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## **POPULISM IN THE FOREIGN POLICY OF CENTRAL EUROPEAN STATES**

*Abstract.* The article explores the populist take on international relations via states' foreign policy. It focuses on Central European EU member states where populists have become a major political force. The article builds on a government-preferences-based approach by combining the international system level with the party competition perspective. Mapping of populist types via their positioning on selected foreign policy issues and impact of the party programme on election results shows growing polarisation within the group of populists and their limited success outside of migration policy area. While confirming the existing literature on systemic constraints and business-as-usual politics, the results also reveal the rising impact of systemic factors, such as growing instability and crises in the external environment on populist parties' polarization and election success.

**Keywords:** Populism, Foreign policy, Central Europe, International Relations, Political parties

### **Introduction**

While the post-Cold War emergence of populism has much to do with changes occurring in the international order, beyond certain general trends like left-wing populism in the south and its right-wing counterpart in the north, the specific occurrence of populism requires a consideration of regional and national conditions (Chryssogelos, 2018). Interaction between the systemic and domestic levels brings forward the question of foreign policy by populists. The existing research is scarce and shows heavy socialisation in the international order, pragmatism and cherry picking and, on a more general level, the lack of attention paid to party politics within International Relations (IR) and to systemic factors within comparative politics (Verbeek and Zaslove, 2015; 2017).

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The purpose of this paper is to fill this gap by exploring the populist take on international relations via foreign policy. We build on a government-preferences-based approach, which is suitable for combining the international system level with the party competition perspective. Moreover, the approach fits the situation of changing government preferences (Moravcsik, 2010). We focus on Central European EU members where populists have not just become a player but a major political force, which allows us to explore actual populist government politics and its impact on election results as well as – due to the region’s coherence – to separate the general trends from specific ones.

The (a) mapping of populist types via their positioning on selected foreign policy issues in the areas of regional integration, the economy, security and identity; and (b) impact of party programme on election results shows two things: growing polarisation within the group of populists as they gain in importance, and their limited success apart from migration policy area. While confirming existing literature on systemic constraints and business-as-usual politics, a more detailed look also shows the importance of systemic factors for populists as they mature and the specific divisions on foreign policy that exist between different generations of populists, implying that populism is becoming a contingent systemic foreign policy feature.

We proceed as follows: in the conceptual framework, we define populism and related concepts, present its relationship to IR and the role of foreign policy as an intermediate level. In the section on the research design, we explain the position held by Central European countries within the international order, the typology of populist programmes on different foreign policy issues, and possible party strategies. A presentation of the results and a discussion then follows.

## Conceptual framework

### *Definitions*

Populism is considered as an ideology, strategy, discourse, rhetoric or a combination of these. A common definition by Mudde (2004: 543; Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017: 5) posits populism as an ideology or discourse “that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people”. The key characteristics are criticism of the elites and the establishment generally; the importance of popular sovereignty; immanent tensions between the elites and the people; and misrepresentation of the popular will in politics (Taggart, 2000; Pirro and Taggart, 2018: 255–256).

Populism contradicts pluralist views of democracy which rely on constitutional constraints, checks and balances, fundamental rights and liberties to protect from the tyranny of the majority. Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017: 18) state: “populism implies that the general will is ... absolute”. Views on whether it is a threat to democracy vary: for Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017: 87) the effects can be negative or positive, e.g. via mobilisation and politicisation. Müller (2016: 19), in contrast, sees it as an imminent threat by pointing to its antagonising anti-pluralist tendencies (Müller, 2016: 42).<sup>1</sup>

Since populism is a “thin centered” ideology or discourse, it does not entail a comprehensive political programme but is combined with thick ideologies (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017: 1). Populists try to avoid the horizontal cleavage (left- vs right-wing) and non-centrist solutions to build on the unity of the people and instead focus on the vertical cleavage by pinpointing those on the top (elites) and/or at the bottom (non-nationals, minorities). One particular under-theorised driver of populism is the role of the crises<sup>2</sup>, potentially acting as a homogenising factor and obscuring the perceived long-term utility of the existing pluralist institutions.

Euroscepticism refers to contingent or qualified opposition and outright and unqualified rejection of European integration, also known as ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ Euroscepticism (Pirro and Taggart, 2018: 256). Euroscepticism is linked to populism via the EU as a pluralist project and via the popular sovereignty concept.

Sovereignty is a traditional IR concept that refers to a state’s effective control of its territory, which includes the making and enforcing of laws. Growing interdependence, the role of international organisations and transnational actors have all altered the concept. Some aspects such as the authority of international organisations or human rights intervention are said to oppose the necessary consent of the governed as a source of legitimacy (Spiegeleire, Skinner and Sweijs, 2017: 33–4; 40). Colgan and Keohane (2017) define populism (in an IR context) as “faith in strong leaders and a dislike of limits on sovereignty and of powerful institutions”.

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<sup>1</sup> *The view of populism as a strategy refers to mobilising the support as the structure of an organisation by a personalistic leader based on the uninstitutionalised or direct support of followers, circumventing traditional structures and organisations (Mudde, 2004: 544), arguing they have been corrupted or exploited by the existing elites. Institutional quality is however a broader issue as populists and non-populists are tempted to avoid institutional controls.*

<sup>2</sup> *A crisis in domestic politics refers to a moment of choice between ‘stark alternatives’ that demand action and a significant change that produces ‘distinct legacies’ (Pirro and Taggart, 2018: 257–258).*

### *International relations*

On the supply side, drivers of populism are socioeconomic ambiguity and cultural backlash while, on the demand side, populism is driven by (party) politics (Spiegeleire, Skinner and Sweijjs, 2017). Following Colgane and Keohane (2017), these have much to do with changes in the international order and globalisation in particular, which has brought about intense economic competition and cultural diversity (supply side), skewed the political space in terms of pressures for redistribution and for nationalism-conservatism (demand side) as well as the competition between different vertical levels of authority (supply and demand side).

While earlier research treated populism as a “perversion of democracy”, more recent research points to the international order’s negative implications for democracy (Chryssogelos, 2018). The mobility of factors has delinked activities, with decentred governance creating moral-hazard conditions and a gap between the demand for representation and the demand for government (Chryssogelos, 2017). Goodhart (Goodhart and Bondanella, 2011; Krastev, 2018) refers to the conflict between highly skilled and mobile individuals, protected by international regimes, vs. less skilled and rooted ones who no longer feel they are being represented. Cases of, to use the words of Colgan and Keohane (2017), “multilateral overreach”, i.e. policies imposed from the outside without direct democratic legitimacy and accountability, result in populism being an “illiberal democratic response to undemocratic liberalism” (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017: 116).

More specifically from an IR perspective, Huntighton (1991: 17–21) argued with respect to the post 1980s wave of democratisation that there will be a reverse wave should the USA, Europe and others fail in terms of economic setbacks, intensified social conflict, polarisation and terrorism as opposed to the attractiveness of remaining authoritarian powers.

The EU has been designed to protect the welfare of small European countries against globalisation. However, economic union and free movement create a risk of asymmetric effects, seen in both the EMU and migration crisis (Balfour et al., 2016: 16–17). Supranational technocratic governance and weak European identity make the EU an easy target for populists/nationalists (Verbeek and Zaslove, 2017). The perception of institutions failing or not being available in the crises has led to disenchantment and the search for alternative identities.

*Foreign policy*

While elite (expert) public opinion tends to be more supportive of official foreign policy, the latter is no longer a *domaine réservé* of an elite (Hill, 2013: 94). However, little scholarship has examined the influence of populists on foreign policy. This is partly due to the lack of attention given to party politics in IR and systemic factors in comparative politics (Verbeek and Zaslove, 2015).

Researchers conceptualise populism as the continuation of domestic politics by other means with the impact of populists largely occurring through their attached ideology. In line with the systemic approach, in Europe, as part of the developed North, most populists thrive on sociocultural issues and are right-wing (Mudde, 2013) although, during the recent eurozone crisis, some left-wing populists also came to power on the periphery of the EU (e.g. Syriza in Greece). Until recently, the impact of populists has been limited (Mudde, 2013),<sup>3</sup> according to Balfour et al. (2016: 14) they “have not yet influenced major decisions on war and peace”, demonstrating socialisation in the international order, pragmatism and cherry picking (Verbeek and Zaslove, 2015; 2017; Chrysosgelos, 2017). However, they are not benign: as seen by the victory of Donald Trump and Brexit, with negative implications including a break from the past, the overprioritisation of domestic politics, and poor diplomacy (Cadier, 2019).

The heavy domestication of foreign policy takes Allison’s decision-making model into consideration, where state influence in the international community is based on the socialised national interest via a rational cost-benefit analysis (Rational Actor Model) as opposed to the instrumentalisation of foreign policy as yet another arena in domestic politics (Government Politics Model) which calls for ‘opening up the black box’.

One possible approach is to use the governmental model which, following Moravcsik (2010), focuses on preferences (as opposed to the distribution of powers or information) which are shaped by competing interest groups and parties.<sup>4</sup> The advantage of the governmental approach is that it can explain policy change via variation in the distribution of interests as well as variation in foreign policy and systemic change.

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<sup>3</sup> *Their agenda-influencing is mostly discursive (Mudde 2013: 14; Kaltwasser and Taggart, 2016), they do not engage in policy but scrutiny-oriented behaviour (Louwerse and Otjes, 2019) or use tactical opposition by modifying the stance over time (Verbeek and Zaslove, 2015: 525–546).*

<sup>4</sup> *States engage in negotiation when governments seek to expand win-sets via two-level games and use dependence symmetries as a source of power. Against the prefix “liberal”, theory recognises circumstances in which government decides to block internationalisation or where interest groups form a coalition, instrumentalising foreign policy (e.g. state capture).*

## Research design

### *Case selection*

Central European new EU member states are small post-communist countries whose transition to liberal democracies was supported by the liberal multilateral order and European integration. They were regarded as an example of successful socialisation-Europeanisation via conditionality and learning. Yet, after the accession, the liberal consensus weakened – the sweeping victory of Law and Justice (PiS) in Poland and the Civil Alliance (Fidesz) in Hungary allowed them to change the constitution, weaken checks on the role of the majority, and interfere with courts, state agencies, media and civil society, thereby skewing the electoral process and checks and balances (Krastev, 2018; Plattner, 2019). This went hand in hand with an anti-liberal ideology, the demonisation of the opposition and pressure on minority rights. Many others in the region seem to be following such developments (Krastev, 2018).

The populist-authoritarian turn is usually explained by two specific factors: the fact that the transition was a top-down process led by a new elite of expert politicians (Korkut, 2012) relying on the TINA (There Is No Alternative) argument, and irrational expectations (Bojinović et al., 2019).<sup>5</sup> Following accession, the top-down conditionality mechanisms weakened and issues with domestic institutions became more apparent, especially when faced with the asymmetrical pressures of the EU crises and the crisis of the EU and the liberal international order.

### *Typology*

Verbeek and Zaslove (2017: 392–393) differentiate four populist types: the radical right defined by a nativist conception of the people (Austrian Freedom Party – FPÖ, Dutch Party for Freedom – FvV, French Front National – FN, Jobbik in Hungary), market liberal that locates people as honest hard-working citizens vs. elite-run state (Pim Fortuyn, Berlusconi's Go Italy), regionalist which posits 'the pure people' as historically belonging to a clear, smaller territorial unit (the Northern League), and the left which sees people as a social category not necessarily 'hemmed in' by national borders (in Germany The Left, in Greece Syriza). The regionalist type can be interpreted in the Central European context in terms of historical-territorial subjugation to a larger political unit or as a more general, mixed type.

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<sup>5</sup> For Zakaria (1997), the absence of a liberal tradition in countries in transition since the 1980s would actually reduce the chance of becoming a liberal democracy, which is why 'libautocracy' was necessary.

Within the three foreign policy issue areas for populists – trade, migration and regional integration (Verbeek and Zaslove 2017) – recent studies (Balfour et al., 2016; Dennison and Pardijs, 2016; De Spiegeleire, Skinner and Sweijs, 2017) observe the following topics: ones related to European regional integration such as the EU referendum, the EMU and the EU's policy on Ukraine; ones related to trade such as the TTIP; ones related to international security like the intervention in Syria, the policy on Russia and NATO membership; and identity related such as immigration and Islam.

While calls for EU reforms can be heard across the political spectrum, demands for referendums on exiting the Union more often come from the radical right (De Spiegeleire, Skinner and Sweijs, 2017: 99–100). On trade, positions differ (Balfour et al., 2016: 38–42). While liberals are in principle not opposed to the market, opposition is consistent among the radical left, making this a necessary condition (NC). Traditional foreign policy issues like security are not preferred topics for populists. They are not necessarily isolationists but prefer an *à la carte* (De Spiegeleire, Skinner and Sweijs, 2017: 101–102) or case-by-case approach (Balfour et al., 2016: 35–6). In general, they are more anti-American and pro Russia in terms of preferring stability over interference and are opposed to EU policies that might provoke confrontation, such as sanctions (Spiegeleire, Skinner and Sweijs, 2017: 100).<sup>6</sup> Migration and Islam have been broadly criticised and rejected by parties in all groups, but the left. Xenophobia is a defining element of the radical right.

Table 1: TYPOLOGY OF POPULIST PARTIES' FOREIGN POLICY

	Radical right	Regionalist	Market liberal	Left
Regional integration: EU referendum	x	x	x	x
Trade	x	x		NC
Security: intervention, sanctions	x	x	x	x
Identity	NC	x	x	

Source: Authors' own analysis.

### Impact

Ensuring actual policy impact requires engagement with competing programmes (Pirro and Taggart, 2018: 259). Here, mainstream parties can either collaborate, co-opt, isolate or simply ignore populists (Pirro and Taggart, 2018: 255–256). Collaboration signals the acceptability of populists

<sup>6</sup> Still, most support NATO membership and support more self-defence (De Spiegeleire, Skinner and Sweijs, 2017: 87, 96).

as a political force and the co-optation of particular ideas, whereas isolation builds on unacceptability and ignorance signals irrelevance.

Populists were successful at EU referendums held in France and in the Netherlands in the past. In the UK, conservatives co-opted with UKIP on the Brexit referendum. More recently, Front National has united centre-right and centre-left forces against it (Balfour et al., 2016: 18). In a similar vein, AfD has been isolated in Germany. Mainstream groups in the European Parliament negotiated a grand pro-European coalition in 2014 and 2019. Thus, regional integration seems to be actively exploited by both opposition populists and government mainstream parties.

Regarding the EMU, Syriza finally accepted many of the demands made by the EU. In the North, the Finns party was against the bailout agreement but, after joining the government coalition in 2015, agreed with it and went through pains to explain this change (Dennison and Pardijs, 2016: 5-6). In the Netherlands, a conservative government in 2012 under pressure of the FVV co-opted and promised at the 2012 election not to support a third bailout for Greece, although in the end they did support it. In Germany, the pressures exerted by AfD did not go unnoticed by Finance Minister Schaube (Balfour et al., 2016: 30-31). As to the TTIP, there has been broad co-optation by mainstream forces on specific issues like transparency, the investor protection mechanism, food safety and quality standards (Balfour et al., 2016: 38-42). This shows that on finance and especially trade there is some co-optation by the mainstream parties, while the rate of policy success is still generally low.

When it comes to traditional foreign policy issues, populism is largely used for tactical reasons or as a tool for scrutiny, sometimes resulting in the active opposition of mainstream forces (Verbeek and Zalsove, 2015). In relation to Russia-Ukraine policy, none of the ruling parties went against the sanctions, including Syriza and Fidesz. Broad scepticism has nevertheless underpinned criticism of the EU and the USA, liberal values and polarised, yet also turned into questioning populists' independence from Russia and the interference emanating from there (Dennison and Pardijs, 2016).

In contrast, especially on the right, populists have successfully introduced a restrictive migration policy based on criminalisation and anti-multiculturalism themselves or by mainstream forces via cooperation and co-optation, or even without direct competition (Balfour et al., 2016: 73). FPO became a junior partner in the coalition in 1999 following an anti-immigration campaign. In Denmark, populists have been instrumental in the swing in policy since participating in government in the 2000s (Balfour et al., 2016: 71).

## Results

### *Increasingly present, increasingly divided*

In Central Europe, the most important populist regionalist parties, characterised by references to geographical-historical pressures and an unequal position within larger political groups, nationalist views of the economy and conservative of society are the Hungarian Fidesz, in power since 2010, and the Polish PiS party which won the 2015 elections with a sweeping majority. Among others, there are the Slovak Direction Social Democracy (SSD) and the Slovak National Party (SNS), which have also been governing alone (SSD) or as a member of a coalition (SNS).<sup>7</sup>

Orban, the leader of Fidesz, became a ‘model populist’ by arguing that “illiberal does not mean non-democratic”, calling liberalism an “ideology” and turning towards political-economic models of Russia, China and Turkey. In tensions with the EU over its domestic institutional reforms, Fidesz (member of EPP) and PiS (member of ECR) holding soft Eurosceptic positions on several issues, often depicted Brussels as a new Moscow. Similarly, SNS (2015) argued against the “European superstate”, making Slovakia “a grey region on the map” and “a vassal of transnational structures”, a colourful expression in the regionalist approach. In the case of SSD, Euroscepticism was more of a single issue and referred to the lost sovereignty in the EU’s relocation quotas during the migrant crisis (Dennison and Pardijs, 2016: 31).

Regionalists have not been very vocal on economic issues; they have expressed some scepticism of the TTIP and the EMU but have not truly rejected them. On foreign policy, following the sovereignty trend and Trump’s victory in the USA, Orban attacked multilateralism as a liberalist take on IR, saying it is “unnatural not to put one’s country first” (Orban, 2017; De Spiegeleire, Skinner and Sweijjs, 2017: 95). Fidesz, PiS and SSD support a more realistic relationship with Russia and the principle of sovereign equality, with Hungary also expressing some admiration for Putin’s leadership and the concept of sovereignty (Balfour et al., 2016: 31–35), while Poland also sees Russia as a threat and is more pro-US oriented. Fidesz and PiS fully support the EU’s policy on Ukraine (Dennison and Pardijs, 2016: 21). SSD has expressed some reservations and SNS has been more sceptical (Dennison and Pardijs, 2016: 31), which may be explained with its

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<sup>7</sup> SSD was already siding with nationalism and chauvinist rhetoric in the 2000s, which resulted in its temporary exclusion from S&D in 2006. Other regionalist parties include the Hungarian Democratic Forum (MDF) that sought a third way between capitalism and communism and was in alliance with Fides until 2006, and the Polish SRP which mixed left-wing, rural and conservative policies.

Table 2: PARLIAMENTARY POPULIST PARTIES IN CENTRAL EUROPE (SHARE OF VOTES)

	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	
<b>Czech Republic</b>							VV (10.88%)			ANO (18.65%) € Dawn (6.88%)				ANO (29.64%) € SPD (10.64%) €			
<b>Hungary</b>	MDF, FIDESZ (41.07%)	FIDESZ+KDNP (42.03%) MDF (5.04%)					FIDESZ+KDNP (52.73%) JOBBIK (16.67%) €				FIDESZ+KDNP (44.87%) € JOBBIK (20.22%) €				FIDESZ+KDNP (49.27%) € JOBBIK (19.06%) €		
<b>Poland</b>	PiS (27%) SRP (11.4%)	PiS (32.11%)					PiS (29.89%) €						PiS (37.85%) € Kukiz15 (8.81%)				
<b>Slovakia</b>		SSD (29.14%) SNS (11.73%) €					SSD (34.79%) SAS (12.14%) € SNS (5.07%) €		SSD (44.41%) SAS (5.88%) €					SSD (28.3%) € SAS (12.1%) € SNS (8.64%) € LSNS (8.04%) € Wearefamily (6.6%) €			
<b>Slovenia</b>	SNS (6.27%) €					SNS (5.4%) €					ZL (5.97%) €				Levica (9.33%)* € SNS (4.17%) €		

Bold = government coalition member; € = Eurosceptic; \*Support for a minority government  
Source: Bojinović et al., 2019, fore details see Lovec, 2019.

opposition status at the time. All parties support NATO membership along with all related commitments (Balfour et al., 2016: 31–35).<sup>8</sup>

Migration as an identity issue has often been blended with the EU and security debate, and played an important role for regionalists arguing for the need to “protect Christian Europe” (Orban), or against “risky experiment in transnational cultural peacemaking” and “cultural reeducation from the outside” (PiS, 2014).

Among the radical right parties that share a nativist ideology, the most important ones are Jobbik – movement for a better Hungary, and Czech Dawn/Freedom and Democracy (SPD).<sup>9</sup> At first, Jobbik was clearly Eurosceptic but after 2014 it started to position itself as more moderate, no longer calling for a ‘Hu-exit’, but focusing on globalisation generally (Dennison and Pardijs, 2016: 21). Dawn had also called for a ‘Czexit’. Radical right parties have been against the TTIP, are more isolationist, pro Russia and anti US, and hold US-led interventionism responsible for the migration crisis. They are not against NATO membership, but want to redefine their commitments (Dennison and Pardijs, 2016: 12; De Spiegeleire, Skinner and Sweijs, 2017: 93).<sup>10</sup>

The group of market liberal populists is characterised by a mix of libertarian and right-wing policies, especially on migration, and is more heterogeneous. The main representatives are the Czech Action of Dissatisfied Citizens (ANO), the Polish Kukiz15, and the Slovak Freedom and Solidarity (SaS, ECR member). ANO was created by businessman Andrej Babiš, arguing that the country should be run like a business. It entered the government coalition in 2013 and won the 2017 elections (Dennison and Pardijs, 2016: 31).<sup>11</sup>

The only representative of radical left parties in Central Europe is Slovenia’s United Left (UL) that was established in 2014 and later renamed Levica (European Left), characterised by democratic socialism and soft Euroscepticism. It is opposed to the dictate of big states and neoliberalism (Dennison and Pardijs, 2016: 32).

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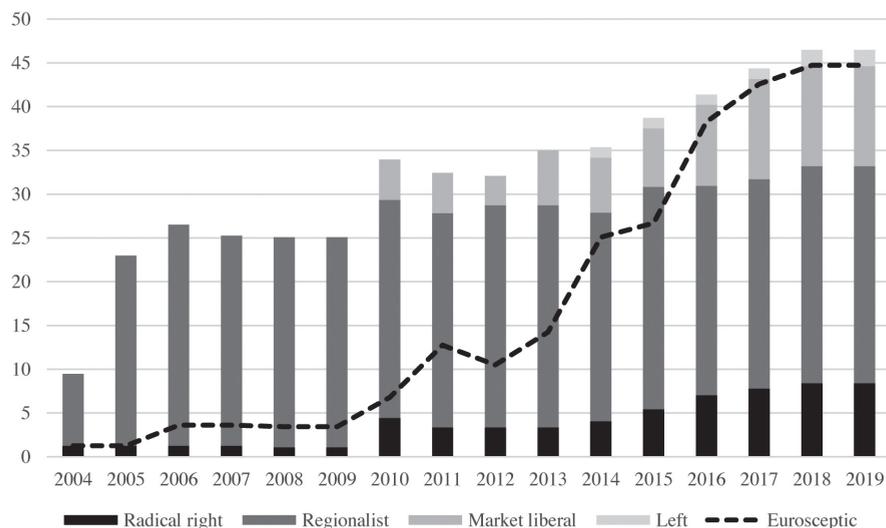
<sup>8</sup> *Fidesz and PiS support a tougher position on the EU (De Spiegeleire, Skinner and Sweijs, 2017: 85) and joint defence capabilities (De Spiegeleire, Skinner and Sweijs, 2017: 85; Dennison and Pardijs, 2016: 28).*

<sup>9</sup> *Dawn was established in 2013 by Tomio Okimura, an ex-Christian Democrat, and members of the liberal populist party Public Affairs (VV). A party with a programme similar to VV that eventually turned to the right. After a split in 2015, Okimura created SPD. Another party in this group is the Slovenian National Party (SNS), a nationalist party without a coherent programme relying on xenophobic rhetoric.*

<sup>10</sup> *Another representative of this group is the Slovak People’s Party (L’SNS) founded in 2010, which characterised by a far-right anti-globalism and anti-immigration stance.*

<sup>11</sup> *Other parties in this group include VV that formed part of the government coalition in the period 2010–2012 and the Slovak We are family founded in 2015.*

Graph 1: AVERAGE SHARE OF VOTES RECEIVED AT ELECTIONS BY PARLIAMENTARY POPULIST PARTIES IN CENTRAL EUROPE



Source: Authors' own calculations.

As Scheme 1 shows, there are two periods in the rise of populists: just after accession and during the global and regional crises and shocks, especially the migration crisis in 2015 and thereafter. This is in line with the literature pointing to the weakening of EU conditionality mechanisms and overall disenchantment, and an effective policy on migration. Another general finding is that while regionalists have retained their position, the overall growth of populists has been due to the stronger role of radical right and market liberals, meaning that the overall strengthening of populists has been matched by the growing polarisation.

A possible explanation of these trends is that regionalist government parties like the Polish PiS or Hungarian Fidesz have used the external crises as a pretext to co-opt on illiberal, Eurosceptic and similar positions in different areas, also to consolidate power, e.g. by using this as justification for institutional meddling. Meanwhile, radical right populists attacking from the opposition such as Jobbik in Hungary or Dawn in Czech Republic have developed more extreme and coherent views of foreign policy issues (and the international system) across the board, from the EU to the economy and security as seen in Table 3 below. However, by sharing more moderate and pragmatic views liberal populists have acted as counterbalancing force neutralising any more specific populist foreign policy programme and constraining any more strengthening of populism in the period 2010–2014, despite crises like the eurozone or Ukraine.

Table 3: SUPPORT FOR POLICIES

	EU			Trade	Security			Identity	
	Exit	EMU	Ukraine policy (sanctions)	TTIP	Intervention (e.g. Syria)	Russia	NATO	Anti-migration	Mono-cult, anti-Islam
CZ-Dawn	Yes/no 3	/	No 3	No 3	No 3	Yes 3	No ****3	Yes 3	Yes 3
HU-Fidesz	No 2 3	Yes/no ** 2	Yes 3	Yes *** 1 3	Yes <sup>3</sup>	Yes/no 1 2	Yes 1 2 3	Yes/no ***** 1 2 3	Yes/no 2 3
HU-Jobbik	Yes→No *1 2 3	Yes 2	No 3	No 2 3	No 3	Yes 1 2	No ****1 2 3	Yes/no 1 2 3	Yes 2 3
PL-PiS	No *1 2 3	Yes/no 2 3	Yes 3	Yes ***3	/	Yes/no 1 2 3	Yes 1 2 3	Yes 2 3	Yes 2
PL-Kukiz15	No 3	/	Yes 3	Yes ***3	/	No 3	Yes 3	Yes 3	/
SK-SSD	No 1 3	/	Yes/No 1 3	Yes/no 1 3	No 3	Yes/no 3	Yes 1 3	Yes 1 3	/
SK-SNS	Yes/No *2 3	Yes 2	No 3	Yes/no 3	No 3	Yes 2	Yes 2 3	Yes 2 3	Yes/no 2 3
SK-SaS	No *3	/	Yes 3	/	/	/	Yes 3	Yes/no 3	/
SI-ZL	No *3	/	Yes/No 3	No 3	No 3	/	No 3	No 3	No 3

\*Pro-reform \*\*Under conditions \*\*\*Reservations \*\*\*\*Stay \*\*\*\*\*For stricter rules

Sources: <sup>1</sup>Balfour et al. (2016); <sup>2</sup>Dennison and Pardijs (2016); <sup>3</sup>De Spiegeleire, Skinner and Sweijjs (2017).

On the other hand, identity politics has been broadly exploited by parties from all political groups except the left, which remains weak. While the reasons are explained in the literature (existing successful framing, e.g. against ‘the pure people’, and anti-immigration policies), the co-optation on migration also helped populists grow as a group in 2015 and subsequently. In the following section, these preliminary arguments will be explored in more detail based on study by Bojinović et al. (2019).

### *Effective policy on three crises: Migration, migration and migration*

#### *The eurozone crisis*

The eurozone crisis had strong negative effects on Slovenia as a eurozone member after 2007, resulting in the emergence of ZL in 2014. With its criticism of the savings measures and reforms, ZL was however effectively isolated by other parties.

The effects of the crisis were also considerable in other countries. In Slovakia, a eurozone member since 2009, the EU's bailout programme for Greece resulted in early elections in 2010 due to the opposition of the coalition SNS (SSD supported the programme). As a result, Slovakia was the only Eurozone member not to take part. New Prime Minister Iveta Radičová stated "more responsible, poor countries should not be raising for less responsible, richer ones" and that creditors rather than taxpayers should take on the burden (Goliaš and Jurzyca, 2013). Parliament approved the Slovak contribution to the EFSF in 2011 but refused to approve the expansion, Slovakia again being the only member against. This time Radičová was in favour and tied the proposal to a vote of confidence. The SaS – member of coalition voted against, relying on arguments similar to those of Radičová in 2010. Later on, SSD provided the votes needed for an extension and won the 2012 elections, in the process becoming the first single-party government in Slovakia since 1993 (Euractiv, 2013: 2). The right-wing then split and lost the elections (Pirro, 2015: 88): SNS which had built on the crisis by proposing to leave the EU (Pirro and van Kessel, 2017: 415) fell short of the threshold, while SaS halved its result.

Hungary was strongly affected by the global financial crisis. In the context of the eurozone crisis, Fidesz developed a soft Eurosceptic position. In its foreign policy strategy of 2011, it argued the country should enter the eurozone "when ready", providing there is support in parliament and social acceptability. In 2013, following growing tensions with Brussels, this was linked to convergence (90% of eurozone GDP), i.e. achieving equal development level first (Orbán, 2013 in Euractiv, 2013: 4–5). In 2012, Jobbik engaged in fierce anti-EU rhetoric. However, as Pirro (2015: 84) and Pirro and van Kessel (2017: 412) note, this was relatively broad based and oriented to EU interference in Hungarian domestic affairs. Jobbik softened its position in 2013 on Hungary's EU membership and started to blame globalisation in general and the Orban government in particular (Pirro and van Kessel, 2017: 412), implying that Euroscepticism serves the more moderate Orban more than the support for their Jobbik party.

In the Czech Republic, following Havlik and Havlik (2018: 17–18) the eurozone crisis "only exacerbated the /existing/ tensions" on joining the EMU. The government coalition in the 2010–2012 period was reserved, with Czech Republic being one of the two countries that did not sign the Fiscal Compact in 2012. In the pre-election period, discussions on adoption of the euro were mostly avoided by the parties (Havlik and Havlik, 2018: 27). ANO did not hold any clear position on this (Euractiv, 2013: 2).

The Polish Civil-platform (PO) led government supported EMU membership and was worried about the exclusive eurozone summits, trying to obtain a 'pre-in' status. They wanted to see more decisive EU governance,

as expressed by Foreign Minister Radislav Sikorski in 2011 when saying he feared German power less than German inactivity (Handl and Paterson, 2013) and offering political support to Germany.

In summary, in Slovenia, an eurozone member, ZL was able to enter parliament by opposing the savings policy but was, however, isolated while doing so. Similar to Syriza, the party's success was based on contestation, not on alternative policy. In Slovakia, another eurozone member, the SNS-SaS government went against the community approach on Greece, turning against them at the elections while the pro-European SSD won with a sweeping majority. The eurozone crisis was used by moderate government populists from non-eurozone countries such as Fidesz and PiS on a rhetorical level and as a slow-steps policy. This shows the importance of systemic constraints in the area of monetary affairs and finance as well as the role of rhetorical opposition, revealing the mobilisation appeal of mainstream policy/discourse.

### *The Ukrainian crisis*

Ukraine is specifically important for Hungary and Poland which have geopolitical interests in the region. Orban condemned the sanctions against Russia as being "against interests of Hungary" and "Europe's shot in its foot" (Győri et al., 2016: 57). He also broke the diplomatic isolation after the 2014 annexation by inviting Putin to visit Budapest. Yet, Hungary did not veto the sanctions or their prolongation. On the other hand, Jobbik initiated a pro-Russian campaign that openly supported Russia and discredited Ukraine (Győri et al., 2016: 60). At the 2014 elections, Jobbik somewhat improved its result relative to Fidesz. Still, there is insufficient evidence to support a causal relationship. Polish politicians participated in a demonstration at the Euromaidan to support the removal of the pro-Russian regime. Similar to the situation in Hungary, while the ruling PO supported a more active pro-Ukrainian role at the EU level and an overall multilateral approach, PiS used a more hawkish tone, with some like President Duda even saying PiS would have stopped the Russian annexation.

In the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Slovenia, scepticism of the sanctions was seen across the political spectrum, but none of the government parties were against. In the Czech Republic, after some initial hesitation the ČSSD-led government supported the imposition of sanctions. For ANO, foreign policy was secondary (Riháčková, 2016).<sup>12</sup> Later on, former Prime Minister Subotka (ČSSD) and Babiš criticised the sanctions for being costly

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<sup>12</sup> *The process was disrupted by Eurosceptic President Miloš Zeman while opposing the sanctions for alleged damage to the economy (Zgut et al., 2017).*

and ineffective, although the Czech Republic has continued to support the Minsk agreement and the prolongation of sanctions. Slovakia backed the EU response, joined the sanction regime and politically supported Ukraine. However, SSD and Fico were also critical of Ukraine, expressing their opposition to the sanctions and pointing to the negative impact on the Slovak economy (Zgut et al., 2017). In Slovenia, several minor coalition and opposition parties have expressed criticism of the sanctions for their economic consequences and questionable effectiveness, yet none of them have turned this into a big political issue.

In summary, beyond the rhetoric on the negative consequences of the sanctions, the more pro-Russian stance potentially benefited Jobbik while the more hard-line anti-Russian attitude potentially benefited PiS. In a more general perspective, opposition parties using the contestation approach were the only ones to capitalise on this, thus demonstrating the role of systemic constraints. The diverging positions of the two major populist parties in the region (PiS and Fidesz) also played a role from the perspective of external affirmation.

### *The migration crisis*

While Hungary and Slovenia were the only ones directly affected by the migrant crisis, there is plenty of evidence showing how the anti-immigration narrative and policy played an important role in strengthening populists in all countries of the region, both in government and in opposition. In Hungary, on the defensive since 2015 Orban has used the crisis to regain support via rhetoric and a restrictive policy and to squeeze out Jobbik (Balfour et al., 2016: 81). Orban has pursued the same strategy internationally, portraying himself as the “defender of Europe” against immigrants, the Brussels elite, Soroš and NGOs (Juhász, Molnár and Zgut, 2015: 6–7; 20). At the 2018 elections, Fidesz won over 49% of the vote, giving an absolute majority in parliament. In pro-EU Slovenia, anti-immigration rhetoric helped the conservative SDS win elections and the right/populist SNS re-enter parliament. On the other hand, the growing polarisation of views on migration also acted in favour of ZL/Levica, which improved its result from 2014.

In Czech Republic, prior to the 2017 elections, President Zeman and Prime Minister Babiš were loud critics of the migration policy. Babiš made xenophobic statements and referred to economic burdens (Smolenova, 2017). Dawn and SPD relied on Islamophobic and anti-migration rhetoric, criticising the EU’s role (Globsec, 2016). At the 2017 elections ANO won with 29.6% of the vote, while SPD received 11%.

In Slovakia, all political parties were against the EU’s migration policy. Looking for a way to stay in power, SSD rejected mandatory quotas and

filed a lawsuit against the EU that was supported by Hungary and the Czech Republic. Full of xenophobic rhetoric, this issue dominated the 2016 election discourse (Szomolanyi and Gal, 2016: 71; Juhasz, Molnar and Zgut, 2017: 26). It improved the results obtained by SNS, L'SNS and We are family.<sup>13</sup>

In Poland, acceptance of the EU's relocation quota in September 2015 by the pro-European PO was a major factor allowing PiS to build on the anti-immigration sentiment (Bachman, 2016: 8). After a landslide victory in 2016, PiS formed a one-party government that withdrew the support for the quota scheme, supported the Slovak lawsuit and radicalised its anti-immigration/refugee and anti-EU rhetoric, blending migration with sovereignty issues. The anti-refugee discourse also strengthened Kukiz'15 (Karolewski and Benedikter, 2018: 49).

## Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to explore how international relations are viewed by populist parties in Central Europe via their stances on states' foreign policies. The study has two main findings:

- first, the growth trend of different types of populists shows increasing divisions that act to constrain their role; and
- second, the policy impact is limited to the area of migration.

Both of these results are in line with the theory that suggests systemic factors play an important role, populists use tactical opposition and become more pragmatic once in government. Polarisation matching the overall growth of populism is a sign of contestation being more important than policy, indicating that the government populists eventually face the same destiny as their mainstream predecessors. Migration is an exception since it is more symbolic and identity-driven, while experience exists of effective policy (Balfour et al., 2016: 42-48), including cross-border affirmation and coalitions (Balfour et al., 2016: 78).

Yet a more detailed look at the results brings up additional relevant aspects. First, external crises helped populists stay in power as they matured by using the crises as a pretext for internal meddling. They presented the crises as an external threat to legitimise the necessary concentration of power. This was specifically beneficial for the (Central European) regionalist model which has a broad ideological policy basis and is focused on geohistorical and institutional inequality. Second, the new generation of

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<sup>13</sup> After the elections, the rhetoric however quickly changed for the Slovak presidency to the EU council during which SSD became more constructive on the quota issue (Juhasz, Molnar and Zgut, 2017: 26). SNS, which entered the government, has abandoned its Islamophobic and anti-immigrant populism.

right-wing populists that is on the rise is more focused on foreign policy and developing more specific agendas across the board, e.g. on the EU, trade, Russia, NATO etc. While this is still on the level of rhetoric and contestation of mainstream politics, it shows the growing role of foreign policy as such as well as specific alternative visions for the international system.

In conclusion, the Central European countries are characterised by strong international dependency; they are typical policy takers. This means that any generalisation of the results might underestimate the potential of populist foreign policy. In several other European countries, in recent years populists have decided to take up foreign policy posts (e.g. Greece, Finland and Italy). Moreover, the USA has been turning inwards while the power of Russia and China is growing, bringing instability and alternative models of governance to the international system. This might act as both push and pull factors for populist-nationalist policy, especially in small transition countries as the weakest link, even though they are not necessarily the main structural proponent of the emerging post-liberal international order. A sub-regional dynamic thus brings about a new mezzo level of relevance of European international relations for populist foreign policy actorness.

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