
Titre du projet : The Foreign Policy of Ruling Populists : Practice and Impact

Durée du projet : 1 an

Coordinateur(s) du projet et centre(s) de recherche impliqué(s):

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Description du projet :

The rise of populist parties in Europe represents one of the most crucial political developments of recent years. This is true not just from an electoral, but also from a policy-making point of view, as populist parties have made it to power (alone or in coalition) in several EU member states (such as Austria, Greece, Finland, Hungary, Italy and Poland). Yet, while the nature, causes and political manifestations of populism have been abundantly studied (see for instance: Taggart 2000; Meny and Surel 2002; Müller 2016; Mudde 2016), its implications for – and impact on policy-making – has paradoxically received little attention, except maybe for some specific policy areas such as migration (Heinisch 2003; Schain 2006; Albertazzi and McDonnell 2015). This is especially true of foreign policy. And yet, in this realm in particular, the impact of populism is likely to be significant, both analytically and politically. How are political parties that are vowing to proof their societies from external influences relate to the state practice tasked with interacting with the outside world, namely foreign policy? Is there such a thing as a 'populist foreign policy'? How does populism impact the formulation, implementation and conduct of foreign policy? This research project aims to shed light on these questions by analyzing the foreign policy practice and choices of populist governments in Austria, Italy and Poland

State of the art

The scarce literature specifically exploring the links between populism and foreign policy has been mainly concerned with characterizing and comparing the foreign policy preferences of populist parties. For instance, drawing on their party programs and the statements of their leaders, several publications have mapped the positions of European populist parties (Liang 2007; Verbeek and Zaslove 2017; Stengel, MacDonald, and Nabers 2019). The most systematic and most insightful contribution in that sense is undeniably the study by Bertjan Verbeek and Andrej Zaslove (2017), as the two authors are methodical in their conceptualization of populism and seek to generalize from their findings. They point to certain international developments that have favoured the emergence of populist parties – namely the end of the Cold War, globalization and regional integration – and analyse how these contexts have, in turn, coloured the foreign policy preferences of populist parties, notably with regard to three issue areas where these preferences are most distinctive (European integration, migration and trade). In they doing so, they compare between different types of populist parties – Radical Right, Market Liberals, Regionalists and Left-Wing – and across European countries. Verbeek and Zaslove find that populist parties do not adopt similar (or even convergent) positions on the themes studied and that divergences can be explained with reference to the 'thick ideologies' to which these parties adhere.¹ For instance, radical right and left-wing populist parties tend to display antagonistic positions on the issue of migration (*ibid.*). Conversely, there seems to be a convergence on foreign policy issues *within* the different strands of populism, notably the Radical Right. Ostermann, Stahl, and Oppermann (2018) find that France's Front National (FN) and Germany's Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) share similar views on US hegemony, climate change, military interventions on humanitarian grounds, international trade and development aid. The causal link between the 'tick' political ideologies of populist parties and their foreign policy preferences can hardly be overstated, however, as some populist parties have radically shifted their policy preferences on

¹ In the ideational approach, which dominates the field, populism is often conceptualised as a 'thin' ideology, that is as one that has "a restricted morphology, which necessarily appears attached to—and sometimes is even assimilated into—other [i.e thick] ideologies" (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017, 6). By contrast, 'thick' ideology (such as nationalism or socialism) are more comprehensive, encompassing and systematic.

certain foreign policy dossiers yet without having varied in their political ideology. This is the case, for instance, of Austria's FPOs and France's FN, which in the 2000s have overturned their positions on NATO and Russia respectively to strategically re-position themselves in their countries' party competition.

Rather than focusing on the influence of the various 'thick' political ideologies to which populist parties adhere, other scholars have sought to reflect whether there is something about populism *as such* (i.e. as a thin-centred ideology) that shapes foreign policy preferences in a distinctive way. In what is probably the most insightful contribution in that sense, Angelos Chrysogelos (2017) identifies two common traits or influence: an essential attachment to sovereignty (which feeds a scepticism towards multilateralism and institutionalised cooperation in foreign policy) and a tendency to project the defining moral opposition between 'the people' and 'the elites' onto the international scene (which feeds an animosity towards the 'elites' of the international system, whether defined as hegemonic powers, international organizations or multinational corporations). These hypotheses appear valid and particularly pertinent, but the author does not methodically test them. Other scholarly works have focused on some specific features of populism and how it translates in foreign policy in certain individual cases or regions, such as the US (Rathbun 2013; Kandel 2018) or in Latin America (Burrier 2019; Sagarzazu and Thies 2019). Finally, a few studies have attempted to shed light on these questions through ambitious comparisons across continents, such as between Venezuela and Iran (Dodson and Dorraj 2008). All these case studies from different national or regional situations provide valuable empirical insights that enrich the understanding about populism and its various shades and manifestations. They do not, however, provide a functional analytical framework allowing to systematically investigate its impact and implications for foreign policy making.

We see several limitations or gaps in the current – and developing – scholarship on populism in foreign policy. First, the aforementioned studies tend to pursue, for most, a descriptive rather than an explicative endeavour: they are concerned with characterizing (and generalising about) the *preferences* of populist parties rather than with accounting for how populism or populists contribute to influence foreign policy *outputs*. Stated differently, they tend to study the relationship between populism and foreign policy mainly through the lens of the first term, but overlook somehow the second. Yet, as documented and conceptualised by the Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA) literature, the preferences of the political party in power are only one potential factor among others in determining a foreign policy output (other factors can include, for instance, bureaucratic politics, societal veto players, the state's national role conception or external stimuli provided by the behaviour of outside actors) We contend that providing a comprehensive picture of how populism impacts foreign policy necessarily implies, therefore, to investigate how populist actors relate to these various determinants and we purport to undertake such analysis. In that endeavour, the exploratory phase of the research (i.e. in preparation of the grant proposal) will notably be put to use to identify the determinants that appear most relevant in this context.

Second and relatedly, there are several gaps in the theorization of populism's effects on – and characteristics in – foreign policy. On the one hand, although there is a rich and long-standing debate in political science on the ontology of populism, all of the pre-cited works on populism in foreign policy stick to the mainstream, ideational approach that conceptualises and studies populism as an ideology. We contend that the other theoretical positions in this debate, which respectively approach populism as a discourse (Laclau 2005), a political strategy (Weyland 2001) or a performing style (Moffitt 2017), can generate important insights on its impact on foreign policy. On the other hand, as evoked, the studies on the foreign policy preferences of populist parties generally fail to mobilize the various theoretical insights provided by the FPA literature on the determination of foreign policy choices, except maybe for the scholarship on the role of political parties in foreign policy making (see for instance: Kaarbo 2012). Yet, just as political science's various conceptualisations of populism provide as many points of entry to study its effects on foreign policy, the different strands of the FPA scholarship allow to theorize these effects correspondingly (Cadier, Boileau, and Lequesne 2018). Thus, as we mainly work ourselves in the field of FPA, the exploratory phase of the research will be used to engage with political scientists specialising, at Sciences Po and beyond, on populism studies.

Third, the scholarship on populism in foreign policy has mainly focused on the preferences of populist parties when they are in the opposition, but rarely on how they conduct foreign policy once in government (a notable exception is: Verbeek and Zaslove 2015). This is partly explained by the fact that, until recently, there was few populist parties in office in Europe. Populist have now made to power in several EU member states, however, and sufficient time has passed for them to leave an observable imprint on foreign policy.

Research Objectives

The research project aims to shed light on the foreign policy of ruling populists by analyzing both the way they relate to foreign policy making and the content and determinants of their foreign policy choices. More specifically, the project will seek to address the following research question: *how does the distinctive political practice of populist actors influence foreign policy outputs?*

Rather than on populism as such, the project will focus on its implications for – and impact on – foreign policy. Thus, while most of the aforementioned studies make of populism (or, more precisely, of the preferences of populist parties) their dependent variable, the project will institute it as its *independent* variable. In the exploratory phase at least, the diversity in the conceptualization of populism will be embraced and tentatively turned into an asset: in investigating its impact on foreign policy choices, populism will be conceptualized in turn as an ideology, a discourse, a political strategy and a performing style. Hypothesis about this impact will be formulated beforehand by relying on corresponding theoretical insights the FPA literature. As for most research endeavor developed in the field of FPA, the project will make of foreign policy choices its *dependent variable*. FPA methods will thus be systematically relied upon to generate evidence (see below).

In the long run, the overall aim of the project will be to unveil, isolate and characterize the impact of populism on the formulation and conduct of foreign policy. As such, the research project should contribute to shed light on whether there is a ‘populist foreign policy’, yet without pretending providing a definitive answer on the matter as it will focus on delimited case-studies (detailed below).

Nature of the project

In addressing the research question and so as to meet the research objectives defined above, the project will aim to address the shortcomings – and contribute to fill the gaps – identified in the existing scholarship. As such, the research project will be interdisciplinary, theory-driven and comparative in nature. First, it will be *interdisciplinary* in that it aims to mobilize conceptual and empirical insights from sociology and political science, not only to conceptualize populism and how it relates to policy-making as evoked above, but also more profoundly to investigate and theorize its effects on foreign policy outputs. For instance, the sociology of actors and networks offers promising methodological venues in studying diplomatic practices (Lequesne 2017; Lequesne and Riaux 2018). Second, the project will be *theory-driven* to the extent that, by combining insights from populism studies and the FPA literature, it aims to generate theoretical hypothesis on the effects of populism on foreign policy outputs that will then be methodically and systematically tested on carefully selected case studies. For instance, a preliminary hypothesis pertains to how the distinctive political logic of populism, which is essentially anti-elitist and anti-pluralist, notably leads populist actors to regard any political opposition as necessary illegitimate and to over-prioritize domestic political struggles over diplomatic considerations in that context (Cadier 2019). Third, the project will be *comparative* in nature not only because the research objective of shedding light on the foreign policy practice of ruling populists necessarily requires considering more than one case, but also more profoundly as comparison will be systematically used as a method to generate evidence.

The interdisciplinary and comparative nature of the research projects means that, to be successfully realized, it will need to engage with – and potentially involve – researchers from different disciplines and specialized on different countries. Hence, we specifically aim to apply, either, for an ERC Synergy Grant or an ANR PRCI grant.

In a fourth, parallel step, we would seek to publish a special issue on the foreign policy of populist governments based on the papers presented at the scientific workshop organized at Sciences Po. This first publication would position ourselves on the topic and give greater weight to our grant application.