', making it unlikely that different populist movements will consistently display an identical foreign policy.¹⁵

Against this background, we use the concept of authoritarian populism as a more or less thick ideology to provide a substantial reference-point for our theoretical

of populism, pp. 48–72.

⁸ Ernesto Laclau, *On populist reason* (London: Verso, 2005), p. 44.

⁹ See Moffitt, *The global rise of populism*.

¹⁰ See for example Gabriele Dietze and Julia Roth, 'Right-wing populism and gender: a preliminary cartography of an emergent research field', in Gabriele Dietze and Julia Roth, eds, *Right-wing populism and gender: European perspectives and beyond* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2020); Shweta Singh and Élise Féron, 'Towards an intersectional approach to populism: comparative perspectives from Finland and India', *Contemporary Politics* 27: 5, 2021, pp. 528–49, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569775.2021.1917164>.

¹¹ See Kirk A. Hawkins and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, 'The ideational approach to populism', *Latin American Research Review* 52: 4, 2017, pp. 513–28, <https://doi.org/10.25222/larr.85>; Kirk A. Hawkins et al., eds, *The ideational approach to populism: concept, theory, and analysis* (London and New York: Routledge, 2018).

¹² Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism: a very short introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

¹³ Cas Mudde, 'The populist *Zeitgeist*', *Government and Opposition* 39: 4, 2004, pp. 541–63 at p. 543, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1477-7053.2004.00135.x>.

¹⁴ See in this regard two specific contributions to this special section: Emmy Eklundh, Frank Stengel and Thorsten Wojczewski, 'Left populism and foreign policy: Bernie Sanders and Podemos', *International Affairs* 100: 5, 2024, pp. 1899–1918, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iaae137>; and Rubrick Biegon and Soraya Hamdaoui, 'Anti-populism and the Trump trauma in US foreign policy', *International Affairs* 100: 5, 2024, pp. 1857–75, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iaae174>.

¹⁵ Here, see Michael I. Magcamit and Aries A. Arugay, 'Explaining populist securitization and Rodrigo Duterte's anti-establishment Philippine foreign policy', *International Affairs* 100: 5, 2024, pp. 877–97, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iaad248>; and Monika Brusenbauch Meislová and Angelos Chrysosogelos, 'The ambiguous impact of populist trade discourses on the international economic order', *International Affairs* 100: 5, 2024, pp. 1941–57, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iaad296>.

expectations and still allow for variation in the populism under question. We thus differentiate populists by focusing on how authoritarian they are. This choice is based on the observation that in the current wave of populism, the thin ideology of anti-elitism and people-centrism is mostly—but not always—combined with ideological traits that are characteristic of the authoritarian or communitarian pole of a new cleavage in modern societies.¹⁶ In this view, ‘authoritarian populism’ is driving the current wave of populism and contains a much thicker ideology. It is mainly driven by widespread distrust in politics and political parties that has built up from the 1960s onwards, as well as by dissatisfaction with the liberal policies promoted by non-majoritarian institutions like central banks, constitutional courts and international organizations. Authoritarian populism combines anti-elitism and people-centrism, the constitutive components of populist thin-centred ideology, with nationalism, majoritarianism and decisionism.¹⁷ This understanding of authoritarian populism includes populists such as Venezuela’s Hugo Chávez and Nicolás Maduro, as well as some leaders of leftist parties in western Europe with a strong exclusionary programme. There are, however, some parties and programmes on the left that may build on populist discourse, performance and style but can hardly be described as authoritarian populists in ideational terms.¹⁸ That said, our focus on authoritarian populists does not exclude other populists from our study on the international effects of this phenomenon. Instead, we look at the variety of populisms in recent times by taking fully authoritarian populists as the highest value of a continuous variable. Our basic expectation is that this variation leads to differences in foreign policy, its related decision-making and its impact on the international order.

Such an approach also allows us to look at variation over time. While populists claim the need to hear the people (instead of the elites), authoritarian populism in power goes hand in hand with the weakening of democratic institutions. We can thus expect populist leaderships with longstanding governmental functions to become increasingly authoritarian over time. Authoritarian populists may evolve from a social movement to a party competing for power, or from a party to a government that aims at undermining the liberal principles on which democracy depends and—in the most extreme case—from such a government to an authoritarian regime.¹⁹ Indeed, in the long run, populist governments are more likely to reshape democratic institutions by undermining the separation of powers, making

¹⁶ Nadia Urbinati, ‘Political theory of populism’, *Annual Review of Political Science*, vol. 22, 2019, pp. 111–27, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-050317-070753>; Inglehart and Norris, ‘Trump, Brexit, and the rise of populism’; Armin Schäfer and Michael Zürn, *The democratic regression: the political causes of authoritarian populism* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2023).

¹⁷ Zürn, ‘How non-majoritarian institutions make silent majorities vocal’.

¹⁸ This nuance is incorporated in some of the articles in this special section. Podemos, discussed in Eklundh et al., ‘Left populism and foreign policy’, may be such a case, as may Syriza in Philip Giurlando and Carla Monteleone, ‘Institutional change, sovereigntist contestation and the limits of populism: evidence from southern Europe’, *International Affairs* 100: 5, 2024, pp. 2047–67, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iaae058>; and Mexican president Andrés Manuel López Obrador in Débora Barros Leal Farias, Guilherme Casarões and Daniel F. Wajner, ‘Populist international (dis)order? Lessons from world order visions in Latin American populism’, *International Affairs* 100: 5, 2024, pp. 2003–24, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iaae179>.

¹⁹ See also Andrew Arato and Jean L. Cohen, *Populism and civil society: the challenge to constitutional democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).

all institutions pliable to their will, infiltrating them with loyalists and political appointees by increasingly controlling the media and, ultimately, by suppressing opposition forces.²⁰ From this perspective, populism—a genuinely democratic phenomenon *per se*—is often considered to promote democratic backsliding and to have the potential to transform into authoritarianism over time.²¹ This all concurs with the centralization and personalization of political power, derived from populists' peculiar understanding of representation as 'embodiment' of the popular will,²² as well as with the anti-pluralism that emerges from populists' claim of being the only possible representatives of the 'true people'.²³

This implies that the effects of populism vary not only across different types, but also over time. In other words, this study draws on the understanding that the longer authoritarian populists stay in power, the more we would expect an effect not only on domestic politics, but also on foreign policy. Certainly, we must recognize that not all populists espouse ethnonationalist ideologies or have hollowed out decision-making procedures and democratic institutions to the same extent. We can expect the authoritarian component of populism to be more or less pronounced, depending on a series of exogenous and endogenous conditions that may constrain these authoritarian patterns. This also relates to populists' duration in office: the weakening of democratic institutions does not happen overnight, and democratic backsliding under populist governments will play out more intensely as time passes, modifying the pre-existing checks and balances.²⁴

Expectations about the international impact of populism

This leaves us, therefore, with a key question, namely: *how does populism, in its more or less authoritarian variants, affect foreign policy and international politics over time?* In the following, we develop a set of expectations that serves as an overarching framework for the analysis of the international effects of populism in the contributions to this special section. We employ three broad expectations that will guide the analysis in those articles, according to the three groups of effects mentioned above (politics, policies and international politics).

Expectation 1: All populists in power will change the processes of foreign policy decision-making, aiming at centralizing and personalizing foreign policy to some degree. The effect increases with authoritarian populists and over time.

²⁰ Urbinati, 'Political theory of populism'; Jan-Werner Müller, *What is populism?* (London: Penguin, 2017); Anna Grzymala-Busse, 'Conclusion: the global forces of populism', *Polity* 51: 4, 2019, pp. 718–23, <https://doi.org/10.1086/705322>; Kim Lane Scheppele, 'Autocratic legalism', *University of Chicago Law Review* 85: 2, 2018, pp. 545–84.

²¹ Takis S. Pappas, *Populism and liberal democracy: a comparative and theoretical analysis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019); Kurt Weyland, 'Latin America's authoritarian drift: the threat from the populist left', *Journal of Democracy* 24: 3, 2013, pp. 18–32, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2013.0045>.

²² Urbinati, 'Political theory of populism'.

²³ Müller, *What is populism?*

²⁴ Pappas, *Populism and liberal democracy*, Levitsky and Ziblatt, *How democracies die*.

This expectation concerns the *politics* dimension outlined above. Being anti-elitist by definition, all populists will be extremely sceptical of traditional foreign policy elites, most notably diplomats. They will therefore tend to marginalize foreign ministries, diplomatic echelons and expert advisers.²⁵ Given populist leaders' claim to embody the popular will, foreign policy will also become more personalized. The populist leader and their inner circle (often with familial ties) is more often at the helm of both the country's private and public diplomacy, which includes fostering the cult of leadership among regional and global audiences and patron–client relations with transnational networks.²⁶

Both centralization and personalization can be expected to intensify as populist governments become more authoritarian—indeed, decisionism entails the notion that there is no need for political procedures and deliberations. Highly authoritarian populist governments will strongly rely on leader-level meetings and decisions in their foreign policy, entirely sidelining conventional bureaucratic procedures. Since they put emphasis on direct representation by populist leaders,²⁷ they can also be expected to avoid the participation of transnational civil society in the processes of formulating and implementing foreign policy. Furthermore, other governments that interact with populists in power—and especially with authoritarian populists, who are internationally perceived as muscular, proactive and successful—are more likely to end up adapting to such changed diplomatic practices after learning from the legitimization gains of their international performances.²⁸ We, therefore, expect all populist governments to centralize and personalize foreign policy decision-making, and to do so in more extreme ways according to how authoritarian the populist government is.

Expectation 2: All populists in power will tend to emphasize national sovereignty in foreign policy. The effect increases with authoritarian populists and over time.

This expectation focuses on the dimension of *policies*: that is, on the introduction of actual changes in the foreign policy course of a country under populists in power. Generally speaking, populists will claim to govern for the 'people' narrowly defined and to be the only defenders of the good and virtuous 'will of the people'.²⁹ This will contribute to inducing them to put great emphasis on the notion of popular sovereignty;³⁰ but they will possibly also be less amenable to cooperating in international negotiations and seeking a compromise in international disputes as compared to non-populist governments, given their tendency to see the world in dualistic, Manichean terms.³¹

²⁵ Destradi and Plagemann, 'Populism and IR'; Christian Lequesne, 'Populist governments and career diplomats in the EU: the challenge of political capture', *Comparative European Politics*, vol. 19, 2021, pp. 779–95, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41295-021-00261-6>.

²⁶ Wajner, 'Exploring the foreign policies of populist governments', pp. 660–63.

²⁷ See Zürn, 'How non-majoritarian institutions make silent majorities vocal'.

²⁸ Wajner, 'The populist way out', p. 429.

²⁹ Müller, *What is populism?*, p. 3.

³⁰ See Thorsten Wojcieszki, *The inter- and transnational politics of populism: foreign policy, identity and popular sovereignty* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023); Corina Lacatus, Gustav Meibauer and Georg Löffmann, eds, *Political communication and performative leadership: populism in international politics* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2023).

³¹ Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser, 'The ideational approach to populism', p. 516.

At the same time, existing research on foreign policy implementation among populist governments has revealed a gap between discourse and policy and a corresponding coexistence of confrontational rhetoric and pragmatism in populists' policy-making in fields such as security, finance and trade.³² According to Andrew Moravcsik, despite their deep criticism of the current international order most right-wing populist parties in Europe may be 'more bark than bite' in terms of foreign policy, while liberal democratic societies show more resilience in confronting such populist challenges than previously thought.³³ Thick ideologies are particularly important in explaining these variations.³⁴ While the core populist categories of 'people' and 'elites' are, as empty signifiers, extremely vague and malleable (and therefore functional for political pragmatism), the overlap with other categories that originate in thick ideologies (usually grounded on ethnicity, religion, class, and so on) provide more rigid boundaries for the definition of the 'people'. In other words, the thick ideologies that are combined with populism help populists specify and define who belongs to the 'people' and who constitutes the 'elite'. Thus, left-wing populists will consider the 'people' to encompass the working classes and marginalized social groups, while ethnonationalist populists will define the 'people' as the members of an ethnic majority (e.g. Hindus in the case of Hindu nationalists in India). This can be expected to have implications for the content of foreign policies.

Given the precise features of authoritarian populism, the more authoritarian a populist government is, the more it will be sceptical of any limitation to national sovereignty, whether internal or external. Ethnonationalism and majoritarianism, related to the claim that the people are always right, will also have implications for populists' approach towards international responsibility: the more authoritarian a populist government, the more it will be inclined to deny historical responsibilities, for example concerning climate change or historical wrongdoing. Ethnonationalist thick ideology, which at the domestic level leads to the exclusion of minorities not belonging to the 'true people', will lead to a more restrictive migration policy.³⁵ Moreover, the notion that the people's will corresponds to that of a silent majority constrained by individual and minority rights can be expected to lead to a rejection of human rights and international law.³⁶

³² See Destradi and Plagemann, 'Populism and IR', pp. 717–23; Stephan Fouquet and Klaus Brummer, 'Profiling the personality of populist foreign policy makers: a leadership trait analysis,' *Journal of International Relations and Development*, vol. 26, 2023, pp. 1–29, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41268-022-00270-2>; Amy Skonieczny, 'Emotions and political narratives: populism, Trump and trade', *Politics and Governance* 6: 4, 2018, pp. 62–72, <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v6i4.1574>; Daniel F. Wajner and Philip Giurlando, 'Introduction to populist foreign policy (PFP)', in Giurlando and Wajner, *Populist foreign policy*, pp. 1–35 at pp. 2–4.

³³ Andrew Moravcsik, 'More bark than bite? The effect of extreme-right parties on foreign policy', American Academy Lecture at Freie Universität Berlin, 11 December 2023.

³⁴ Verbeek and Zaslove, 'Populism and foreign policy'; Destradi and Plagemann, 'Populism and IR', pp. 712–14.

³⁵ See for example Philipp Lutz, 'Variation in policy success: radical right populism and migration policy', *West European Politics* 42: 3, 2019, pp. 517–44, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2018.1504509>; Alexander Rossell Hayes and Carolyn Marie Dudek, 'How radical right-wing populism has shaped recent migration policy in Austria and Germany', *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies* 18: 2, 2020, pp. 133–50, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15562948.2019.1587130>.

³⁶ In this special section, this is discussed in particular in the article by Monika Barthwal-Datta and Shweta Singh ('Populism and foreign policy: India's refugee policy towards the Rohingya', *International Affairs* 100: 5, 2024, pp. 1983–2002, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iaae173>); and that by Barros Leal Farias and colleagues.

Even among populist leaders who initially pursue pragmatic policies, the hardening of authoritarian practices after long periods in power can be expected to concur with a radicalization in their foreign policies across multiple thematic areas: in other words, revisionism.³⁷ The combination of ethnonational, majoritarian and decisionist beliefs with self-assigned roles as leaders of civilizational clashes, along with nostalgic claims of ‘restoration’ of an imperial past and a declared preference for radical revolutionary ends, makes authoritarian populists more likely to distance themselves from the policies of previous governments in fields such as security, trade, human rights, international aid or the environment.³⁸

Expectation 3: Populists will increasingly tend to contest international institutions and the liberal international order the more power they gain and the more authoritarian they become.

When it comes to the impact of populism on states’ foreign policy stances towards international institutions (the international *polity* dimension), we expect that it will be mainly the current authoritarian wave of populism which is detrimental to multilateralism in the long term. Generally speaking, we expect authoritarian populists to be increasingly sceptical of and vocal against international institutions, which, like intermediate institutions at the domestic level, are considered to stand between the leader and the people.³⁹ Particularly where a high degree of authority has already been ceded to international institutions, as in the case of global governance institutions and regional organizations with supranational powers, populists will use the issue for politicization and mobilization.⁴⁰ Indeed, the perceived increasing influence of ‘international bureaucracies’ is often considered a driver of the emergence of authoritarian populism,⁴¹ as these bureaucracies are seen as transnational elites detached from the needs of the people.⁴² At the same time, authoritarian populists are identified as being particularly averse to those institutions that embody the core values of the LIO.⁴³

Contemporary authoritarian populist leaderships, nevertheless, have shown a greater tendency not only to erode and delegitimize existing international institutions, but also to recreate and legitimize ‘alternative’ institutions that better fit their identities, interests and ideas.⁴⁴ In this sense, *we also expect that the more*

³⁷ See Jenne, ‘Populism, nationalism and revisionist foreign policy’, pp. 329–32; Daniel W. Drezner, Ronald R. Krebs and Randall Schweller, ‘The end of grand strategy: America must think small’, *Foreign Affairs* 99: 3, 2020, pp. 107–17, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/world/2020-04-13/end-grand-strategy>. (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 23 July 2024.)

³⁸ See Rogers Brubaker, ‘Between nationalism and civilizationism: the European populist moment in comparative perspective’, *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 40: 8, 2017, pp. 1191–1226, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2017.1294700>; Jelena Subotić, ‘Antisemitism in the global populist international’, *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 24: 3, 2022, pp. 458–74, <https://doi.org/10.1177/13691481211066970>; Ihsan Yilmaz and Nicholas Morieson, *Religions and the global rise of civilizational populism* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023).

³⁹ Johannes Plagemann and Sandra Destradi, ‘Populism and foreign policy: the case of India’, *Foreign Policy Analysis* 15: 2, 2019, pp. 283–301 at p. 287, <https://doi.org/10.1093/fpa/oryo10>.

⁴⁰ See Michael Zürn, *A theory of global governance: authority, legitimacy, and contestation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 137–67.

⁴¹ Michael Zürn, ‘Global governance and legitimacy problems’, *Government and Opposition* 39: 2, 2004, pp. 260–87 at p. 285, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1477-7053.2004.00123.x>.

⁴² Destradi and Plagemann, ‘Populism and IR’, p. 710.

⁴³ Söderbaum, Spandler and Pacciardi, *Contestations of the liberal international order*.

⁴⁴ Daniel F. Wajner and Luis Roniger, ‘Populism and transnational projection: the legitimization strategies of Pink

*authoritarian the populist government in question, the greater its opposition to and contestation of existent international 'polities' and its desire to create new ones.*⁴⁵ Among other reasons, this is because nationalism entails the notion that political communities and responsibilities end at the national borders, which can induce authoritarian populists to react against regional and global organizations that are portrayed as not of immediate use to the 'people' (here understood in ethnonational terms).⁴⁶

The international effects of populism: findings from the special section

The articles of this special section have explored three types of effects of populism. We move from looking at national foreign policy decision-making to the content of foreign policies and to their effects on international institutions. A first set of contributions addresses the impact of populism on the processes of foreign policy-making (*politics*). This approach addresses changes in the practices and style of populist governments' foreign policy-making (Michael Magcamit and Aries Arugay; Özgür Özdamar and Lerna Yanık⁴⁷). Within this section, we also move beyond the realm of populist foreign policy by studying the reactions to populist diplomacy on the part of foreign policy elites, regional neighbours and intellectual communities (Rubrick Biegon and Soraya Hamdaoui; Emmy Eklundh, Frank Stengel and Thorsten Wojczewski). In doing so, we look at the indirect effects of populism in power.

A second group of contributions focuses on the substance and content of the populists' foreign policy (*policies*). They delve into a range of issue areas, from international cooperation and security (Monika Barthwal-Datta and Shweta Singh; Sandra Destradi and Johannes Plagemann⁴⁸) to international trade and finance (Monika Brusenbauch Meislová and Angelos Chryssoyelos; Amy Skonieczny and Ancita Sherel⁴⁹). The unifying goal of all these contributions is to find out how the formation of populist governments leads to changes in the substance of foreign policy, while making sense of variations among the foreign policies of populist governments.

A third group of contributions completes the shift in the level of analysis. They move beyond a focus on the domestic origins of the foreign policies of states and the specific consequences of populism for processes of foreign policy-making in single countries. Instead, this group of contributions focuses on the broader impact of populism on states' stances towards international institutions (the *international polity*). They therefore move into the context of multilateralism,

Tide neo-populist leaderships in Latin America', *Comparative Political Theory* 2: 2, 2022, pp. 118–47 at pp. 134–6, <https://doi.org/10.1163/26669773-bja10037>.

⁴⁵ See Börzel and Zürn, 'Contestations of the liberal international order', pp. 284–90.

⁴⁶ See Jenne, 'Populism, nationalism and revisionist foreign policy', pp. 325–9; Fukuyama, 'The populist surge'.

⁴⁷ Özgür Özdamar and Lerna K. Yanık, 'Populist hyperpersonalization and politicization of foreign policy institutions', *International Affairs* 100: 5, 2024, pp. 1835–56; <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iaae181>.

⁴⁸ Sandra Destradi and Johannes Plagemann, 'Do populists escalate international disputes?', *International Affairs* 100: 5, 2024, pp. 1919–40, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iaae172>.

⁴⁹ Amy Skonieczny and Ancita Sherel, 'The Trump effect: the perpetuation of populism in US–China trade', *International Affairs* 100: 5, 2024, pp. 1959–81, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iaae183>.

addressing how populist governments approach international institutions at the global level (Déborah Barros Leal Farias, Guilherme Casarões and Daniel Wajner; Agnese Pacciardi, Kilian Spandler and Fredrik Söderbaum) and regional organizations (Philip Giurlando and Carla Monteleone). The common goal of this set of contributions is to lay the groundwork for identifying the broader impact of the current wave of populism on regional and international orders.

The evidence presented in the contributions to this special section is geographically diverse and thereby does justice to the global character of populism. Evidence includes case studies from North America (Biegon and Hamdaoui; Brusenbauch Meislová and Chryssogelos; Skonieczny and Sherel), eastern and western Europe (Brusenbauch Meislová and Chryssogelos; Giurlando and Monteleone; Pacciardi et al.), Latin America (Barros Leal Farias et al.), and south and south-east Asia (Barthwal-Datta and Singh; Magcamit and Arugay), as well as cross-regional comparisons (Eklundh et al.; Destradi and Plagemann; Özdamar and Yanık).

Our first expectation concerned populists' way of doing foreign policy (*politics*) and focused especially on the centralization and personalization of decision-making under populist governments. This expectation was confirmed in the cross-regional analysis of populists in power by Özdamar and Yanık. They argue that populists' foreign policy falls prey to the quest for regime survival, and for the personal political survival of populist leaders. By also including Russia under President Vladimir Putin in their analysis as an extreme case of authoritarian populism, Özdamar and Yanık's article is particularly helpful to show variations in centralization and personalization of foreign policy. Similarly, in their analysis of the Philippine president Rodrigo Duterte's foreign policy, Magcamit and Arugay delineate the features of personalized foreign policy-making, highlighting how Duterte securitized the 'liberal West' as a threat to the Philippines' sovereignty, mostly in response to what he perceived to be personal attacks against him by representatives of international institutions and western governments.

In addition, foreign policy can be affected by populist leaders long after they leave office. As Biegon and Hamdaoui show, the foreign policy establishment's discursive response to the Trumpist 'rupture' in the first two years of the administration of Joe Biden reflects the apparent overcoming of a trauma. The anti-populist framing strategies that followed the populist 'disruption' are full of emotional and ideational elements, based on the claimed need to return to normal through a 'restoration' of the US international image as a responsible leader which is (re-)committed to internationalism and the LIO. In sum, where populist leaders do not necessarily incorporate authoritarian components into their political projects, populism's assumed effects on foreign policies are often exaggerated, as Eklundh and colleagues point out in their article. In their opinion, efforts to study the effects of populism should narrowly define the phenomenon and approach it as an articulation of different types of politics.

The special section articles also support our expectations regarding *policies*, according to which populists in power emphasize national sovereignty in their foreign policies, with increasing impact in cases of authoritarian populism. In this

sense, Destradi and Plagemann show that populist governments tend to adopt more confrontational foreign policies, but that this depends on various conditions, including the degree of personalization of decision-making processes, the extent to which a dispute is used to mobilize internal support, the (a)symmetrical nature of the power relationship, and the cost–benefit calculations of the confrontation. Through a cross-regional comparison that included populist leaderships in Bolivia, India and the Philippines, the study confirms that authoritarianism and ‘thick’ ideologies tend to increase the radicalization of populist foreign policies, while warning that other contextual elements at home and abroad can outweigh these effects.

Popular sovereignty is also highlighted in the articulation of populists’ foreign policy discourse regarding trade policies, as Brusenbauch Meislová and Chrysosgelos show. While protectionism and ‘pro-free-trade’ are generally presented as two contradictory approaches often adopted by populist leaderships in trade policy—as in the respective cases of Trumpism and Brexit—the authors describe how a common logic of domestic mobilization can unite both, with path-dependent international implications over time. This logic of affective perpetuation and intensification is also confirmed by Skonieczny and Sherel, whose study reveals the lasting effects of emotional narratives behind nationalist populist trade policies, as evidenced by the escalating tariff war between the US and China during the administration of Donald Trump, and subsequent economic relations during the Biden administration. Highly nationalistic emotions also characterize the foreign policy orientations of populists towards foreign populations and, more specifically, the securitization of some refugee populations and not others, according to Barthwal-Datta and Singh. They implement an intersectional approach to analyse India’s discursive construction of Rohingya refugee policy under the government of Narendra Modi’s Bharatiya Janata Party, while paying attention to the mediating role of geopolitical dynamics and religion–gender identity assemblages embedded in regional politics.

The expectation that populists will contest international institutions and the LIO (the *international polity*) is similarly confirmed in a number of contributions to this special section. Barros Leal Farias and colleagues argue that populists in power tend to envision an international order characterized by ‘minilateralism’, featuring mostly symbolic and small-scale international cooperation schemes, along with a selective rule of law(-ish) embrace and an anti-pluralist rejection of international society as a driving force of foreign policy. While these normative pillars are present (to varying degrees and in varying expressions) in the world-order visions of three Latin American populist leaders who have held office during the last decade—Brazil’s Jair Bolsonaro, Venezuela’s Nicolás Maduro and Mexico’s Andrés Manuel López Obrador, the study concludes that it is (as yet) difficult to identify a homogeneous, consolidated plan for an alternative ‘populist international order’. Moreover, the authors’ analysis confirms the expectation that longer tenures in power, mediated by gradual authoritarianism, can lead to a more forceful contestation of the LIO.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Barros Leal Farias, Casarões and Wajner, ‘Populist international (dis)order?’.

In addition, the findings of Pacciardi and colleagues confirm our expectations in the 'polity' field, but they also highlight that disengagement can take a variety of forms, with exit from international institutions being a rare outcome. These dynamics are particularly evident in the case of the confrontational approach of Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán to the European Union.⁵¹ Likewise, in their analysis of southern European populists, Giurlando and Monteleone found that populists were more openly Eurosceptic and sovereigntist as long as they could blame the EU for making their countries the underdogs of Europe, but that they toned down their criticism after the adoption of the Recovery Fund (later restyled as NextGenerationEU).⁵² An interesting deviation from our expectation that the rejection of multilateralism will be particularly pronounced in countries that have ceded a high amount of sovereignty to international institutions appears in the case of Duterte's government in the Philippines. As set out in the contribution of Magcamit and Arugay, Duterte's attacks against multilateral institutions were primarily driven by the high degree of personalization in his foreign policy decision-making. Also, Pacciardi and colleagues do not find evidence that high-authority international institutions meet greater resistance by populists in power.

In sum, the findings offered in this subsection corroborate the assertion that it is easier to identify common ground among populists in the vocal contestation of existing international institutions than in the proposals they promote (and implement) to replace or improve these vilified 'polities', at both the regional and global levels. Moreover, although the anticipated impact of populism through gradual backlash and delegitimization appears to be greater in relation to LIO institutions, a change in the underlying normative foundations is also likely to increase the constraints on institutional cooperation among authoritarian leaderships (whether populist or not). A 'sample' of these potential challenges is reflected in the recent distancing dynamics between Putin's Russia, Xi Jinping's China, and Modi's India (among other contenders for global/regional power roles), as epitomized in their active participation (and absences) in alternative international forums that they share, such as the G20 or BRICS.⁵³

More generally, the different contributions of the special section confirm that the declared preferences of populists, particularly regarding policies and polities, do not fully materialize and soon reveal a sizeable gap between discourse and practice. While the effect has the expected direction, the 'malleability' of outcomes is illustrated by the foreign policies of populist leaders such as Bolsonaro, Maduro, López Obrador, Orbán, Modi and Duterte. This gap can be explained by the countries' structural power restrictions and the influence of domestic political systems. The studies also shed light on the implications of the clash between populists and their audiences, once it becomes clear that leaders are falling short of their promises and the gap is publicly revealed, often leading to radicalization over time.

⁵¹ Agnese Pacciardi, Kilian Spandler and Fredrik Söderbaum, 'Beyond exit: How populist governments disengage from international institutions', *International Affairs* 100: 5, 2024, pp. 2025–46, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iaae185>.

⁵² Giurlando and Monteleone, 'Institutional change, sovereigntist contestation and the limits of populism'.

⁵³ Thanks are due to an anonymous reviewer for their suggestion that we address this important topic.

Conclusions

Populists in power affect both the making of and the content of foreign policies. This effect increases if the authoritarian types of populism are in control and if they are present for a long period. Russian foreign policy in 2022, including the decision to wage a full-scale war against Ukraine, is the most visible example of this. Moreover, authoritarian populists in power target liberal international institutions. That said, populists like Alexandros Tsipras of Syriza, López Obrador and Bernie Sanders have criticized neo-liberal international institutions exercising authority in favour of austerity policies, but if policies change they often turn supportive, as demonstrated by the studies of Giurlando and Monteleone and of Barros Leal Farias and colleagues. In contrast, authoritarian populists like Bolsonaro, Maduro and Trump aim at weakening regional and global institutions as such.

While the three hypotheses condense essential insights about the effects of populists' foreign policy from different countries and world regions, there remain critical issues to be studied, to which we could contribute only a little. The starting-point of these concluding observations is the finding that time and temporal dynamics matter in the effects of global populism. Three issues are of special importance. The first one directly builds on our findings. The length of staying in power plays an important role. Authoritarian populists do not aim for revolutions, they are in the business of democratic backsliding. This is true for the realm of foreign policy as well. It seems that the more authoritarian populist governments achieve a regime change over time, the more it leads to a radical revision in terms of international *polities* and *policies* (i.e. beyond *politics*). There is therefore a need to move beyond comparative statics when studying the foreign policies of populist leaders. Populists in power seem to radicalize over time. Putin, whose regime won relatively open elections in the 2000s, never was a *lupenreiner* (flawless) democrat, as the former German chancellor Gerhard Schröder once described him (notably, Schröder remains a friend of Putin). But the nature of Putin's rule changed over time, and an authoritarian system is now fully established. Hence, building on this research, in future we need to study the radicalization of authoritarian populist leaders over time as a dynamic process. Understanding the sequences and causal chains on the basis of which these dynamics unfold can help to provide insights into the decisive junctures for path-dependent developments and into how they can be influenced and mitigated.

Another potential future direction for study is to go back into history and look at these populist actors' careers in the years before they ascended to power and came to control foreign policy. Although our comparative statics framework looks at populists in power, there are good reasons to believe that they affect foreign policy even before they attain power. By focusing only on the foreign policies of populist leaders once they have taken power, and on what they actively changed, we have risked underestimating the (intended and unintended) consequences of populism on foreign policy. As the comparative politics literature on populism increasingly

shows,⁵⁴ there are ‘silent’ or ‘indirect’ changes that may be equally important. One of those may be due to a desire of incumbent parties to *prevent* or *mitigate* the further rise of populist challengers. In western Europe in particular, periods when populist parties are on the rise in a country are often associated with the deepening and widening of European institutions. In France, Jean-Marie Le Pen benefited from the referendum against the European Constitutional Treaty in 2005; Nigel Farage’s UK Independence Party (UKIP) thrived as long as the EU could be pitted as an enemy for the British people; in Germany the Alternative für Deutschland initially gained popularity as a response against the EU’s currency union, and in Greece, Syriza would have not been possible without the Troika.⁵⁵ Leaders of incumbent parties have become aware of this mechanism and they have good reasons to believe that populists, and especially authoritarian populists, benefit from strong and intrusive international organizations.⁵⁶ Leaders of parties that are in favour of a LIO may therefore be much less daring nowadays in publicly supporting internationalist projects—in spite of a strong need for such projects given the most recent global crises. From this perspective, the willingness to support international institutions may have declined as a silent effect of increasing global populism.

An alternative explanation refers to a lack of capacity to support internationalism, instead of a declining willingness. The mere possibility that populist leaders will block any attempt to deepen international cooperation may prevent incumbent internationalist forces from doing so. A vivid example is the role of Hungary and Poland in the EU. Their threat to blockade any institutional reform that requires unanimity has dissuaded major reform attempts. A similar situation can be observed in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) regarding the (lack of) implementation of the Responsibility to Protect norm. Here, the UNSC has exercised self-restraint for fear of public criticism. In this sense, populists—and especially authoritarian populist parties—may affect the foreign policies of democratic states toward international institutions, even if they are not in power. It is crucial to study these constitutive mechanisms more deeply, potentially with the help of constructivist approaches.

A last theme refers to the need to go further back in history. If they were running their respective countries of France and the United States today, Charles de Gaulle and Ronald Reagan (as he was early in his presidency) might be labelled as populists. Moreover, some of their foreign policies show similarities to the policies of populist leaders today. Along the same lines, during the ‘twenty years crisis’⁵⁷ the internationalist forces that prevailed on the side of the major powers

⁵⁴ See for example Tim Bale and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, eds, *Riding the populist wave: Europe’s mainstream right in crisis* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2021); Matthijs Rooduijn, Sarah L. De Lange and Wouter van der Brug, ‘A populist *Zeitgeist*? Programmatic contagion by populist parties in western Europe’, *Party Politics* 20: 4, 2014, pp. 563–75, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068814360665>; Anna Grzymala-Busse, ‘The failure of Europe’s mainstream parties’, *Journal of Democracy* 30: 4, 2019, pp. 35–47, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2019.0067>.

⁵⁵ See Giurlando and Monteleone, ‘Institutional change, sovereignty contestation and the limits of populism’.

⁵⁶ Zürn, ‘How non-majoritarian institutions make silent majorities vocal’.

⁵⁷ Edward H. Carr, *The twenty years’ crisis, 1919–1939: an introduction to the study of International Relations* [1939] (London: Macmillan, 1946).

for some years after the First World War were increasingly challenged. The foreign policies of the fascist and communist challengers of that period may also point to some significant similarities to today's foreign policies; for instance, the deepening of transnational solidarities and emotional polarization in international interactions. A careful historical comparison would allow us to understand the current wave of populism better, in terms of its historical meaning, and would also allow for long-term lessons that may guide contemporary responses to the current populist challenge.