Transatlantic Turmoil:
Populist Parties and NATO Membership in the European Union

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Animus in consulendo liber
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Abstract

For the past few years, scholars, politicians, and journalists on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean have been ringing alarm bells about the rise of anti-institutional populism in Europe bringing about the fall of the bulwark institutions of the liberal international order. Although there is a lot of literature on the antagonistic relationship between populist parties and the European Union (EU), there is little on how these parties view the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), another bastion of the internationalist post-war order. Seeking to close this gap, thesis asks the following question: what are the attitudes of populist parties in the EU towards NATO membership and why?

Interestingly, a majority of EU populist parties support NATO membership. This work uses party platforms and secondary sources to examine this counterintuitive variation in populist party stances on NATO membership. It assesses domestic and international explanations of this variation and concludes that the latter have more explanatory power than the former. Specifically, this thesis posits that domestic party competition does not parallel party stances on NATO membership, while numerous international positions do. Foreign policy positions related to support for NATO membership include not being Euroskeptic and holding a positive view of the United States, while those that are correlated with opposition to NATO membership are a negative view of the United States and opposition to EU membership. A party’s view of Russia, its support of EU membership, and Euroskepticism are inconsequential. Furthermore, this thesis argues that there is no such thing as a “populist foreign policy,” at least in the realm of NATO-related affairs, since populist parties have a diverse range of stances on these matters. As such, it stresses that EU populist parties should not be treated as a homogenous group and notes that while we can take some comfort in knowing that NATO is not threatened by populism to the same extent that the EU is, we should not rest easy: the unpredictability and influence of these parties means that if they make severing ties with NATO their core issue, they may get their way.
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Chapter I: Introduction

“The potential rise of populism … should not be viewed by policy planners as posing just another specific type of security threat. For unlike the traditional, irregular, catastrophic, or disruptive ones normally considered in the future scenarios, populism poses a potential challenge to the underlying political substructure that has given us the collective material capability and moral legitimacy to deal with all these threats.”

- Steve Ropp

Old Friends, New Foes

For decades, the European Union (EU) has been regarded as the poster child of peace and democracy: the organization anchored nations that appeared to be mortal enemies in a political and economic union that spanned 28 countries. The EU’s commitment to liberal democracy is enshrined in the Treaty on European Union which states that the Union is “founded on values of respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities.” These values have been applied—albeit to different degrees—across the continent: Western and Northern Europe are lauded for their consolidated democracies and generous welfare states, while Southern, Central and Eastern Europe are home to inspiring tales of democracy’s frighteningly recent triumph over authoritarianism. However, it is important to remember that continental integration is only one part of the story of European democratization and development. One cannot forget that the road to democracy has been paved with conflict, pitting activists against oppressors, Europeans against Europeans, and liberalism against its rival regimes. According to recent headlines, European democracy is back in the trenches. Its new adversary? Populism.

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Francis Fukuyama and Robert Muggah are convinced that “Populism is poisoning the global liberal order” and *The Economist* blames populism for the “corrupting of democracy.” The outlook is not optimistic. James Traub has declared, “The Economic Crisis Is Over. Populism Is Forever” while Maciej Kisilowski and Anna Wojciuk argue that “Europe’s populists can’t be defeated—but they can be contained.” French President Emmanuel Macron has compared nationalist populism to “a leprosy” while former President of the European Commission Jean-Claude Juncker has exclaimed, “Never before have I seen national governments so weakened by the forces of populism.” One cannot help but wonder: is populism the new specter haunting Europe?

**Populism(s) in the European Union**

It is easy to picture populism since it has become a buzzword that frequently appears in the news, accompanying images of Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte presiding over his extrajudicial drug war, US President Donald Trump riling up his supporters at rallies, and UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson exclaiming “Brexit means Brexit!” But what does populism actually mean?

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This thesis employs Cas Mudde’s definition of populism as a thin-centered ideology with two central characteristics. The first is anti-elite discourse: populists posit that the mainstream or incumbent political and economic elites are self-serving, unresponsive, and indistinguishable, and that all institutions they preside over are therefore problematic. The second characteristic is advocacy in the name of “the people.” Populists insist that the good and honest people are exploited by the elites and their institutions; the people’s will must be represented and populists are here to do just that. The definition of “the elite” and “the people” vary greatly. The thin-centered nature of populism means that it can attach itself to thicker, more coherent ideologies like nationalism and socialism. As such, populism can easily manifest on both sides of the political spectrum. Left-wing populism tends to adopt an inclusive definition of the people based on socioeconomic terms (e.g. workers versus the capitalist elites), while right-wing populists adopt a more exclusive definition of the people, often based on ethnicity or religion.

While the history and causes of populism in Europe are explored in-depth in Chapter II, it is important to provide a brief overview of the specific populisms related to this thesis. Although European populism is not a new phenomenon, it has experienced a major surge in recent years: populist parties have almost doubled their vote share across the EU and entered government in over a dozen countries. This recent surge has its roots in an incendiary mixture of cultural, economic, and historic factors. In Europe specifically, these factors include rapid European integration, the EU’s difficulties in responding to the migrant crisis and the earlier debt crisis, party convergence, Russian efforts to undermine European democracy, and perceived double standards in EU enlargement.

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There are more right-wing populist parties in the EU than left-wing ones. The latter group focuses on socioeconomic inequality; these parties are usually socially liberal, protectionist, anti-imperialist, and anti-austerity. Classic examples include Podemos in Spain and Syriza in Greece. On the other hand, right-wing populist parties prioritize economic stability along with physical and cultural security. These parties, which include Fidesz and the Danish People’s Party (DF), are usually socially conservative, xenophobic, and nationalist. In sum, populism is a global phenomenon that exists on both sides of the political spectrum, and one that has gained traction in the EU over the past few years.

Institutions in Peril

Almost all populist parties in the EU are Euroskeptic, meaning that they express “contingent or unqualified opposition, as well as incorporating outright and unqualified opposition to the process of European integration.”11 Euroskepticism is a matter of degree: some of these parties want to reform the Union, while others are eager to renounce their membership. The growing prominence of these parties—which now occupy around a quarter of seats in the European Parliament—has prompted many discussions about the future of a supranational organization that has not faced such intense scrutiny for decades.12

However, the EU is not the only international institution experiencing turmoil in an increasingly multipolar world with rapidly changing geopolitical trends. Another institution that has received a lot of attention recently is the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO):

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transatlantic political and military alliance that binds together 29 countries in a commitment to democratic values, collective defense, and security collaboration. 2019 marked NATO’s 70th anniversary, which prompted much reflection on the present and future of the Alliance. The outlook for NATO is slightly more optimistic than that for the EU: some experts have concluded that the Alliance is “indispensable,””13 “essential for world peace,”14 and “the enduring transatlantic alliance for peace and security.”15 That being said, not everyone is optimistic; other experts have argued that the anniversary should be taken as an “opportunity to recalibrate” what they deem “an alliance in crisis.”16

Populism appears to be a challenge that jeopardizes the future of both institutions. It is important to understand what NATO and the EU have in common before considering how these similarities relate to populism. First and foremost, the two organizations have 22 member states in common (since I began writing prior to the UK formally leaving the EU, which took place on January 31, 2020, I will continue to refer to the UK as an EU Member State); 27 if members of NATO’s Partnership for Peace (PfP) program are included. The EU and NATO are defining organizations of the post-war international order that embody liberal institutionalism—the idea that states can overcome the anarchy that hinders international cooperation by establishing international institutions that incentivize compliance with certain laws and norms, and allow states to overcome collective action problems to realize common interests across various fields

like trade and security. Given the increasingly blurred line between challenges facing the nation and those facing the world, these institutions are becoming more necessary than ever to take advantage of the benefits of global interdependence while fighting its perils. For over half a century, NATO and the EU have sought to achieve similar goals: they have worked to “keep the peace through collective military might and shared security” and “promoted democratic ideals and international trade while investing in the notion that coalitions were the antidote to destructive nationalism.”

In many ways, then, NATO and the EU can be seen as two sides of the same coin. They are icons of the postwar order that share a significant number of member states; they have an intertwined history, similar goals, and complementary tasks. The question then becomes whether they are both under threat by the rising tide of anti-institutional populism that often views supranational institutions as imposing the will of “foreign elites” without the consent of the people.

According to Daniel Deudney and G. John Ikenberry, the answer is a solemn yes. The authors write, “Across the world, a new nationalist mindset has emerged, one that views international institutions and globalization as threats to national sovereignty and identity rather than opportunities.” Their concern is echoed by Peter S. Goodman, who warns us that “The model that has dominated geopolitical affairs for more than 70 years appears increasingly fragile. Its tenets are being challenged...and its institutions under assault from some of the very powers

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that constructed them.”20 Their insights align with the idea that populism offers “an alternative view of international relations” that “articulates the main criticism of the contemporary international system, its institutions, and its operating rules.”21

The Puzzle: Populism Meets NATO

Intuitively, it makes a lot of sense that populist parties would oppose NATO membership, which requires the relinquishment of a substantial degree of sovereignty over national defense and foreign policy matters. The cornerstone of the Alliance is collective defense, enshrined in Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty which declares that an attack against one of the allies “shall be considered an attack against them all.”22 Among other things, NATO membership also entails deploying troops around the world, welcoming armed forces and weapons from other NATO countries on national territory, and committing to a certain level of defense spending (around 2% of GDP).

There are 43 populist parties across 25 EU Member States that have a discernible stance on NATO membership. Interestingly, a brief examination of party platforms23 and related statements reveals that 18 populist parties oppose NATO membership, 22 support it, and 3 are indeterminate. The fact that a majority of populist parties support NATO membership is a surprising observation given the anti-international organization stance typically associated with populists.

23 I use platform and program interchangeably.
While there is a lot of literature on how populist parties view the EU and some on how they see institutions more broadly, there is little on the relationship between populist parties and NATO. This gap in the literature is concerning for a few reasons. First, it is ill-informed to ring alarm bells about populists leading to the collapse of the bulwark institutions of the liberal international order without knowing where populists stand with regard to NATO. Second, NATO plays a very important role in the world: allies work together to fight terrorism, train security forces, deter adversaries, and promote democratic norms. NATO’s role will only grow as global security challenges develop and transform on both sides of the Atlantic; the Alliance’s relevance and activities have already increased substantially in the aftermath of Russia’s annexation of Crimea. Thus, it is vital to be aware of trends that may threaten the efficacy and scope of the Alliance. Third, it is necessary to contribute to developing a more holistic understanding of populism – a phenomenon that will not disappear anytime soon—since the literature on populist security and foreign policy is still in its infancy.

The central question of this thesis is as follows: what are the attitudes of populist parties in the EU towards NATO membership and why? In answering this question, I will also use NATO membership as a way of conceptualizing how populists think about foreign policy and the world around them, asking whether there is such a thing as a “populist foreign policy.”

I will be testing two sets of hypotheses that may explain what factors make EU populist parties more or less likely to support NATO membership and in doing so, provide insights into patterns in populist foreign policy stances to create new ways of categorizing and comparing populist parties in the context of Euro-Atlantic integration. The first set of hypotheses focuses on the link between domestic party competition – specifically left-right competition and populist-mainstream competition—and populist parties’ stances on NATO membership, while the second set of hypotheses centers on international explanations, seeking to understand whether there is a
relationship between NATO membership and populist positions on other international institutions and alliances (namely the EU, Russia, and the United States).

To test these hypotheses, I will be examining the *stances* of EU populist parties (based on their party platforms), not their *policies* once in power. This is because not all populist parties in the EU have been in power and because policymaking is influenced by non-ideology factors such as institutional constraints, coalition politics, and competing domestic priorities. Hence, this study focuses on *ideology* rather than *policy implementation*, with the goal of developing an understanding of populist parties' worldviews. While it is inherently valuable to learn more about populist ideology for the sake of furthering our conceptual knowledge about populism, there is also a compelling argument to be made that populist parties’ attitudes matter insofar as they can influence policy. Fortunately for this study, populists frequently impact policymaking, especially when it comes to their core issues.\(^\text{24}\) When in government, populists work towards making their central promises a reality (e.g. refusing to take in refugees during the 2016 refugee crisis). Out of government, they exert influence through agenda-setting, issue framing, and by posing a rhetorical and/or electoral threat to mainstream parties, which forces them to engage with populist proposals.\(^\text{25}\) Thus, it is worthwhile to focus on populist positions and ideology.

**Next Up**

The subsequent chapters will work towards shedding light on the relationship between EU populist parties and NATO membership, beginning with a discussion of the past and present of


populism in Europe in Chapter II, followed by an assessment of the extent to which party programs correspond to policy implementation in Chapter III. I present an overview of my hypotheses and methodology in Chapter IV and analyze my results in Chapters V and VI. Finally, Chapter VII contains a summary of my findings and on their implications, asking whether it is true that “We are at a tipping point where the success of these [populist] movements raises a fundamental question about the [viability of the] international order we are living in.”

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Chapter II: History and Definitions

This thesis is primarily an examination of the relationship between NATO membership and populist parties in the EU. More broadly, it is an attempt to understand how populists approach foreign affairs and how they conceptualize the world beyond the domestic sphere. It is therefore important to begin by establishing the key players and concepts related to this study: populism, European populists, and NATO.

Populism 101

Defining Populism

As explained in the introduction, I am using Mudde’s ideational definition of populism, conceptualizing the phenomenon as “a thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately splintered into two homogenous and antagonistic camps, the ‘pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite,’ and which argues that politics should be an expression of the volonté generale (general will) of the people.”

The definition of the people and the elite are context-dependent as they are derived from a combination of domestic factors and the thick-centered ideology that a party espouses; this makes populism a flexible ideology capable of adapting to social, economic, and political changes. Generally, the people are portrayed as a homogenous, unified group that have been marginalized by the powerful elite, who work only to further their own interests. The people may be distinguished from the elite based on a combination of economic status, political power, nationality, religion, and so on. The general will is therefore the wishes of the people, defined not

27 Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, Populism, 6.
through institutional preference aggregation but rather through majoritarian forms of direct
democracy such as referenda and plebiscites.

One contemporary example of a populist party is the Alternative for Germany (AfD),
which entered the Bundestag in September 2017 and has been the largest opposition party since
then.\textsuperscript{28} When it was established in 2013, the party’s platform revolved around economic issues:
the AfD championed free-market and pro-austerity policies coupled with economic
Euroskepticism, opposing both the euro and Germany’s contributions to bailouts. The party
underwent a major transformation in 2015 in response to the refugee crisis, with the new
leadership shifting its focus from economic Euroskepticism to xenophobia. The AfD now
advocates for the embrace of Christian values to counter the “Islamification” of Germany,
demands that the EU seal its borders, and believes that asylum seekers whose applications have
been rejected should be deported regardless of the dangers and illegality of refoulement. The AfD
defines “the people” as nationalist Christian Germans and “the elite” as the politicians and
bureaucrats in Berlin and Brussels.

\textit{Populism versus Democracy}

There is a popular misconception that populists are \textit{inherently} authoritarian,
undemocratic, and/or illiberal.\textsuperscript{29} This is not so. Populism is not authoritarianism, though it is
certainly \textit{compatible} with authoritarianism. Similarly, populism is not inherently undemocratic or
illiberal. In fact, populism can actually be an inevitable \textit{solution} to the ills of liberal democracy


that arise due to the opaque decision-making that is intrinsic to many democracies. Populists can articulate citizens’ dissatisfaction with representative institutions and highlight the gap between their expectations of democracy and reality, while also mobilizing previously excluded or disengaged groups, forcing conversations about difficult topics, encouraging party differentiation, and inducing necessary changes in the distribution of power.  

That being said, populists’ fondness for majoritarianism combined with their aspiration to implement the people’s will at any price creates an uncomfortably close relationship between populism and illiberal democracy. Once in office, populists often work to undermine formal and informal manifestations of liberal democracy; populist leaders criticize checks and balances that stand in the way of the people’s will and portray people who disagree with this volonté generale as a threat. Populists’ dislike for democratic institutions and practices that disrupt the uninhibited implementation of the people’s will (e.g. through preference aggregation and compromise) can therefore be conducive to executive aggrandizement that corrodes both formal institutions like the judiciary and informal norms like transparency and forbearance. As such, it is not surprising that there has been a significant degree of democratic backsliding in countries where populists have a strong hold on the government, such as Hungary and Poland. However, the impact of populism on democracy varies greatly depending on the institutionalization of a democratic regime, the strength and positions of populist parties, their agendas, and the behavior of mainstream parties. It is also worth stressing that populism is not a revolutionary ideology, like communism or fascism: populists generally wish to reform politics and society through democratic means (e.g. the ballot box, legislation), unlike more extreme authoritarian ideologies that seek revolution via undemocratic means like violent coups.

The Rise of Populism

Even though populism in the European continent can be traced back to failed agrarian movements in 19th century Russia, populism did not become a distinct and significant political force until the 1990s. This is largely because of the post-World War II order: communism in the East and moderate social democracy in the West left little room for populist politics. Nevertheless, there were a few small movements led by parties opposed to major socioeconomic changes underway at that time, such as the French Union for Defense of Traders and Artisans led by Pierre Poujade in the 1950s and the Dutch Farmers Party of Hendrik Koekoek in the 1960s.

Since 1990, support for populist parties has more than doubled in Europe; the average vote share of populist parties in the older democracies of Western and Northern Europe climbed from approximately 5% in 1990 to 15% in 2018, while their counterparts in younger post-communist democracies increased their vote share from 15% to 30% (Fig. 1). Populist parties have formed governments and become coalition partners and opposition forces to be reckoned with across the continent.

On the whole, populists gained traction in Europe as cracks emerged in the post-war order as a result of significant economic, social, and political transformations. Hence, populism can be understood as a form of backlash against the intensification of European integration, immigration, and globalization. Populists have politicized many of these intersecting grievances.

31 Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, Populism, 32-36.
(e.g. EU expansion and immigration) and built entire parties and around them. It is therefore difficult to pinpoint a clear-cut set of reasons that explain the popularity of populist parties; nevertheless, some important factors that have contributed to the rise of populism in the EU are explored below. It should also be noted that their rise was partially enabled by electoral systems like proportional representation that make it easier for small parties to enter parliament.

One significant factor behind the recent surge of populism is globalization. Bertjan Verbeek and Andrej Zaslove argue that globalization “has produced a politically powerful sentiment: a feeling that the global economy produces new victims and villains, renders governments less powerful, and requires a new anchor in terms of identity.”33 Those who have been harmed (or feel as though they have been harmed) by the proliferation of free trade, progressive values, and multiculturalism are therefore particularly vulnerable to populist appeals rooted in popular sovereignty, protectionism, and cultural preservation. Globalization is closely related to inequality. As Rosa Balfour explains, inequality should be seen “not just as a social and economic condition, but inequality of opportunity and inequality of access to opportunities, such as education. Culprits are seen in international organizations, the European Union, International Financial Institutions, elites, technocrats, and experts, who are all seen to have benefited from globalization at the expense of those left behind.”34

Of course, it is not possible to talk about European populism without mentioning immigration, which, for many Europeans, created a perfect storm of anxieties about increased job competition, downward pressure on wages, and cultural dilution. The refugee crisis differed from

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earlier waves of immigration like guest worker programs, which were controlled, ethnically homogenous, and numerically small. Populists—especially those on the right—took advantage of the refugee crisis to make xenophobic appeals and connected the influx of immigrants to salient matters like employment, welfare, and the decline of progressive “European values.” For instance, Party for Freedom (PVV) leader Geert Wilders portrayed Islam as diametrically opposed to liberalism, while the Sweden Democrats (SD) spread fear about immigrants devastating the already strained welfare system.

*Economic challenges*, especially the European debt crisis of 2008, are also an important factor in the rise of populism.35 The crisis and subsequent bailouts played into the hands of populists in both wealthy and indebted countries: left-wing populist party Syriza rose to power in Greece on an anti-austerity platform, while right-wing AfD attracted voters by arguing that Germany should not be footing the bill for other countries’ financial mismanagement. Populists attacked establishment parties for failing to prevent and cope with the crisis, which was music to the ears of many people struggling to make ends meet and losing faith in national and European institutions.

Unique to Europe is the role of the *EU and denationalization*.36 Most populist critiques of the Union revolve around sovereignty and inequality: populist parties argue that the ever-expanding list of EU competences takes away decision-making power and enables “bureaucrats in Brussels” to impose their wishes on the people undemocratically, as exemplified by the debate over mandatory refugee quotas. Populists in newer Member States depict the EU as a hypocritical

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institution that is biased in favor of older members; they paint the enlargement process as one where Brussels bureaucrats and older Member States dictated strict accession conditions on younger democracies with little room to negotiate. Furthermore, the EU has depoliticized many tough domestic issues like immigration and economic policies by denationalizing them, thereby allowing mainstream parties to scapegoat EU institutions for the consequences of supranational decisions regarding those subject areas; this scapegoating enabled establishment parties to avoid taking responsibility for policy outcomes and reduced their domestic accountability, thereby reaffirming populist rhetoric about the gap between and the government.37

This ties into the bigger issue of failures of mainstream parties.38 The center-left and center-right Social Democrat and Christian Democrat parties that have presided over the secure and stable post-war European order for decades failed to adequately respond to voters’ concerns, especially during moments of crisis; in doing so, they validated populist parties’ arguments regarding the triumph of the elite consensus over public interests. A related issue is party convergence. The center-left has been significantly weakened by this, as it moved away from the welfare state and its blue-collar constituency to neoliberalism and social progressivism to attract more voters, leaving much of its traditional base in a lurch. The rise of “Third Wave” politics on the left, as exemplified by Gerhard Schroder and Tony Blair’s embrace of free markets and security states, moved these parties much closer to their right-wing opponents. In the meantime, the center-right failed to adequately counter rising populist sentiments by presenting salient policy solutions. Little by little, establishment parties began to look too similar to voters and populist parties became one of the few distinct alternatives at the ballot box.

38 Ibid, 40.
The situation in Central and Eastern Europe was different due to the transition from communism to democracy and from planned economies to free market capitalism. Young post-communist democracies did not develop ideologically distinct parties: most parties that rose to power after the fall of communism were weakly organized top-down structures that supported Euro-Atlantic integration, democratization, and capitalism. Hence, populists emerged as the only critics of international integration, which added credibility to their sovereigntist and nationalist appeals later down the road. Thus, most populist parties in the Central and Eastern European region gained traction by exploiting “transition fatigue” and dissatisfaction with mainstream parties, which they still deem corrupt and homogenous.

*Populism(s)*

Populism in Europe exists on both sides of the political spectrum, differentiated primarily by the thick ideologies that parties choose to employ. Right-wing populist parties usually define the people in a nativist and/or nationalist manner that is closely linked to xenophobic appeals; they paint nonnative groups like recent immigrants and ethnic minorities as a socioeconomic and cultural threat. As such, they embrace welfare chauvinism, demanding that groups considered “other” have restricted access to welfare and other social services. As with many other right-wing parties, populists on the right dream of a sovereign society defined by law and order, and some degree of social conservatism. A classic example of such a party is the PVV, which advocates for

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strict assimilation policies, high military spending, low taxes, leaving the EU, and the “de-Islamization” of the Netherlands through the closure of mosques and outlawing of the Quran.\textsuperscript{41}

Left-wing populists are less popular in Europe compared to other regions like Latin America.\textsuperscript{42} The prominence of right-wing populism is generally attributed to two factors, the first of which is the nature of salient issues in EU Member States: most countries’ policy agendas are centered on social-cultural issues rather socioeconomic ones.\textsuperscript{43} The second factor is left-wing parties’ loss of much of their traditional worker base as a result of their ideological shift towards cultural and social progressivism at the expense of economic leftism.\textsuperscript{44} Nevertheless, many left-wing parties became prominent in the aftermath of the economic crisis. Generally, left-wing populists define the “people” more inclusively than their right-wing counterparts: they adopt a socioeconomic definition that pits the capitalist, neoliberal elites against the hardworking people that are struggling to get by. They are pro-redistribution and more sympathetic to those who have been “left behind” like immigrants and members of the LGBTQ community. Left-wing populists dislike the EU and similar institutions due to their neoliberalism and proximity to corporate power. A typical example of such a party is Syriza, especially in its early days, when it pushed for tax cuts and public sector hiring, while criticizing the austerity imposed by the troika.\textsuperscript{45}


\textsuperscript{44} Ibid.

Although there is not a distinct populist electorate, there are some commonalities across supporters of populist parties across Europe. Populists on both sides of the political spectrum appeal to voters who are fed up with the actions of “the elites” (EU officials, mainstream politicians, wealthy businesspeople, etc.) and feel disadvantaged by social, political, and economic changes that threaten their conceptions of identity, security, and stability. Voters drawn to populist parties are often less educated and have lower incomes; they are pessimistic about the economy and feel an intense distrust towards institutions. Thus, populism succeeds when the status quo system fails a group of people, without providing a way for them to voice their grievances.

NATO

NATO 101

NATO dates back to 1949, when it was founded by twelve countries with three goals in mind: to counter Soviet expansionism and aggression, to prevent the revival of militarism in Europe, and to facilitate European political integration. According to Nicholas Burns and Douglas Lute, NATO has become the “largest and strongest alliance of democratic countries in the world” and “remains vital for more than 900 million Europeans and North Americans who benefit from it every day.”

NATO is a political and military alliance that promotes democratic values and facilitates consultation and cooperation on defense and security matters. Its two-pronged organization reflects this purpose: there is a military structure with two strategic commands complemented by

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47 Burns and Lute, “NATO at Seventy: An Alliance in Crisis.”
the North Atlantic Council, which has delegates from each Member State. Decisions are made through consensus, though individual members can initiate actions outside the Alliance and can choose not to partake in certain operations. The Alliance is able to use military power if there is an invocation of Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty (which declares an attack on one NATO member is an attack against all), if the organization is given a United Nations mandate, and/or by working with other countries and organizations. Article 5 has only been used once: the allies invoked the collective defense clause to express their solidarity with the United States in response to the September 11 attacks and followed the United States into Afghanistan shortly thereafter.

Today, the organization consists of 29 member states, 22 of which are in the EU (non-EU members are Albania, Canada, Iceland, Turkey, the United States, Montenegro and Norway; EU members not in NATO largely due to neutrality commitments are Austria, Sweden, Ireland, Malta, Cyprus, and Finland). Additionally, PfP connects NATO to 21 other countries in Europe (in addition to Australia, South Korea, and Japan) via voluntary bilateral cooperation initiatives that involve military reforms, joint exercises, interoperability, defense planning, and so on.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union nullified its raison d’être, NATO spent much of the 1990s assisting the democratic transitions of former Warsaw Pact members and intervening in the violence that ensued in the aftermath of the breakup of Yugoslavia. In the early 2000s, it became engaged in more out of area operations in the Middle East and North Africa. As NATO’s involvement these conflicts winded down and Russian aggression increased, the Alliance found itself returning to its original purpose of countering the threat emanating from Moscow.

Currently, the Alliance has non-combat capacity-building missions in Afghanistan and Iraq, and a maritime security mission in the Mediterranean. It assists with peacekeeping in the African Union, helps run the Kosovo Force, and has undertaken various deployments to strengthen its Eastern flank. Historically, the organization has made a name for itself through its
intervention in Libya, and the airstrike campaign in Bosnia during the breakup of Yugoslavia.

Other pertinent NATO priorities include bolstering its members’ ability to respond to emerging threats, especially in the realms of terrorism and cybersecurity.

Money Matters

NATO members contribute to a collective budget as determined by a cost-sharing formula based on their gross national income. The civil budget for 2019 is €250.5 million, while the military one is €1.4 billion, with an additional €700 million for the NATO Security Investment Programme.48 Member states cover the costs of deploying their own armed forces for NATO-led operations. In 2014, NATO members agreed to work towards spending 2% of their annual GDP on defense; 19 members are yet to meet that goal.49

NATO versus Russia50

Unsurprisingly, Russia has never been a fan of NATO and it has consistently scorned the Alliance’s Eastward expansion, which began in 1994 with NATO welcoming former Warsaw Pact members into the PfP. Although there have been attempts at facilitating dialogue between NATO and Moscow, such as the establishment of the NATO-Russia Council for Dialogue in 2002, it has always been a fraught relationship. The 2004 expansion brought NATO to Russia’s borders as Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania became formal members of the Alliance. Just four years later, NATO members opted to delay Membership Action Plans for Georgia and Ukraine but

reiterated their commitment to the eventual accession of the two nations in spite of Russian warnings against such a move. Shortly thereafter, Russia invaded Georgia and NATO suspended cooperation with Moscow.

Tensions reached another peak in 2014, when Russia annexed Crimea and invaded Eastern Ukraine. NATO suspended cooperation with Moscow again and then reinforced its Eastern flank by increasing military exercises in the region, deploying Multinational Forward Presence Battalions, establishing new air patrols, creating new command centers, and stepping up cooperation with Ukraine.

The current state of NATO-Russia relations and Moscow’s view of the Alliance is aptly captured by a recent statement President Vladimir Putin made to the Russian parliament: “They have lied to us many times, made decisions behind our backs, placed us before an accomplished fact. This happened with NATO’s expansion to the east, as well as the deployment of military infrastructure at our borders.”

NATO versus NATO?

Putin is not the only problem endangering the stability and security of NATO. Over the past few years, serious disagreements have emerged within the Alliance over democratic backsliding, enlargement, cost-sharing, and members’ commitments to collective defense, leading Macron to call the Alliance “brain dead.” These internal fractures considered alongside international security challenges--China and Russia becoming increasingly assertive, rapidly

51 Ibid.
evolving cyber threats, and the EU working on creating its own security architecture—have raised questions about NATO’s purpose and viability in the 21st century.

The rise of populist parties may be one of the most prominent challenges the Alliance is facing. As Magnus Petersson explains, “The wider rise of populism in established NATO democracies such as France, Germany, and Italy is worrying and a major internal challenge to the liberal-democratic nation states as such, as well as NATO…In addition, many of the populist parties in Europe get support from Russia and see Putin as a role model. His policies against liberalism, pluralism, and institutionalism are viewed as sound.”\(^{53}\) Petersson’s alarming tone is certainly justified. Populists, especially when in power, can pose a serious threat to NATO because they can disrupt the shared values and goals that make the Alliance so effective. The first major concern is that populism-induced democratic backsliding may disincentivize cooperation and ultimately undermine the collective defense clause that makes NATO such a powerful deterrent. The lack of democratic accountability and consequent unilateralism and unpredictability often associated with autocracies and illiberal democracies can jeopardize the trust that arises from the collective commitment to democratic principles; democratic members may be reluctant to share intelligence with and strengthen militaries of regimes that do not respect their citizens’ rights and freedoms.\(^{54}\) The rise of nationalist populism may be particularly concerning here, as more world leaders embrace an “America First” style zero-sum view of international security and abandon allies when their needs are not convenient or not in line with national interest. It is fair to say that no NATO allies would wish to relive the panic that Trump


unleashed after questioning Washington’s commitment to mutual defense. Another worry related to collective defense is articulated by Sven Biscop, who asks: “Which democratic government could justify to its citizens putting its forces in harm’s way in order to defend an eventual dictatorship in another NATO country?” In short, democratic backsliding may cause both democratic and undemocratic members to become less invested in the Alliance.

The second valid concern raised by Petersson is the close relationship between many populist parties and Russia, which can result in those parties acting as a conduit for Russian policy. Numerous NATO members including Hungary, Italy, and Turkey have warmed up to Moscow, and some in ways that have raised serious concerns about NATO capabilities. For instance, Turkey’s purchase of the Russian S-400 long range air and anti-missile system in lieu of a NATO interoperable one was criticized by many of Ankara’s NATO allies due to political concerns and worries about Russian espionage.

A related third concern raised by multiple scholars is that is that populists dislike international institutions and will therefore be averse to NATO; once enough of them are in power, they may disrupt the consensus decision-making of the Alliance in favor of the “will of the people” and even advance Moscow’s geopolitical goals while doing so. For example, last year Hungary vetoed a joint NATO declaration on Ukraine over issues concerning the rights of ethnic Hungarians – a move that pleased Moscow and one that many interpreted as Orban

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prioritizing pandering to his ethnonationalist base over the Alliance’s geopolitical goals.\textsuperscript{58}

Populist parties in powers are not the only ones to fear. There are many ways in which populists in opposition can impact national discourse and policies: they can be co-opted by other parties, set the agenda through media coverage, and push for previously unconsidered or contentious policies like leaving the EU. Thus, populists within parliament and outside of it can promote anti-NATO policies in a number of ways while populists in government can directly harm the Alliance, since they have a say in NATO affairs.

It is fair to say that European populist parties \textit{generally} dislike international institutions, lack a formidable commitment liberal democracy, and seem less committed to traditional alliances. However, it is inaccurate to paint all populists with that brush, and then apply those principles to their approach towards NATO. Poland is a case-in-point here: though its democracy has disintegrated under leadership of the populist Law and Order party (PiS), Warsaw has emerged as one of the most ardent supporters of NATO, spending more money on its military (in terms of GDP) than most other members, undertaking an ambitious modernization program, and welcoming the growing NATO presence on its territory.\textsuperscript{59}

There are almost 50 populist parties in EU Member States with a considerably wide range of policy stances; in order to comprehend populist parties’ approach to NATO, one must go beyond generalizations about populists and institutions, and instead, understand \textit{how} each party views the world and \textit{why}.


\textsuperscript{59} Dan Goure, “Poland: The Most Important Member of NATO (Thanks to the Russia Threat)?,” \textit{The National Interest}, September 6, 2019, https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/poland-most-important-member-nato-thanks-russia-threat-78486.
Chapter III: Parties in Power

This thesis is based on the premise that populist party platforms contain certain positions and rhetorical elements that can be connected to reveal a number of distinct worldviews that help explain party stances on NATO membership. However, these platforms and doctrines therein exist in the abstract realm of ideas and promises. The question then becomes whether or not they are realized when these parties are in power. In other words, what is the relationship between ideology and implementation? How much weight should be given to populists’ positions on foreign policy issues? Are their electoral programs empty promises or serious commitments? These questions are very timely given that voters are beginning to care more about foreign policy issues due to the rapidly blurring frontier between domestic and global affairs, a trend that has both been a cause of and consequence of the rise of populist parties that have made their relationship with the outside world a key part of their party identity (e.g. the UK Independence Party and Brexit, National Rally and anti-Americanism).60

Unfortunately, the literature on populist foreign policy—both in terms of ideology and implementation—is scant, as are instances of populists in power. Most research in this area has focused on the history of populism, voter behavior, and populists’ impact on domestic politics and specific international issues (e.g. migration, austerity). Furthermore, literature on European populists tends to concentrate on right-wing populism, which is understandable since there are more right than left-wing populists in the continent, and the former tend to enter government more frequently.

Although populism is not a new phenomenon, populists being in power certainly is.

Though there were a few breakthroughs by populist parties in the 1980s, most populist parties in the EU have come to power (in coalitions or alone) after 2000, as they have become more accepted by establishment parties.\(^6^1\) Generally, this looks like right-wing populists forming coalition governments with conservative parties, with some instances of left-wing coalitions (primarily in Eastern Europe).\(^6^2\) Examples of populists who have been in power recently include DF (2001-2011, 2015), Fidesz (2010-present), the Five Star Movement (M5S) (2018-present), the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) (2017-2019), Finns Party (2015-2017), the League (2018-2019), PiS (2005-2007, 2015-present), PVV (2010-2012), Syriza (2014-2019), and the Slovak National Party (2006-2010, 2012).\(^6^3\)

**Promise versus Practice**

It’s important to note that all parties in power, populist or otherwise, face a range of issues while attempting to implement their platforms and that it is difficult to attribute political outcomes to specific parties or events. For instance, there is debate over whether Italy’s decision to become the first major European economy to join China’s Belt and Road Initiative was a manifestation of the League and M5S’s defiant Euroskepticism or a pragmatic reaction to Italy’s economic troubles, which include inadequate European and Western investment.\(^6^4\) The rest of this section elaborates on policy implementation challenges that governing parties – populist or otherwise—face.


\(^{6^2}\) Ibid.

\(^{6^3}\) Balfour et al., “Divide and Obstruct: Populist Parties and EU Foreign Policy,” 8.

\(^{6^4}\) Ibid, 11.
First and foremost, parties must balance promissory and anticipatory agendas. As Caterina Froio, Shaun Bevan, and Will Jennings explain, “Parties’ ability to stick to their mandate largely depends on how they balance their attention between electoral promises, the promises of their opponents, the agenda of the executive and the issues salient to the public at the present time.” A party must implement its promises or risk facing electoral punishment in the future; at the same time, it must respond to other issues—major crises (e.g. terrorist attacks, scandals, pandemics), changes in public opinion, problems the media draws attention to, and demands of other parties—in order to maintain its reputation as a competent party while gaining respect and credibility in the eyes of the media, the rest of the electorate, and other parties.

Second, parties can only do so much, given their limited time in office and limited political and economic capital. As such, they must pick and choose their battles carefully. A third constraint is the issue of competences. Especially in the case of EU Member States, domestic governments have reduced autonomy in many policy areas (e.g. exclusive EU competences and shared ones).

Finally, there are many domestic constraints that arise from institutional veto players like an independent judiciary, binding long-term decisions like trade agreements made by past administrations, and electoral systems like proportional representation that necessitate more inter-party cooperation and compromise. In sum, any party in power will have trouble implementing their promises to the fullest extent possible.

There may be additional constraints on populist parties’ ability to enact their promises. The biggest constraint on populist parties tends to be coalition politics. In addition to coalitions

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being more vulnerable to internal conflict, most populist parties come to power as junior partners with less governing experience than their mainstream counterparts; as such, they are often not given control of major policy fields besides those related to their core issues. For example, Spain’s Minister of Equality is from Podemos, Austria’s previous Minister of Defence was from the FPÖ; the FPÖ also nominated the previous Minister for Europe, Integration and Foreign Affairs.⁶⁸ That being said, a populist party’s bargaining position during coalition negotiations is dependent on many factors, such as the salience of its core issues, electoral strength, issue ownership, and coalition options.⁶⁹ A different constraint is ideological tension: populists need to navigate the unique challenge of walking the line between their new insider status and their professed outsider status in order to retain their credibility as anti-elite actors while governing with the elites they so often demonize.

**Populist Priorities**

The literature suggests that populists tend to focus on one or two core issues when they are in office. In terms of foreign policy, this looks like an approach that is a combination of their central goals or ideology and ongoing short-term political calculations.⁷⁰ The concept of issue ownership is very relevant here. When a party establishes ownership over an issue, it markets itself as—and is generally perceived to be—competent to deal with a specific issue; voters give the party credit or punish it depending on the salience of the topic and the party’s policies in that realm.⁷¹ If a party fails to implement suitable or expected policies, it risks not only losing votes

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⁶⁸ Chryssogelos, “Populism in Foreign Policy,” 7.
⁷⁰ Balfour et al., *Europe’s Troublemakers: The Populist Challenge to Foreign Policy*, 49.
⁷¹ Akkerman and de Lange, “Radical Right Parties in Office,” 577.
but also losing its issue ownership. Examples of such issues for right-wing populist parties include opposition to European integration and immigration, while those for left-wing populists include anti-globalization, pacifism, and anti-austerity.

Populist parties in power tend to be consistent on these “core issues” and employ other issues strategically: they are open to moderating their stances on non-core issues and using them as tools of compromise and proof of their flexibility in coalition negotiations. This means that while populists are committed to their key issues—which are often those they have established ownership over and the ones their electorate cares about the most—they can be unpredictable when it comes to other policy questions. This is sometimes the case for parties in opposition as well, though it is more contingent on their bargaining position and influence in the legislative process, whereas parties in government usually have to make compromises earlier on (e.g. coalition agreements).

Though one or two core issues may sound too few to have any significant impact, it is worth noting that these are usually “buckets” of issues that can have many policy implications. For instance, a dedication to anti-globalization can manifest itself (foreign policy wise) as protectionism, restrictive immigration policies, opposition to constructive participation or membership in international institutions, and support for sovereigntist multipolarity over Western or American hegemony. Furthermore, political issues are neither static nor in a vacuum. 9/11 fundamentally altered the scope of war and peace issues by securitizing many previously unrelated domains like transportation, travel, international development, and immigration. Hence, a core issue has the potential to impact a myriad of related issues. Along those lines, decisions in

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72 Ibid.
73 Ibid.
74 Balfour et al., *Europe’s Troublemakers: The Populist Challenge to Foreign Policy*, 49.
one realm of politics affect others; if a party does not prioritize the military, it may push for those resources to be redirected to sectors that it does care about, thereby harming the future of the armed forces.\textsuperscript{75}

Therefore, it can be said that populists make a few key issues their hill to die on and use others as bargaining tools. In the past few years, populists have succeeded in making some of their salient promises in the international realm reality, as exemplified by Brexit and the failure of the EU relocation quota scheme during the refugee crisis.

\textbf{Bark versus Bark}

There is a group of scholars who argue that populists have not been effective even when it comes to their core issues, writing, “In the foreign policy area, they have not yet influenced major decisions on war and peace. Left-wing populists have failed to do more than dent the recipe served up to tackle the Eurozone crisis. Right-wing populism has not led to the unravelling of European integration, nor has it blocked asylum seekers from arriving in Europe - yet.”\textsuperscript{76}

Andrew Moravcsik suggests that this is the case because there is an inherent and intentional tension between populist foreign policy rhetoric and reality for populists in power.\textsuperscript{77} He finds that although populist parties talk extensively about their foreign policy commitments, they often accomplish little besides implementing or slightly altering policies of their coalition partners or previous administrations. He argues that this rhetoric-reality gap is actually beneficial for populists, as the impassioned promissory rhetoric satisfies their base while the lack of

\textsuperscript{75} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{76} Ibid, 14.
implementation allows the party to maintain favorable relationships with other interests groups (e.g. businesses, mainstream parties) and avoid being linked to policy failure, especially given that most populist proposals are oversimplified and not well thought out. For example, populist parties moved away from the idea of leaving the EU in the aftermath of Brexit, as they (and their voters) witnessed the economic complexities and political upheaval it unleashed; instead, they began supporting a “common sense Europe” that calls for fewer EU competences and greater national sovereignty. Syriza’s time in office is another case of populist bark being more powerful than its bite: the party came to power as a result of its anti-austerity platform but ended up capitulating to the troika’s demands and implementing painful fiscal consolidation, while also tempering its promises about moving closer to Russia.

There is additionally the idea that populists simply amplify mainstream trends. Mudde argues that European politics have been moving in a more “authoritarian” direction since the 1980s (a trend that was amplified after 9/11), especially with regard to migration, law and order, and security. Although governments containing right-wing populist parties have pushed harder on these topics, similar policies have nevertheless been implemented in countries without populists in power, as demonstrated by the EU-wide convergence towards more restrictive asylum legislation. According to this school of thought, populists – at best – become indirect influences that speed up the implementation of these policies either due to their position of power, electoral pressure, or ability to increase the salience of certain topics.

78 Browne, Bergmann, and Rohac, “Beyond Populism,” 25.
Populist Politics

Perhaps a more fundamental question to ask is whether a populist party’s presence in government is even necessary for the implementation of their platforms. In other words, can populists be influential in opposition or even out of parliament altogether? The answer is a conditional yes: a populist party can be impactful with regard to its core issues if it is able to influence the electorate, that is, affect public opinion or pose an electoral threat.81

Generally, the two effects go hand in hand: as a populist party’s key issues gain salience, it attracts more voters and poses a threat to mainstream parties.82 This gives mainstream parties three options: (1) form a coalition or work with the populist party to benefit from its electoral strength, (2) co-opt its platforms to win over some of its voters, or (3) exclude (i.e. ostracize) the party by working or forming a coalition with other parties.

The first option (coalition or collaboration) can easily lead to the implementation of populist policies in the key issue domains. A very recent example of this can be found in the coalition agreement between the mainstream center-left Spanish Socialist Workers’ Party (PSOE) and its junior coalition partner left-wing populist Podemos: in addition to securing the positions of Labor Minister and Minister for Equality, Podemos has won over major concessions with regard to rent control, workers’ rights, raising the minimum wage, and tuition reduction.83 The co-optation option has the same result. For instance, since the 1990s, dozens of Western

European parties have adjusted their position on integration and immigration in response to populist pressure, regardless of whether the populists were in opposition or government.\textsuperscript{84}

Interestingly, the third option – ostracism – can also amplify populist voices, even though it is intended to keep populists out of government. The exclusion of populist parties by their mainstream counterparts can range from refusing to acknowledge them as a legitimate political party to the creation of a “cordon sanitaire,” which means completely ruling them out as a possible coalition partner.\textsuperscript{85} This exclusion often prevents the de-radicalization of populist platforms as more moderate voters and party members jump ship to more electable parties and thereby lend a greater voice to remaining extremists, and as populist parties lose the incentive to moderate to demonstrate their acceptability as political partners.\textsuperscript{86} Furthermore, exclusionary tactics legitimize the populist claim that the elites do not care about the wishes of the people, which the populists claim to represent, and that populists are the good, honest outsiders working to change that.\textsuperscript{87} Depending on the institutional context (e.g. how influential the parliamentary opposition is, vote shares of populists, the electoral system) ostracism can enable populists in opposition and outside of parliament to remain radical and continue drawing attention to their big promises which they will never be forced to implement. In sum, all of the options mainstream parties have when faced with a powerful populist challenger may result in populists radicalizing mainstream politics and gaining more credibility.

\textsuperscript{84} Rooduijn, de Lange, and van der Brug, “A Populist Zeitgeist?” 570.
\textsuperscript{86} Ibid, 358.
\textsuperscript{87} Cas Mudde, Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 289, https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511492037.
Populist parties can be impactful independent of mainstream parties as well.\textsuperscript{88} Their unconventional rhetoric and proposals usually garner a lot of media attention; the amplification of populist voices can increase polarization and expand the Overton window, resulting in politics becoming a more antagonistic, zero-sum game as opposed to one about collaboration and compromise in the marketplace of ideas. Moreover, populists’ issue ownership can result in issues being framed differently and increasing in salience, thereby allowing populists to capture and shape the debate on those issues, and ultimately, achieve agenda-setting power. For example, Maurits J Meijers has found that Euroskeptic challenger parties influence mainstream parties by increasing issue salience; these challengers are “capable of influencing mainstream position shifts on European integration, provided that, on average, EU issues are regarded as important by the Eurosceptic challengers… In addition, mainstream party characteristics such as vote loss… did not have a conditional effect on Eurosceptic challengers’ impact.”\textsuperscript{89} In short, populists can impact issues they are most passionate about without even directly engaging in parliamentary politics.

\textbf{Conclusion}

The takeaway from studies of populists in power seems to be that they are effective when it comes to their core issues, which they also often develop ownership of. In other domains, their bark tends to be more powerful than their bite as a result of their desire to maintain the rhetoric-reality gap and due to the number of constraints that affect policymaking for all parties (e.g. the tension between the promissory and anticipatory agenda) and those that often specifically affect

populists (e.g. junior coalition partner status and navigating the outsider-insider boundary).

What’s more, populists do not have to be in power to influence the political agenda and policy implementation, since they can wield their outsider status to draw attention to their core issues and force mainstream parties to choose among three options – cooperation, co-optation, or exclusion—that can easily amplify populist voices.

How does this all apply to the future of foreign policy, especially NATO membership? In addition to populists increasing their share of the vote in many EU Member States, scholars have noted that there is a “new generation of right-wing populists that is on the rise… more focused on foreign policy and developing more specific agendas across the board, e.g. on the EU, trade, Russia, NATO.”

Now that populists parties’ central issues of immigration and EU membership are losing salience as a result of refugee inflows coming to a standstill and the discouraging effect of the tumultuous Brexit process, it is likely that there will be a re-centering of their platforms and priorities. Therefore, if populists turn NATO membership into a core issue that they are willing to influence at all costs, it is not inconceivable that they succeed in doing so, whether they are in government, opposition, or even outside parliament.

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Chapter IV: Literature, Hypotheses, and Methodology

The Leave campaign’s Brexit referendum slogan of “Take Back Control” is echoed by many populists who believe that membership in international institutions represents an unacceptable violation of national sovereignty, because such institutions force a country to pay dues, compromise with other nations, accept limits on its domestic and international actions, and partake in actions it may disagree with. Most populist parties in Europe embrace Euroskepticism and other “pro-sovereignty” stances; this observation has led many scholars to conclude that aversion to international institutions is a core element of populism. For instance, Chryssogelos argues that “the current surge of populism is a response to the internationalization of state elites and their insulation from popular scrutiny”91 and Jahn contends that populists “explicitly identify liberal internationalism as the cause of the problem. They despise multilateralism, refuse to cooperate with international organizations, and (try to) leave the EU; they drop free trade agreements...prioritize domestic over international law...All these policies serve but one goal: to re-establish a clear distinction between the domestic and international sphere by building (ideological, legal or physical) walls between nations.”92

It is therefore entirely reasonable to expect that populist parties will support the dismantling of supranational structures that inhibit the realization of the people’s wishes, which populists see as the ultimate national interest. However, the variation in populist parties’ attitudes towards NATO membership—especially the observation that a slim majority of them support it—pushes back against this expectation. As such, this thesis will consider domestic and

international reasons that may account for the variation in populist parties’ attitudes towards NATO membership.

**Domestic Explanations**

No political party exists in a vacuum; all parties in democratic countries are embedded in pluralist party systems, which means that they influence, and are influenced by, other parties. Competition is a defining element of democratic party systems, since parties compete with each other to capture voters. The domestic hypotheses I will test focus primarily on democratic *party competition*; specifically, they seek to understand how different forms of domestic party competition affect populist parties’ stances on NATO membership.

**Left-Right Orientation**

One simple way of differentiating parties is by looking at where they fall on the political spectrum; this differentiation captures the broader ideological dimension of party competition, which is the contest between right-wing and left-wing worldviews. Some scholars have posited that populist parties on the right and left have distinct beliefs when it comes to foreign and security policy. Populists on the left often support peace movements and international arrangements that counter great power competition while protecting “the weak.”93 Thus, they prefer a pan-European approach (usually one that includes Russia) to collective security over NATO.94 Populist parties on the right prioritize nationalism and physical security; as such, they are generally in favor of increasing defense spending and multilateral security arrangements that

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93 Verbeek and Zaslove, “Populism and Foreign Policy,” 394.
94 Angelos-Stylianos Chryssogelos, “Undermining the West from Within: European Populists, the US and Russia,” *European View* 9, no. 2 (December 2010): 274, [https://doi.org/10.1007/s12290-010-0135-1](https://doi.org/10.1007/s12290-010-0135-1).
increase national security without going against the country’s interests (e.g. not getting involved in conflicts deemed counter to national goals). Beyond the bounds of populism, this left-right division is reflected in public opinion surveys conducted in numerous NATO countries: voters on the right in many NATO Member States view the organization more positively than those on the left. Right-wing voters are also more likely to say that their country should defend a NATO ally under attack and to think that military force can be justified in the name of maintaining order in the world. As such:

H1a. Right-wing populist parties will support NATO membership while left-wing populist parties will oppose it due to diverging opinions on military affairs and national security.

Protest Parties

Political parties compete with each other through their policy proposals: they present contrasting platforms and adjust them based on the demands of the electorate. A key characteristic of populist parties across the political spectrum is their adversarial relationship with “the elite,” rooted in the Manichean worldview that defines populism. In the context of party competition, the elite can be understood as mainstream parties. Many populist parties across Europe have won votes by differentiating themselves from establishment parties by presenting the electorate with non-mainstream (i.e. unpopular, previously unarticulated, or new) policy proposals that clash with the “elite consensus” that has arisen out of party convergence. The anti-EU sentiments expressed by populists in some of the bloc’s main economic beneficiaries and some of its founding members are an example of this approach. As Margaret Canovan explains,

97 Ibid.
“Populists see themselves as true democrats, voicing popular grievances and opinions systematically ignored by governments, mainstream parties and the media...This does not in itself demonstrate (as is sometimes claimed) that populists or unprincipled or confused: merely that what makes them populist is their reaction to the structure of power.”

This reactionary populist strategy has proven to be effective, as it addresses the voter disenchantment and alienation that has plagued many democracies as a result of establishment parties’ inability to cope with the challenges of major socioeconomic and sociocultural transformations, and the decline of their representative function as a consequence of party convergence and supranational governance. Voting for populists therefore becomes a form of protest and a way of punishing mainstream parties. Understandably, populist party voters tend to have lower levels of political trust, weaker social ties, and Euroskeptic beliefs; they are also more likely to be dissatisfied with democracy. Moreover, there is a communal component of protest voting. An individual’s feelings of relative deprivation or dissatisfaction are amplified if s/he belongs to a community who feels the same way. These negative collective emotions create a group who is resentful towards those who they see as responsible for their situation; a group who is incredibly susceptible to populist appeals fueled by that resentment.

The aggressive populist divergence from mainstream parties is particularly effective in younger democracies, where party attachment is weaker compared to older democracies in which

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voters have had more time to learn about party politics and parties’ ideological orientations. In emerging post-communist democracies, for instance, populist parties’ ardent non-mainstream positions and rhetoric appear “doctrinally pure and consistent,” and send a forceful message that evokes an emotional response from voters, compared to the more changing, ambiguous, and moderate messaging from establishment parties. Taking all of the above into consideration, the protest party hypothesis is as follows:

\[ \text{H1b. If there is an elite consensus regarding NATO membership, a populist party will take the opposite stance in order to differentiate itself from mainstream parties.} \]

**Valence Competition**

Even though populism is fundamentally about a reaction to power, there are some issues that may constitute exceptions to the anti-elitist stance populists take. There are two types of issues that political parties must address. The first are position issues, which “involve the advocacy of government actions from a set of alternatives over which a distribution of voter preference is defined.” The second are valence issues that “merely involve the linking of the parties with some condition that is positively or negatively valued by the electorate.” Voters have differing opinions regarding position issues, while there is widespread public agreement across the ideological spectrum regarding valence issues. In many European countries, affordable tuition is a valence issue while immigration is a position issue. Valence issues are often determined by the

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105 Ibid.
zeitgeist, which is affected by exogenous factors; for example, national security policies may shift from position issues to valence issues in the aftermath of a terrorist attack.\textsuperscript{106}

When it comes to valence issues, parties are judged not on their contrasting positions but rather, on the \textit{intensity} of their position and their \textit{competence} (i.e. ability to deliver on their promises).\textsuperscript{107} In short, when it comes to valence issues—where there is not a uniform distribution of voters across an issue, but instead, widespread agreement—a party’s valence advantage is of immense importance. Taking a contrarian stance would constitute electoral suicide; instead, the electorally reasonable choice for a party is to heighten the \textit{intensity} of its commitment to issue.

The valence competition hypothesis thus posits:

\textbf{H1c.} If NATO membership is a valence issue, a populist party’s stance on it will be based on electoral viability; as such, the party will not only agree with the elite consensus but also take a more \textit{intense} stance on the topic (e.g. oppose or support NATO membership more than mainstream parties).

\textbf{International Explanations}

The intersection of domestic politics and international affairs has increased dramatically in the 21\textsuperscript{st} century as a result of globalization and the emergence of transnational challenges. This is particularly true for the EU, which facilitates the free movement of goods, services, capital, and persons across 28 Member States. The growing overlap between domestic and international spheres has compelled populist parties to develop international agendas; it has also been complicit in the rise of populist parties, since populism is in part a reaction to the


internationalization of political rule and the depoliticization of global governance mechanisms.108

On that account, this set of hypotheses examines the relationship between NATO membership and populist parties’ positions on international alliances and institutions.

Europe and International Institutions

Almost all populist parties are Euroskeptic to some degree; some of them, like Vlaams Belang (VB) and Golden Dawn completely oppose the EU and call for its dissolution, while others like the FPÖ and Direction-Social Democracy (Smer-SD) in Slovakia want to stay in the EU because they support its basic tenets, but wish to implement reforms to change its future direction (e.g. reducing the number of EU competences). The close connection between Euroskepticism and populism is reasonable given populist parties’ focus on reclaiming decision-making power from domestic and supranational elites and returning it to “the people.” However, since Euroskepticism is such a wide spectrum, it is not a clear metric of how populist parties feel about European integration, relinquishing sovereignty, and similar topics. As such, it is not likely to be a useful parallel to their attitudes on NATO membership.

A more telling variable may be a more defining form of Euroskepticism: attitudes on EU membership. As explained in Chapter I, the EU and NATO have numerous similarities including their membership, purpose, history, reliance on technocracy, guiding principles, and emphasis on collective duty and long-term planning. Therefore, it makes sense that populists that oppose membership in one would do so for the other. These observations yield two possible outcomes with regard to NATO membership:

H2a. Euroskeptic parties oppose or support NATO membership based on the degree of their Euroskepticism; as such, Euroskepticism alone will not clearly explain a party’s stance on NATO membership.

H2b. If a populist party opposes EU membership, it is more likely to oppose NATO membership, and conversely, due to the similarities between the two institutions.

Linkages

The two major non-EU world powers that are highly relevant when it comes to NATO affairs are the United States and Russia. The former is the most militarily and economically powerful country in NATO and played a significant role in the founding of the Alliance; many countries initially joined NATO to strengthen transatlantic ties and to take advantage of the US security guarantee (and nuclear umbrella).109 In recent history, Washington’s NATO allies have supported the United States in all of its major wars and acted as multipliers of US diplomatic and military influence across the world.110 While many parties believe that the United States can be a force for good, many others believe it is the epitome of the discontents of globalization and complicit in the emergence of major transnational challenges (e.g. US interventionism in the Middle East giving rise to terrorism and refugee crises).111 Thus, it is sensible to hypothesize:

H2c. If a populist party supports close ties with the United States and has a favorable outlook on US leadership and policy in general, it will support NATO membership due to the major role the United States plays in the Alliance, and conversely.

Russia, on the other hand, sees NATO as an aggressive expansionist alliance that is diametrically opposed to national interests, with Putin claiming, “We are not expanding

110 Ibid.
anywhere; it is NATO infrastructure, including military infrastructure, that is moving towards our borders…[NATO legions] are tied to the achievement of the geopolitical goals of containing Russia.”

Populist fans of Putin’s politics see Russia as a country that is a staunch defender of sovereignty, multipolarity, realist politics, and a counterbalance to US hegemony; some also believe that stable relations with Russia are conducive to regional stability and economic growth. For example, right-wing French populist party National Rally (RN) has advocated for a “strategic alliance” comprising a military and energy partnership between Russia and Europe.

On the other hand, many parties—especially those in the Baltics—view Russia as a major security threat given their tense history, Moscow’s rising military expenditures, and its recent interventions in Chechnya, Georgia, Ukraine, and Syria. For them, NATO continues to serve a slightly modified version of one of its founding principles, now deterring Russia instead of the Soviet Union. Thus:

H2d. If a populist party supports close ties with Russia and views Russia positively, it will oppose NATO membership due to the antagonistic relationship between NATO and Russia, and conversely.

Methodology

Parties and Programs

This thesis seeks to test competing hypotheses about support for NATO membership among populist parties in service of understanding populist foreign policy doctrines. Essentially, I will be analyzing how populist parties across Europe view the world and how this manifests

113 Brownstein, “Putin and the Populists.”
114 Balfour et al., Europe’s Troublemakers: The Populist Challenge to Foreign Policy, 32.
ideologically (as opposed to policy implementation). As such, my main source base is party platforms (translated via Google Translate), supplemented by parties’ posts on their official social media pages and secondary sources if absolutely necessary. Electoral programs are a useful resource because they contain a party’s long-standing policy commitments, and help a party develop an identity and reputation; ultimately, the public will vote for the party whose program most resembles their preferences with the hope that the platform becomes policy.\textsuperscript{116} Although party programs are useful, they are also imperfect: it is difficult to know whose view they reflect (e.g. was a random party official told to write the section on NATO or was it a thorough party-wide discussion?) and how many of the pledges the party actually intends to fulfill, since there are instances where party leaders’ statements have contradicted the official party line.\textsuperscript{117} Nevertheless, party programs remain the most effective way of analyzing how a party views the world and seeks to influence it.

Furthermore, I am taking an \textit{inductive} rather than deductive approach, and one that is more qualitative than quantitative due to the limited sample size of 43 parties. While my analysis and findings will still be framed by my hypotheses, I think it is vital to be cognizant of the nuances and interplays of different categories in a subject—the interplay between populist parties in Europe, NATO, and foreign policy—that is both new and understudied.

I created a list of populist parties across 28 EU Member States (I am including the UK since I began writing this prior to the UK’s official departure from the Union on January 31, 2020) based on Mudde’s criteria. I am not excluding EU Member States that are not NATO


members because they may choose to join in the future and populist parties are likely to play a role in those debates. For instance, joining NATO has become a more salient issue in both Sweden and Finland in recent years and populist parties have been all but silent about the matter.\textsuperscript{118} After eliminating parties that did not have accessible platforms or discernible stances on NATO membership, I was left with 43 parties in 25 Member States. I then created a table, in which I coded their stances on NATO membership and other variables related to my hypotheses.

\textit{Domestic Explanations}

I determined a party’s left-right orientation based on their platforms and classifications in secondary sources. I chose to make this a binary category instead of one that includes more political orientations such as center-right and center-left for clarity and comparability. This decision does not significantly reduce accuracy, as most populist parties in the EU are clearly on one side of the political spectrum or the other instead of the center and only a few are subject to debates about the extent of their leanings (e.g. GERB has been classified as right-wing\textsuperscript{119} and center-right).\textsuperscript{120} The only exception here—which I have categorized as “neither”—is the Five Star Movement in Italy, which has become a well-known “catch-all” or “big tent” party because it combines left and right-wing views to the point where classification becomes nearly impossible.\textsuperscript{121}

\begin{footnotes}
\renewcommand{\thefootnote}{\alph{footnote}}
\footnote{Lorenzo Mosca and Filippo Tronconi, “Beyond Left and Right: The Eclectic Populism of the Five Star Movement,” \textit{West European Politics} 42, no. 6 (September 19, 2019): 1258–83, \url{https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2019.1596691}.}
\end{footnotes}
The protest party and valence competition hypotheses involve comparing populist and mainstream party stances. For the latter, I coded the NATO membership positions mainstream parties in each country (112 parties in total) based on their party platforms and social media posts if necessary. I defined mainstream parties as center, center-left and center-right parties that are represented in national parliament (based on the most recent election) and associated with the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe, the European People’s Party, and the Party of European Socialists on the European level, and the International Democrat Union, Centrist Democrat International, Liberal International, and Progressive Alliance on the international level. I excluded pirate parties, green parties, and single-issue parties, along with non-centrist parties that are clearly on the right and left of a country’s political spectrum. I defined elite consensus as the situation where all mainstream parties in a country have the same stance on NATO membership.

For the protest party hypothesis, I examined whether the populist party (or parties) in a country agrees with the elite consensus on NATO membership or whether it disagrees, which would designate it a protest party. For the valence competition hypothesis, I isolated countries in which NATO membership is considered a valence issue, which I defined as a situation in which two thirds of the public would vote to stay in NATO if there was a referendum on the issue. I then analyzed the attitudes of populist parties in countries where NATO membership is a valence issue and compared the intensities of populist and mainstream party support using the contents of their platforms.

In terms of the international hypotheses, I coded the stances of populist parties on the categories outlined below (Table 1). I conducted a numerical analysis by asking what percentage of parties that fall into a certain category support or oppose NATO membership (or are indeterminate). The small sample size of 43 parties limited complex quantitative analysis
possibilities, so I opted to use a percentage-based approach to examine which factors accounted for a greater than 50% difference in the amount of parties within a given category that support and oppose membership.

Table 1. Coding of Party Stances

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hypothesis</th>
<th>Green</th>
<th>Red</th>
<th>Yellow</th>
<th>N/A</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Euroskepticism</td>
<td>Euroskeptic</td>
<td>Not Euroskeptic</td>
<td>Indeterminate, equivocal</td>
<td>No information found</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EU Membership</td>
<td>Remain in the EU</td>
<td>Leave the EU</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stance on the United States</td>
<td>Supports policies and interests (especially in the context of NATO), in favor of developing closer ties</td>
<td>Hostile to policies and interests (especially in the context of NATO), opposed to developing closer ties</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stance on Russia</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter V: Domestic Politics

Populist parties do not exist in a vacuum; they exist on a political spectrum in multiparty democracies that have been dominated by a range of mainstream parties for many decades. Thus, one cannot talk about populist parties without examining the role of their place on the political spectrum and their relationship to the establishment parties ruled by “the elite.” This chapter explores the role of domestic party competition in shaping populist stances on NATO membership.

Left-Right Orientation

There are 12 left-wing populist parties and 30 right-wing populist parties in the EU (Table 3). The right-left orientation hypothesis predicted that right-wing populist parties would support NATO membership while left-wing parties would oppose it, since the latter tend to oppose militarized conflict resolution while the former tend to favor strengthening national security through military means. This does not appear to be the case: there is not a notable difference between the percentage of right and left-wing parties that support or oppose NATO membership. 57% of right-wing parties and 33% of left-wing parties support NATO membership, while 40% and 50% oppose it respectively (3% and 17% are indeterminate).

The reasoning behind this lack of significance may be that the place parties occupy on the political spectrum is not a nuanced enough measure of a party’s worldview. There are many types of right-wing ideologies and left-wing ones (e.g. democratic socialism versus communism) and it is possible for parties to have the same stance with different justifications. For instance, both right and left-wing populists can adopt protectionist views, one on the basis of ethnocentrism and
the other on the basis of economic egalitarianism.\textsuperscript{122} When it comes to NATO membership, some left-wing parties such as The Left and People Before Profit (PBP) oppose it on the grounds of anti-imperialism and anti-militarism, while right-wing parties such as VB and the National Renovator Party (PNR) do so in the name of sovereignty and pragmatism. There are also cases of issue convergence.

There are also instances of parties on opposite sides of the political spectrum sharing the same position and justification: for example, right and left-wing populist parties in Lithuania and Slovakia support NATO membership because they believe it furthers national security and deepens beneficial alliances. Another interesting case is when parties on the same side of the political spectrum disagree on NATO membership, which is explored in the final section of this chapter.

One caveat about the political spectrum hypothesis is the role of pacifism. If a populist party is a staunch supporter of pacifism, it will oppose or be indeterminate on NATO membership, since NATO is a military alliance that encourages higher defense spending and the development of stronger militaries, while normalizing armed responses to conflict. This anti-NATO stance grounded in pacifism is embraced by left and far-left populist parties that identify with socialist or communist ideologies, and related doctrines such as opposition to American-led neoliberal globalization and neoinperialism (Human Shield, The Left, the Greek Communist Party, PBP, Podemos, the Socialist Party, and Syriza).\textsuperscript{123} Many of these parties call for a pan-European approach to security that includes Russia, similar to the Organization for Security and

\textsuperscript{122} Jeroen van der Waal and Willem de Koster, “Populism and Support for Protectionism: The Relevance of Opposition to Trade Openness for Leftist and Rightist Populist Voting in The Netherlands,” \textit{Political Studies} 66, no. 3 (August 2018): 560–76, \url{https://doi.org/10.1177/0032321717723505}.

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Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), and believe that war (unless it is being waged by an oppressed group) is a way of entrenching the capitalist state’s monopoly on force and oppression. Thus, it is fair to say that if a populist party is pacifist or supports many pacifist practices like disarmament and stopping the arms trade, it will oppose NATO membership.

**Elite Consensus**

There is an elite consensus (mainstream parties being in agreement) about NATO membership in all but two of the 25 EU Member States in this study: Finland and Sweden. (Appendix A). Technically, there is no elite consensus in the United Kingdom either, but the dissenting mainstream party (Sinn Féin) is not nationally significant compared to all the other mainstream parties in the UK. An important caveat here is that I recorded the stances of mainstream parties in a binary fashion (support versus oppose membership) and as such, I will not be commenting on the *degree* of elite consensus among mainstream parties.

The lack of elite consensus in Finland and Sweden is understandable given both countries’ changing relationship with the Alliance. As a result of their neutrality commitments, neither country is a member of NATO. Sweden officially embraced pragmatic neutrality in the 19th century while Finland did so at the onset of the Cold War. However, since the end of the Cold War, both have moved closer to NATO: both joined PfP, increased their participation in NATO operations, embarked on military modernization programs, and signed bilateral defense cooperation agreements with the United States and Host Nation Support Agreements with NATO. They were both given “enhanced opportunity partner status” (the highest level of

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partnership standing in NATO) at the 2014 Wales Summit.\textsuperscript{126} All of these changes, combined with the deteriorating strategic situation in the Baltic Sea region, have led parties in both countries to seriously consider NATO membership.\textsuperscript{127} However, the potential consequences of undertaking such a shift in defense policy, such as retaliation from Russia or a failed referendum on membership, have made some parties hesitant.\textsuperscript{128} Two out of five mainstream parties in Finland support NATO membership; in Sweden, all parties except the Social Democratic Workers’ party (which has occupied the highest number of seats in the Riksdag for almost a century) express that membership would be in Sweden’s interests. Populists in both oppose membership.

**Protest Parties**

There are 16 populist parties that disagree with the elite consensus in the 23 Member States where it exists. There are seven countries where all populist parties disagree with the elite consensus and four countries where populist parties are divided on the issue (Table 2). This section focuses on the former group, namely, instances where all populist parties in a country can be considered protest parties with regard to NATO membership, since they are the only party (or group of parties) that disagrees with the elite consensus. In doing so, this section seeks to examine the merits of the protest party hypothesis, which posits that if there is an elite consensus regarding NATO membership, a populist party will take the opposite stance in order to differentiate itself from mainstream parties.

\textsuperscript{126} Cottey, “Understanding European Neutrality.”


\textsuperscript{128} Ibid.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Elite Consensus</th>
<th>Populist Party Stances</th>
<th>Category</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Austria</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>FPÖ</td>
<td>Indeterminate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belgium</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>VB</td>
<td>Protest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bulgaria</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>GERB Ataka</td>
<td>Divided</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Croatia</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Human Shield</td>
<td>Protest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Czechia</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>KSČM SPR-RSČ SPD</td>
<td>Protest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>DF</td>
<td>Protest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Estonia</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>EK</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finland</td>
<td>No consensus</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>RN</td>
<td>Protest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>AfD The Left</td>
<td>Divided</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greece</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Golden Dawn KKE Syriza</td>
<td>Protest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hungary</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Fidesz</td>
<td>Jobbik</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ireland</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Socialist Party</td>
<td>Divided</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>League M5S</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latvia</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lithuania</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>DP TS-LKD TT DK</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>PVV</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poland</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>PiS LPR</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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<td>Portugal</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>PNR</td>
<td>Protest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romania</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>PRU</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Slovakia</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Smer-SD SNS OL'aNO Sme Rodina L'SNS</td>
<td>Divided but excluded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slovenia</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>SDS SNS</td>
<td>Divided</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td>Podemos Protest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>No consensus</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>UKIP</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Reacting to Structures of Power

Most of the NATO-related content in party platforms and declarations put forward by these protest parties references the elite consensus in a manner that clearly demonstrates the “people versus elite” divide that defines populism and embodies Canovan’s observation that “what makes [populist parties] populist is their reaction to the structure of power.” These parties argue that joining NATO was a self-interested and ill-informed decision made by the elite (mainstream parties) without taking the people’s will into account.

For instance, Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD) in Czechia portrays NATO membership as an elite “lie” that was imposed on the people. Their platform declares, “Politicians and the media spread two persistent lies…The second lie is the false belief that NATO and the EU will defend us” and explains, “When our post-November government decided on the Czech Republic’s accession to NATO, it did so without a referendum.” RN in France takes a similar stance, accusing politicians who decided to rejoin the integrated military structure of doing so behind closed doors “without debate, without studies and without justification.” VB in Belgium also portrays NATO as an elite decision that continues to be imposed on the people by politicians: “Only after the Second World War was the neutrality position abandoned. The Belgian politicians engaged us completely in a transatlantic context…politicians cannot emphasize enough how much we should be a ‘loyal partner’ for NATO.” These sentiments are echoed by the Communist Party of Greece (KKE), which blames the government for putting foreign interests above national ones and surrendering national sovereignty by fostering the

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“cosmopolitanism of capital,” taking on “the role of the ‘flag bearer’ for NATO, the USA, the EU” and playing “the role of NATO’s salesman.”

The protest party hypothesis holds for some parties, perhaps because they may benefit from differentiating themselves from the elite politicians who they argue imposed NATO membership on the people unjustly. Many of these parties also tie this differentiation to other protest positions such as leaving the EU—for instance, RN’s opposition to Euro-Atlantic integration because it comes at the expense of good relations with Russia stands in stark contrast to mainstream party positions. Although populist parties may still be influenced by other factors, such as their thick ideology and attitudes towards other countries, it is clear that the protest party hypothesis holds some weight in their case due to the textbook populist anti-elite rhetoric in their platforms. Although populism ties these parties together, there is nothing that immediately stands out as a common thread between countries that host these protest parties (Belgium, Croatia, Czechia, France, Greece, Portugal, and Spain).

However, the protest party hypothesis fails to explain populists’ stances on NATO membership across the board. While populists can act as the only dissenters on certain topics like EU membership or refugee policies in many countries, NATO membership does not appear to be one of these topics: there are 25 parties that agree with the elite consensus. Why are some populists protest parties when it comes to NATO membership but others are not? One answer may be public opinion: if most of the public supports NATO membership, opposing it would not be electorally sensible. 84% of Lithuanians said that they would vote to remain in NATO in a referendum and 6% said they would vote to leave; if populists in Lithuania did not support

membership, they would risk alienating a significant portion of the electorate.\textsuperscript{133} Another public opinion related explanation may be issue importance: if voters are indifferent to the topic of NATO membership, it may not be worth taking a contrarian stance only to become an avenue for dissent that few people use. An alternative reason may be that there are factors—alliance politics, sovereigntist beliefs, pacifism and so on— that shape populist attitudes towards NATO that go beyond pure populist opposition to establishment parties. Hence, we can conclude that populist parties do not take a stance solely based on that of elite parties.

\textit{Opposition Writ Large}

Beyond pure populist critiques of NATO membership as an unjust and self-interested decision made by the elites, protest parties oppose NATO membership for similar reasons. The first theme that emerges very quickly is concerns about sovereignty and national interests. Parties argue that NATO membership has drastically diminished national control of defense and foreign policy; these matters are now determined by other countries, which reduces efficiency, flexibility, efficacy, thereby limiting the worthwhile pursuit of national interests. Along those lines, they posit that NATO membership has put other countries’ interests—especially those of the United States—above national ones, which is inherently problematic and has made their country complicit in legitimizing problematic actions by other Member States (e.g. interventions without a UN mandate). It is interesting to note that these parties tend to denounce US interests but not those of the EU, even though many of them oppose EU membership and are very critical of the Union. This may be because the EU does not behave as a single entity within NATO, contrary to its behavior in other international realms (e.g. entering into international agreements) and because

the United States has emerged as the most controversial interventionist NATO power in recent history, frequently creating divisions within NATO (and EU members), especially with regards to its actions in the Middle East. Examples of statements in favor of sovereignty and national interests include Human Shield’s contention that NATO has become the “lever of the United States and the part of the EU that exercises terror over countries where they have economic interests” and RN’s argument that “NATO’s anti-Russian obsession does not serve the interests of a sovereign France” and that, through NATO, the country is “subjected to American imperatives (Afghanistan, American purchases of materials, alignment with foreign policy).

The second theme is the high risk, no reward nature of NATO. Parties argue that NATO membership is dangerous because it aligns members with the United States and the West, which creates tensions with other important powers like China and Russia. Furthermore, they write that NATO is an unreliable alliance that will not defend their country in a time of need and that there are better ways of strengthening national security. Finally, they suggest that the Alliance has failed to live up to its promises of creating peace and security in the region, and that it has even intensified conflicts around the world. For instance, Human Shield’s platform states that “NATO does not guarantee peace… intensifies conflicts around the world and pursues war-torn politics. With NATO membership, Croatia has clearly identified itself with America and the Western bloc, which poses a great risk to our security, especially in the context of conflicts with Islamic countries, Russia, or China” while the SPD proclaims, “In the event of an attack in our country or a threat to its security, there is no obligation to take immediate action by another country.

137 “Zivi Zid Political Program,” 67.
within NATO....It is necessary to create cooperation with the V4 countries or other states where, unlike NATO, immediate military assistance, including nuclear retaliation, will be guaranteed in the case of the use of weapons of mass destruction against the Czech Republic.”

The third theme is the violation of international laws and norms. Protest parties across the EU denounce NATO actions that they allege contravened international law (e.g. interventions without a UN mandate, such as the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia) and maintain that NATO cooperates with, and/or furthers the interests of countries they deem troublesome. These justifications are usually accompanied by critiques of unnecessary and illegitimate troop deployments that jeopardize the nation’s reputation and its pursuit of legitimate sovereign interests. The Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia’s (KSČM) platform promises, “We will limit foreign missions and unnecessary militarization” and instead, support “Consistent implementation of the UN Charter…respect for international law…restore the role of the OSCE which has successfully secured peace in Europe for more than 30 years.” That of the KKE states that NATO “enhances cooperation with murderous states such as Israel and Saudi Arabia” and demands the “closure…of all foreign military bases in Greece… return of the Greek military forces involved in missions outside its borders.”

The final theme is monetary costs. Parties justify their opposition to NATO membership on the basis that it imposes unnecessary costs on members (e.g. procurement, cost of participating in activities and operations) with few monetary benefits in return. The PNR criticizes the Alliance for forcing Portugal to “spend resources on sending troops to theaters of

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138 “SPD Political Program,” 16.
140 “On the KKE’s Stance against the Dangerous Plans of the USA-NATO-EU and Greece’s Involvement in Them.”
operation that do not concern us”\(^{141}\) while RN contends that “industrial return is almost nil within NATO (France is a net contributor) and within NATO countries (the Netherlands never ordered French materials; the purchases of American materials from Poland, the Baltic countries, Romania, Norway speak for themselves).”\(^{142}\)

These themes demonstrate that protest parties do not oppose NATO membership solely on the basis of differentiating themselves from the elite consensus. They have defensible critiques of their stances, some of which are echoed in mainstream debates in member countries, like the back-and-forth between the Social Democratic Party and the Christian Democratic Union about raising Germany’s defense spending,\(^{143}\) and in countries considering membership, like Finnish parties’ arguments about whether NATO membership would reduce sovereignty and harm relations with Russia.\(^{144}\) This observation substantiates the notion that there is more to populist parties than reacting to the existing power structures. While these parties certainly frame their anti-NATO stance using the elite versus people dichotomy, they still ground it in broader ideological principles.

What else do these protest parties have in common? Most of them do not like the United States and only one has a negative view of Russia. All of them are Euroskeptic and only half are in favor of EU membership. These attributes make sense given the themes discussed above; unlike most of their mainstream counterparts, these parties do not staunchly support their country adopting a Western orientation grounded in Euro-Atlantic integration and transatlantic


\(^{142}\) “Defense and the Army.” 7.


\(^{144}\) Dempsey, “Should Finland and Sweden Join NATO?”
cooperation. They oppose institutions like the EU and NATO because they constrain national sovereignty.

In short, while 16 populist parties are protest parties, in the sense that they disagree with the mainstream consensus on NATO membership, the protest party hypothesis fails because it does not account for the 25 other parties in countries where there is an elite consensus.

Agreement

There are 25 populist parties across that agree with the elite consensus. There are 11 countries where all populist parties (21 parties total) agree with the elite consensus and four countries where populist parties are divided on the issue (four parties in favor, four opposed or indeterminate).

Support Writ Large

Parties that agree with the elite consensus support or oppose NATO membership for reasons generally similar to those given by mainstream parties. In terms of supporting NATO membership, the first theme that is common across most of their platforms is, understandably, security. Parties maintain that NATO membership has improved the security of their country and supported international peace efforts due to a variety of reasons including the Alliance’s commitment to collective defense and its facilitation of cooperation to counter transnational threats like terrorism. The Estonian Centre Party (EK) platform declares, “NATO has significantly increased our security…to succeed in the battle against organized crime, uncontrolled distribution of weapons of mass destruction, and terrorism that endangers peace and
welfare of mankind.”\textsuperscript{145} Similarly, the Homeland Union (TS-LKD) in Lithuania praises NATO because it “strengthens the state’s geopolitical safety and promotes faster growth of the economic and social prosperity of its people.” and contributes to “deterring Russian aggression and ensuring the safety of Europe.”\textsuperscript{146} The second theme is more credibility and decision-making power: NATO increases a country’s influence on the world stage and bolsters its credibility by aligning its actions and policies with other countries that share similar goals. Being a NATO member allows countries to shape important Alliance decisions and strengthen political ties with likeminded nations. For instance, the League of Polish Families argues that NATO helps “strengthen and consolidate our position as an important factor in European and also global politics.”\textsuperscript{147} The third justification is Euro-Atlantic orientation and integration. Parties stress that NATO is an integral pillar of Euro-Atlantic security that aligns members with Western values, bringing their country closer to other liberal democracies in Europe and North America to develop a unified stance on many worthwhile foreign policy goals. For instance, the Labour Party in Lithuania praises NATO as the “foremost Euro-Atlantic security organization” that enables Lithuania to achieve the above-mentioned goals.\textsuperscript{148}

In Austria and Ireland, the elite consensus on NATO membership is negative due to these countries’ commitment to non-alignment. Populist parties in both agree with the elite consensus that maintaining neutrality is more advantageous for reasons related to history, autonomy and security. For example, the FPÖ platform maintains that “Austria must...maintain its neutrality…Austria is an autonomous and peacemaking country, and must therefore not be a

\textsuperscript{147} “Program Assumptions: League of Polish Families,” Liga Polskich Rodzin, December 30, 2019, \url{http://www.lpr.pl/pl/zalozenia-programowe/}.
\textsuperscript{148} “About the Party,” Darbo Partija, October 26, 2013, \url{https://www.darbopartija.lt/apie/}.
member of a military pact.”

Mainstream parties in Ireland defend remaining neutral while maintaining status quo defense commitments and active multilateral cooperation with current partners. This is exemplified by Fine Gael’s platform, which reads, “utilising this experience and Ireland’s position of military neutrality we will actively engage on the international stage and continue to espouse the importance of multilateralism in support of international peace and security.”

On the other hand, the two populist parties in Ireland, both of which are very left-wing, support neutrality on the basis of pacifist and anti-imperialist beliefs, which are not values espoused by mainstream parties. This sentiment is reflected by the PBP platform, which reads, “We defend Irish neutrality; oppose NATO and the military use of Shannon [Airport], and all Irish participation in the international arms trade” while the Socialist Party opposes NATO because of its promotion of militarism and imperialism.

Hence, the two left-wing parties take the argument against NATO in a wholly different direction.

Other similarities among populist parties that agree with the elite consensus are as follows: though they are still critical of the EU, they are mostly in favor of EU membership, they are mostly pro-US, and only a handful are pro-Russia.

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Valence Competition

The valence competition hypothesis predicts that if NATO membership is a valence issue, a populist party’s stance on it will be based on electoral viability; as such, the party will not only agree with the elite consensus but also take a more intense stance on the topic (i.e. oppose or support NATO membership more than the elite and on how much they support NATO membership and related commitments). I define valence issues based on public opinion: NATO membership is a valence issue in countries where two thirds (67%) of the population would vote to stay in the Alliance in a referendum, which demonstrates significant public support for membership. This is the case for electorates in 12 countries: Poland (90% would vote to remain in the Alliance), Romania (85%), Lithuania (84%), Denmark (79%), Estonia (77%), Portugal (77%), Hungary (76%), Latvia (72%), the Netherlands (69%), Italy (68%), the United Kingdom, (68%) and Germany (67%). Recent public opinion data is not available for non-members with an elite consensus on staying out of NATO (Ireland and Austria), hence this hypothesis will only be tested on countries with pro-NATO publics. There are 19 populist parties in EU Member States where NATO membership is a valence issue. Three of these parties (The Left, Jobbik, PNR) go against the elite consensus by not supporting NATO membership or taking an indeterminate stance, while the other 16 agree with mainstream parties’ pro-NATO membership stance.

The valence competition hypothesis does not stand, however, because few pro-NATO populist parties differ in their intensity of NATO support relative to their mainstream counterparts; interestingly, there are even cases of populists being less intense about their commitment to NATO. Most populist parties that agree with the elite consensus have similar

levels of commitment to the Alliance as their mainstream counterparts; they do not propose anything significantly different from the mainstream parties and they do not praise the benefits of NATO more than them. Populist and mainstream parties in countries where NATO membership is a valence issue share similar NATO-related goals: usually some combination of increasing defense spending to 2% of GDP, working towards interoperability, modernizing their armed forces, and continuing to counter global threats together.

There are a few instances where populists do not fawn over NATO to the same extent as mainstream parties do, and thus do not seem particularly interested in increasing their country’s involvement in NATO. Some of them even seriously criticize the Alliance, calling for changes that would reduce NATO’s involvement in global affairs. This general lack of enthusiasm is clearly visible when comparing populist and mainstream party platforms in Romania. The populist United Romania Party calls NATO a necessary “strategic partnership” that can help Romania “respond timely and well to the new problems of the East.”\textsuperscript{154} while mainstream parties elaborate significantly more on the benefits of NATO membership. The Social Democratic Party (PSD) places NATO membership in the context of Euro-Atlantic integration, democratization and rationality, stating, “In all countries of the European Union, extreme nationalism, right-wing populism and hate speech are gaining more and more ground. The PSD must assume the role of voice of reason and balance, firmly asserting that the future of our country cannot be conceived outside membership of the European Union and that our place is in Europe...NATO membership and EU membership are neither optional nor voluntary.”\textsuperscript{155} The National Liberal Party takes it a step further, declaring that the EU and NATO are “not only a form of assuring stability and a

\textsuperscript{154} “PRU Program,” Partidul România Unită, November 2014, \url{http://www.apptv.it/romania/program.html}.
\textsuperscript{155} “A Relationship Based on Respect,” Partidul Social Democrat, 2020, \url{https://www.psd.ro/o-relatie-bazata-pe-respect/}. 
prosperous future, but also an affirmation of the political reconnection with our European and Western identity... The pillars of our country's foreign and security policy are NATO and EU membership, as well as the strategic partnership with the US...Romania must...respect its commitments regarding the increase of military expenditures...Maintaining NATO's security commitments is crucial to the security of Europe as a whole, and to us, as the border state of the Alliance. Investments in defense and participation in NATO actions must also be complemented by political actions that will strengthen the cohesion of the Alliance and involve us in defining its future objectives.”

In sum, the valence competition hypothesis does not hold much water. Perhaps populist parties do not feel the need to compete with mainstream parties on the topic of NATO membership or Alliance commitments in general, because it is not a priority for voters in these countries; even though most people support it, a party’s extent of commitment to membership may not matter to them. Moreover, valence competition may not be feasible given the circumstances. If mainstream parties are already campaigning on platforms that demonstrate their dedication to membership and are proposing policies to that end, there may not be more that populists could say to stand out to voters. Romania once again serves as a useful example here: in addition to speaking highly of NATO, mainstream parties across have promised a whole host of policies as proof of their commitment to the Alliance, including increasing military expenditures to 2% of GDP, strengthening Romania’s role in NATO, developing NATO’s missile defense system, strengthening the Alliance’s presence in the region by supporting enlargement, and working towards stronger relations with the United States. There are few politically or

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157 See platforms of ALDE, PMP, and PNL.
financially feasible or compelling actions that populist parties could propose that would meaningfully differentiate them from their mainstream counterparts in this instance.

**Populists Divided**

Populist parties remain divided on the issue of NATO membership in four countries; in three of these countries, one party is for membership while the other is against it. In the fourth country, Hungary, Fidesz supports NATO membership, while Jobbik is indeterminate. Technically, Slovakia could serve as a fifth country, but only one of the five populist parties is opposed to membership, so I am not including it as a notable example of a disagreement between populist parties. It is worth taking time to examine countries with a stark for-and-against division: how do two parties in the same country that are often grouped together as “the populists” disagree on the issue of NATO membership and what does this reveal about populist foreign policy?

**Bulgaria**

Center-right GERB and right-wing Attack are both conservative populist parties. Even though they are both populist and located on the same side of the political spectrum, they have fundamentally different foreign policy priorities, which explains their divergent approaches to NATO. GERB argues that Euro-Atlantic integration is more important than ever given the growing influence of and interference by external powers in the Black Sea and Balkan region, and the related resurgence of Russia. As such, the party expresses that the collective security guarantee and deployment capabilities provided by NATO—especially with the assistance of the
United States—are vital to Bulgaria’s security.158 On the other hand, Attack views NATO as an “imperialist,” “terrorist and fascist” organization that behaves unfairly towards Russia and includes Turkey as a member, all of which go against Bulgarian interests.159 Furthermore, the party posits that the Alliance subjects its members to double standards in terms of military cooperation and procurement, often acting as a tool of US neocolonialism and violence.160 GERB and Attack’s disagreement on NATO membership makes sense in the context of their other foreign policy orientations: GERB is pro-EU and pro-US, while Attack is nationalist, anti-US, pro-Russia, and incredibly Euroskeptic, frequently campaigning in favor of severing ties with the EU, NATO, and the IMF.161 In sum, the parties espouse two very different worldviews, even though they both frame them in populist terms and they are both on the right side of the political spectrum.

Slovenia

The situation in Slovenia is similar to that in Bulgaria: there are two conservative populist parties with opposite stances on NATO membership that are a result of their disparate worldviews. The right-wing nationalist Slovenian National Party (SNS) opposes NATO membership on the basis that it hampers the country’s independence and diminishes pragmatic policymaking; moreover, the party’s platform notes that membership in the Alliance is not only

160 Ibid.
costly but also fails to further Slovenian interests, such as the resolution of issues with other members like Croatia. On the other hand, the center-right Slovenian Democratic Party (SDS) portrays NATO membership as key to the modernization, security, and prosperity of Slovenia, emphasizing that NATO helps bolster the military’s adaptiveness and responsiveness, and increases Slovenia’s credibility on the world stage. Like GERB in Bulgaria, SDS is anti-Russia, pro-EU, and pro-US, while SNS, like Attack, is pro-Russia, anti-US, and opposed to EU membership.

Germany

Unlike those in Bulgaria and Slovenia, the two populist parties in Germany are on opposite sides of the political spectrum. The right-wing AfD contends that NATO membership advances national interests by strengthening the German military, though it also states that NATO must remain a “defensive” alliance and withdraw troops and nuclear weapons from Germany, and that German forces should only be involved in UN-approved missions that serve the country’s interests. On the other hand, The Left defines itself as “the only party in the Bundestag that demands a paradigm shift in peace policy” and views NATO as a Cold War relic that should be dissolved. The party accuses NATO of harming relations with Russia, disregarding international law, and promoting militarism. The Left also believes the Alliance should be replaced by a “pan-European collective security system with the participation of

Russia.”

While one party grounds its radical proposal of dissolving NATO in left-wing pacifism, the other has a stance informed by its nationalism and pro-military attitude.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has five central takeaways about the link between domestic party competition and NATO membership. The first takeaway is that a party’s left-right orientation does not determine its stance on NATO membership, with the exception of a few pacifist radical left-wing parties.

The second takeaway is related to reasons behind parties’ stances on NATO membership. There is an elite consensus regarding NATO membership in 23 of the 25 EU Member States examined in this study and a majority of populist parties in these countries agree with the elite consensus. Mainstream parties and populists (except those in Ireland and Austria, which oppose membership on neutrality grounds) support NATO membership because they believe (to varying degrees) that it advances national security and wellbeing, bolsters their country’s international influence, and facilitates Western integration. Parties that disagree with the elite consensus do so in a manner that emphasizes the classic populist elite-people divide; they oppose membership because they believe the Alliance works against national interests (i.e. the unrestricted pursuit of the people’s will) by reducing national sovereignty and foreign policy flexibility, while imposing high monetary costs. They also posit that NATO violates international laws and norms. These protest parties tend to be closer to Russia, dislike the United States, and oppose EU integration.

The third and fourth takeaways concern the protest and valence competition hypotheses. The protest party hypothesis alone does not explain populist parties’ stances towards NATO

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166 Ibid.
membership, since there are only 16 protest parties that disagree with the elite consensus out of a possible 41. While populists can often be a dissenting voice, that does not seem to be the case regarding NATO membership. More populists agree with the political elites they so often demonize than not. The valence hypothesis does not fare much better: although most populist parties are in agreement with their mainstream counterparts regarding the issue of NATO membership, they are not more “intense” about their embrace of, or commitment to, the Alliance.

The final takeaway is that when two populist parties in the same country are divided on the issue of NATO membership, this divergence can be understood in the context of their differing worldviews that result in fundamental differences in terms of foreign and security policy priorities, which their stance on NATO membership is a manifestation of. This is an apt place to end this chapter and introduce the next one, which asks which parts of these worldviews (i.e. other important foreign policy beliefs) best explain why populist parties oppose or support NATO membership.
Chapter VI: International Affairs

The conceptualization of populism as a thin ideology can be misleading, as it may be interpreted to suggest that populism is a mere filtering or framing of thicker ideologies or more substantial policy stances. While populism certainly affects the framing of certain issues (e.g. populist socialists portraying their cause as a Manichean struggle between the working class and the neoliberal capitalist elite), populism also has more tangible policy implications. According to some scholars, populist parties in the EU have developed positional similarities partially as a result of their pro-people anti-establishment stances; for instance, they argue that there are certain characteristics that constitute a populist foreign policy, though there is little agreement on what those traits are, besides a general preoccupation with national sovereignty and consequent dislike of the EU. This chapter seeks to explore the relationship between populist parties’ stances on NATO membership and their positions on numerous potentially related international institutions and alliances – namely, the EU, the United States, and Russia. It first examines the question of whether there are in fact commonalities between parties’ foreign policy platforms with regard to these topics and then evaluates how those stances may help explain the variation in populist stances on NATO membership. In doing so, this chapter seeks to suggest a typology of how different populist parties see the world and, most importantly, to ask which ones most successfully predict a populist party’s stance on NATO membership. I do not mean “predict” in a numerical, probabilistic sense; rather, I mean it in a correlative sense, with the goal of determining which foreign policy positions do the best job of explaining a party’s likely stance on NATO membership.

Table 3. Positions of EU Populist Parties

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Party Name in English</th>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Left-Right Orientation</th>
<th>Stance on NATO Membership</th>
<th>Euroskepticism</th>
<th>Stance on EU Membership</th>
<th>Stance on the United States</th>
<th>Stance on Russia</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Austria</td>
<td>Freedom Party of Austria</td>
<td>FPÖ</td>
<td>Right</td>
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<td>Belgium</td>
<td>Vlaams Belang</td>
<td>VB</td>
<td>Right</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bulgaria</td>
<td>Attack</td>
<td>GERB</td>
<td>Right</td>
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<tr>
<td>Croatia</td>
<td>Human Shield</td>
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<td>Left</td>
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<tr>
<td>Czechia</td>
<td>Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia</td>
<td>KSČM</td>
<td>Left</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Rally for the Republic – Republican Party of Czechoslovakia</td>
<td>SPR-RSC</td>
<td>Right</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Freedom and Direct Democracy</td>
<td>SPD</td>
<td>Right</td>
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<tr>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>Danish People’s Party</td>
<td>DF</td>
<td>Right</td>
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<tr>
<td>Estonia</td>
<td>Estonian Centre Party</td>
<td>EK</td>
<td>Left</td>
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<tr>
<td>Finland</td>
<td>Finns Party</td>
<td>PS</td>
<td>Right</td>
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<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>National Rally</td>
<td>RN</td>
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<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>Alternative for Germany</td>
<td>AfD</td>
<td>Right</td>
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<td>The Left</td>
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<td>Syriza</td>
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<td>Left</td>
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<tr>
<td>Greece</td>
<td>Golden Dawn</td>
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<td>Right</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Communist Party of Greece</td>
<td>KKE</td>
<td>Left</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hungary</td>
<td>Fidesz</td>
<td></td>
<td>Right</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Jobbik</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ireland</td>
<td>Socialist Party</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>People Before Profit</td>
<td>PBP</td>
<td>Left</td>
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<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>League</td>
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<td>Right</td>
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<tr>
<td>Latvia</td>
<td>National Alliance</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>Right</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lithuania</td>
<td>Labour Party</td>
<td>DP</td>
<td>Left</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Homeland Union - Lithuanian Christian Democrats</td>
<td>TS-LKD</td>
<td>Right</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Order and Justice</td>
<td>TT</td>
<td>Right</td>
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<td></td>
<td>The Way of Courage</td>
<td>DK</td>
<td>Left</td>
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<tr>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>Party for Freedom</td>
<td>PVV</td>
<td>Right</td>
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<tr>
<td>Poland</td>
<td>Law and Justice</td>
<td>PS</td>
<td>Right</td>
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<td></td>
<td>League of Polish Families</td>
<td>LPR</td>
<td>Right</td>
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<td>Portugal</td>
<td>National Renovator Party</td>
<td>PNR</td>
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<td>Romania</td>
<td>United Romania Party</td>
<td>PRU</td>
<td>Right</td>
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<td>Direction – Social Democracy</td>
<td>Smer-SD</td>
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<td>Slovakia</td>
<td>Slovak National Party</td>
<td>SNS</td>
<td>Right</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Ordinary People</td>
<td>OL’aNO</td>
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<td></td>
<td>We Are Family</td>
<td>Sme Rodina</td>
<td>Right</td>
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<td>People’s Party – Our Slovakia</td>
<td>LSNS</td>
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<td>Slovenian National Party</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Slovenian Democratic Party</td>
<td>SDS</td>
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<td>Spain</td>
<td>Podemos</td>
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<td>Sweden</td>
<td>Sweden Democrats</td>
<td>SD</td>
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<tr>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
<td>UK Independence Party</td>
<td>UKIP</td>
<td>Right</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Common Attributes**

As displayed in Table 3 summarized in Table 4, populist parties across the EU do not have identical stances on many important foreign policy issues; in fact, the variation in their stances on NATO membership, the United States, and Russia are striking. It is interesting to note that although an overwhelming majority are Euroskeptic and most want to leave the EU, a majority (albeit a slim one) of EU populist parties support NATO membership. This observation reaffirms the importance of questioning whether the rising tide of anti-institutional populism threatens both the EU and NATO.

In short, we can conclude that there is no one size fits all populist foreign policy, as evidenced by the lack of consensus on many NATO-related foreign policy matters. Furthermore, this categorization of stances points to possible foreign policy typologies of populists (at least in the realm of Euro-Atlantic affairs), such as pro-US parties, anti-EU parties, and so on.

*Table 4. Stances of EU Populist Parties (rounded to the nearest integer)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attribute</th>
<th>Yes/Support</th>
<th>No/Oppose</th>
<th>Indeterminate</th>
<th>N/A</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NATO Membership</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Euroskeptic</td>
<td>74%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EU Membership</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russia</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**The NATO Connection**

The bulk of this chapter evaluates my second set of hypotheses concerning international explanations by drawing parallels between NATO membership and other aspects of populist foreign policy, and asking *why*: Why would a party that has a particular foreign policy position support NATO membership, and vice versa? Why not?
My findings are based on the answer to the following question: of parties that fit into one of the categories below, what percentage of them support or oppose NATO membership? I define a foreign policy trait as “significant” if it results in a 50% difference between parties that support or oppose membership. Take pro-Russia populist parties for example: 42% of them support NATO membership, 53% oppose it, and 5% are mixed. It is difficult to say that a pro-Russia party will likely be for or against NATO membership. However, if one looks at leaving the EU, 17% of parties that oppose EU membership are for NATO membership, while 83% of them are against NATO membership; it is more justifiable to say that if a party is against EU membership, it will likely be against NATO membership as well.

Table 5. EU Populist Party Stances on NATO Membership Based on Foreign Policy Attributes
(Rounded to the nearest integer, intermediate stances excluded, significant differences (≥ 50%) are in yellow)

| Attribute | Support NATO Membership | Oppose NATO Membership | Difference $|\text{[Support-Oppose]}|$ |
|-----------|-------------------------|------------------------|-------------|
| Euroskeptic | 38% | 53% | 16% |
| Not Euroskeptic | 100% | 0% | 100% |
| Stay in EU | 64% | 25% | 39% |
| Leave EU | 17% | 83% | 67% |
| Pro-US | 85% | 10% | 75% |
| Anti-US | 0% | 93% | 93% |
| Pro-Russia | 42% | 53% | 11% |
| Anti-Russia | 62% | 29% | 33% |
EU Integration

Euroskepticism

It was initially hypothesized that Euroskepticism would not clearly account for a populist party’s stance on NATO membership due to its variability (i.e. Euroskepticism is a spectrum, a matter of degree). This hypothesis holds: parties that are not Euroskeptic are likely to support NATO membership, but Euroskeptic parties may oppose or support membership.

The former group of pro-EU and pro-NATO parties are primarily located in countries that have recently joined both organizations and have been at the heart of the discussion about Euro-Atlantic integration: GERB (Bulgaria), EK (Estonia), NA (Latvia), TS-LKD, DP, and DK (Lithuania), OL’aNO and Smer-SD (Slovakia), and SDS (Slovenia). All of them joined the EU and NATO in 2004 (with the exception of Bulgaria, which joined the EU in 2007).

The EU and NATO are “inter-democratic security institutions” that strengthen national and regional security by promoting international integration and liberal democracy, based on the
notion that security is contingent on democratization. Frank Schimmelfennig argues that these institutions facilitate the achievement of comparable goals: “In the domestic sphere, the liberal principles of social and political order—social pluralism, the rule of law, democratic political participation and representation as well as private property and a market-based economy… in the international sphere, the liberal order is characterized by the ‘democratic peace’—nonviolent conflict-management between liberal democratic states—and multilateralism.” Beyond supporting these broader systems and principles, both institutions provide similar benefits to their members: international influence, cooperation in solving national and transnational challenges, more rights and freedoms for citizens, economic confidence, and a guarantee of assistance during difficult times. These benefits have been particularly important in former Soviet bloc countries, which made a choice to relinquish some governmental control (i.e. sovereignty) in exchange for social, political, and much-needed economic benefits that they would not have had otherwise.

Thus, it is sensible that a party will hold both institutions in high regard and be willing to give up some sovereignty so long as the national benefits of membership outweigh the costs. As the TS-LKD platform articulates, membership in both “ensure[s] that Lithuania participates in tackling Europe’s problems on every level: both by joining the structure of political and economic cooperation, the European Union, and by joining the Transatlantic Security Community, NATO. We believe that membership in these organizations helps Lithuania pursue its key interests—it strengthens the state’s geopolitical safety and promotes faster growth of the economic and social prosperity of its people.”

One might assume that the opposite—Euroskeptic parties opposing NATO membership—would be true as well, since a dislike of the EU grounded in anti-institutionalism can translate into an aversion to NATO given the similarities between the two organizations. However, this is not the case. First and foremost, Euroskepticism is a broad label that fails to capture the degree of a party’s hostility to the EU (and if the EU is used as a proxy for other institutions, the degree of a party’s anti-institutionalism). As Richard Dunphy and Luke March explain, Euroskepticism is an “an ambiguous and highly normative term that can have the unfortunate tendency to lump together parties that reject the European integration project altogether...parties that are skeptical about the direction that European integration has taken...and parties that feel the process has lost momentum and betrayed the original ideals of European federalism.”172 Second, NATO and the EU are similar but not identical. Hence, a party can reasonably support one but not the other. At the most basic level, they serve different purposes and therefore have different competences. NATO is a military alliance, while the EU is a political and economic one; to that end, NATO influences a country’s security and foreign policy, while the EU membership entails giving up control over many more aspects of governance (e.g. foreign policy, economic policy, environmental policy, humanitarian aid, agriculture and fisheries, and energy policy, to name a few). The organizations’ geographical reaches also differ: most importantly, NATO is a transatlantic alliance while the EU is limited to most of Europe. Another significant difference is structure. Since the EU has more functions, it has more decision-making institutions (e.g. the Parliament, Commission, and the Council) compared to NATO, which has a simpler civilian and military structure. The differences between NATO and the EU are recognized by the AfD and We Are Family, which are both Euroskeptic. The former is on the fence about EU membership,

while the latter supports it, though both champion a “Europe of nations” over a “United States of Europe” because they are tired of the federalization of the EU, viewing it as a violation of their sovereignty with little return. However, they do not have the same issues with NATO, and instead, place a high value on the security-related benefits they receive from the Alliance.

EU Membership

While general Euroskepticism does not automatically imply anti-NATO sentiments, being Euroskeptic enough to the point of wanting to leave the EU does. If a party’s primary foreign policy goal is to reclaim national sovereignty and embrace unbounded pragmatism in the international sphere, it will oppose both NATO and EU membership. This anti-NATO and anti-EU stance is usually accompanied by the populist argument that both are ruled by an intolerable self-interested set of elites. For instance, the SNS believes Slovenia should leave both institutions to be able to embrace an “independent policy without political and other pressures and ultimata by the EU, the US, and NATO” and undertake “pragmatic cooperation” to realize national interests without paying any membership costs.173 There are also parties that disagree with the core purposes and policies of both institutions. PBP opposes both on the grounds of its socialist aversion to militarization and neoliberal politics; it views NATO as a warmongering imperialist organization and criticizes the EU because “it is not generous enough to immigrants… too corporate… not international enough… not fighting enough for social equality.”174

However, it is still possible to want to stay in the EU yet want to leave NATO. As discussed in the previous section, NATO and the EU are similar but not the same. Pro-EU anti-

173 “Program of the Slovenian National Party Adopted at the 10th Party Congress,” 2.
NATO parties believe that their country gets more benefits from the Union than the Alliance. Though many of these parties are Euroskeptic and want to seriously reform the EU, they still think membership is valuable. For instance, The Left opposes NATO membership on pacifist grounds, but believes that the EU successfully advances certain leftist interests like improving workers’ rights and pushing for more stringent environmental regulations.\textsuperscript{175} The FPÖ, the Finns Party, and SD are also pro-EU and anti-NATO, though their stance is largely a result of the fact that their countries are not NATO members to begin with; these parties are averse to relinquishing their countries’ status quo sovereignty and non-alignment. This is not exactly the case for Ireland. Although Ireland is not a NATO member either, Irish populist parties oppose membership more on the basis of pacifist principles than a desire to maintain the status quo.

My initial hypothesis was that if a populist party opposes EU membership, it is more likely to oppose NATO membership, and conversely. The first part is accurate: if a populist party opposes EU membership, it is more likely to oppose NATO membership due to the similarities between the two institutions. However, the converse is not the case, as pro-EU membership parties are not discernibly in favor of staying in or joining the Alliance.

\textbf{The United States}

\textit{On the United States and NATO}

NATO and its most militarily powerful member have a deeply intertwined history, as evidenced by the Alliance’s founding purposes, which its first Secretary General Lord Ismay once summarized as “to keep the Soviet Union out, the Americans in, and the Germans down.”\textsuperscript{176}

\textsuperscript{175} “Europe Only in Solidarity,” Die Linke, 2019, \url{https://www.die-linke.de/themen/europa/}.
US dominance of the Alliance has only increased over the years. As the *New York Times* Editorial Board explains, NATO “remains the most successful military alliance in history, the anchor of an American-led and American financed peace that fostered Western prosperity and prevented new world wars.”177

The United States emerged as a global superpower after World War II: a victorious nation in possession of a booming economy and strong military, complemented by a shift away from isolationism and unilateralism influenced partially by pivotal events like the coup in Czechoslovakia and the Berlin blockade. Given the circumstances, it was only natural that the United States was a founding member of NATO, which began as a way to counter the Soviet threat (and entrench US dominance) during the Cold War and eventually became a pillar of the liberal international order linking Washington and Europe in their commitments to mutual defense and liberal democracy.

The US security guarantee (especially the nuclear umbrella) allowed many NATO members to improve their economies and develop their democracies without fear. During the Cold War, the balance of power enabled by the alliance system allowed Washington to keep the peace from afar, while maintaining its sphere of influence and preventing nuclear proliferation in the West. Once the Soviet Union collapsed, the United States began to use NATO as a way of maintaining US primacy.178 Alliances such as NATO greatly reduce the military and political costs of power projection; since the mid-20th century, US treaty allies have participated in all major wars the United States has fought, even though there are no legal requirements for them to

177 Ibid.
178 Rapp-Hooper, “Saving America’s Alliances.”
They have also supported many of Washington’s foreign policy goals, thereby acting as political and military multipliers of US influence.

US membership has significantly impacted NATO and continues to do so in a number of ways. The United States contributes 22% of the NATO budget and Washington accounts for close to 70% of total defense spending by NATO members. Moreover, US membership has allowed Washington to station forces and nuclear weapons around Europe, facilitating easier access to other strategically significant locations like the Middle East and Africa. The military power provided by the United States helps make NATO an effective deterrent: many scholars and politicians posit that if the Baltic countries were not protected by NATO (ergo the United States) Russia would engage in gray-zone warfare tactics. The nuclear umbrella has additionally prevented countries from developing their own nuclear weapons, thereby decreasing the risks associated with nuclear proliferation. What’s more, the United States is the only country for which Article 5 was invoked—for almost two decades, NATO has been supporting the United States in Afghanistan, making the operation NATO’s largest, most expensive, and longest-running one to date. Close to a third of the fatalities suffered by coalition forces in the country have been from non-US NATO members and partners. Though the relationship between the United States and NATO has had its peaks and troughs, it is undeniable that the two actors are closely linked.

Ibid.

Ibid.


Ibid.


Ibid.

Daalder, “Responding to Russia’s Resurgence.”


Given the intertwined nature of NATO and the United States, it is understandable that the pro-US means pro-NATO hypothesis is valid: populist parties that support close ties with the United States and have a favorable outlook on US leadership and policy in general support NATO membership due to the major role the United States plays in the Alliance, and conversely.

Populist parties in the former group stress the advantages of transatlantic cooperation in terms of security, but also in terms of democracy, trade, and foreign policy. As such, they see NATO as a way of strengthening links with the United States and working towards shared goals. The League’s platform advocates for a “special and privileged relationship” with the United States, noting that “numerous policies of the current US administration (such as defense against Islamic extremism and aggressive Chinese political-commercial penetration) are in full harmony with the League’s program and Italian national interests.” Furthermore, parties emphasize that US membership makes NATO a credible deterrent. As TS-LKD explains, “Of paramount importance is the continued presence of US and other Allied troops in the Baltic States and Poland, as well as the integrated operational leadership of the Alliance. The direct military involvement of the United States in Central and Eastern Europe in securing collective defense in the region is an exceptional deterrent to potential aggression.”

The anti-American camp argues that the United States is an unreliable ally (especially under Trump’s leadership) and that transatlantic ties too often become a liability, making NATO members—and Europe writ large—not only complicit in problematic US policies (intervention in Middle Eastern conflicts is the most frequently used example) but also overdependent on

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Washington. This stance is justifiable: between the end of the Cold War and the annexation of Crimea, the United States gradually disengaged from Europe and put other priorities above those of the continent. Controversial pre-Trump actions included the decision to invade Iraq, the pivot to Asia, the “reset” with Russia, and the cancellation of plans to build a missile system in Poland. The Trump administration has exacerbated transatlantic tensions by withdrawing from the Iran Deal, withdrawing from Syria without sufficient input from the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, imposing tariffs on numerous European products, and calling NATO “obsolete” in addition to questioning the US commitment to mutual defense. Populist parties that dislike the United States see NATO as an alliance that furthers detrimental US interests at the expense of national ones and believe that leaving the Alliance would finally free their country of unreliable and unnecessary transatlantic commitments. This sentiment is captured perfectly by SPD, which argues that NATO membership has turned the Czech army into “a small, irrelevant expeditionary force of the US army… the Czech flag gives [US events] the hallmark of an international alliance. But the real result of this cooperation is that the Czech Republic has been included in the list of hostile states” and ties with the United States “are primarily, economically, militarily and politically beneficial to the US.” Similarly, the People's Party – Our Slovakia platform declares, “NATO does not serve to defend its members, but to promote the interests of the United States… We do not want Slovakia to be an accomplice in American war crimes and a toy in the hands of world powers.” In short, a populist party’s view of the United States is highly correlated with its stance on NATO membership.

190 Ibid.
191 Ibid.
Russia

Russia and NATO

It is often argued that Moscow and NATO are locked in a zero-sum security dilemma: when one undertakes an action to improve its security, the other perceives it as happening at the expense of its own security, even if the action was actually a defensive measure.\textsuperscript{194} Russia has also long opposed Euro-Atlantic integration, seeing a means of regime change and the West’s way of furthering its own strategic objectives against Russian interests.\textsuperscript{195} The Kremlin has taken many measures to deter NATO enlargement including going to war against Ukraine and Georgia, attempting to overthrow the Montenegrin government before its referendum on NATO accession, and promoting opposition to the Prespa Agreement which was a prerequisite for Macedonia’s Euro-Atlantic integration.\textsuperscript{196}

As Richard Sokolsky explains, “From the West’s perspective, Russia is a revisionist, neoimperialist, and expansionist power determined to overturn the post-Cold War European security order, destroy NATO’s cohesion, and restore its sphere of influence throughout the former Soviet Union.”\textsuperscript{197} These sentiments are still shared by many countries in Central and Eastern Europe that originally saw NATO accession as a way of joining “the West” and staying safe from Russian resurgence. During a 1993 meeting Czech President Vaclav Havel urged US President Bill Clinton to support NATO enlargement as a way of keeping these candidate countries from “living in a vacuum” and exclaimed, “We see ourselves as Europeans who

\textsuperscript{195} Diesen and Sakwa, \textit{EU and NATO Relations with Russia}, xviii.  
\textsuperscript{197} Sokolsky, “Not Quiet on NATO’s Eastern Front.”
embrace European values.” In the same meeting, Polish President Lech Walesa stressed, “We are all afraid of Russia… If Russia again adopts an aggressive foreign policy, that aggression will be directed toward Ukraine and Poland.” Russia has only grown more powerful since then.

Today, Russia is a nuclear superpower with a defense industry that has many eager customers (as demonstrated by the controversy surrounding India and Turkey’s purchases of the S-400 missile system) and an effective modernized military (put on display during its interventions in Georgia, Ukraine, and Syria), all of which have contributed to making Russia the country with the third highest defense spending in the world. The Kremlin has made it clear that it is not afraid to use force, both in the conventional military sense and in nontraditional ways like cyberwarfare and political interference. NATO has proven to be an important deterrent to the former, as Russia has never gone to war against a member of the Alliance. Unfortunately, that has not kept it from engaging in nonmilitary attacks, such as the 2007 cyberattacks targeting government institutions, political parties, news organizations, and banks in Estonia.

Putin’s Populists

The Kremlin supports numerous right-wing populist parties in Europe with the intention of sowing discord in the West so that it cannot be united and pose a credible threat to Russian interests (e.g. gaining more influence over post-Soviet states). The illiberal tendencies of populists and the resulting democratic backsliding has also created opportunities for Russia to

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199 Ibid.
200 Daalder, “Responding to Russia’s Resurgence.”
insert its influence, especially due to the normalization of corrupt practices and undemocratic values.

The incentives for Russia to support the wave of populism in the West is clear. What about those on the receiving end? Why would populists welcome Russian backing? Part of the answer is inherent to populism: taking Putin’s side in Europe, where most mainstream parties denounce Russia’s actions and support tough responses like sanctions and the provision of military support to countries under threat, is an effective way for populists to demonstrate their commitment to anti-elite politics. Furthermore, Russia offers a source of approval and reinforcement when these parties are reprimanded for their denouncements of anti-Russia policies and their association with the “illiberal international.” There are also some ideological similarities between the Kremlin and right-wing European populist parties: both tend to blame challenges stemming from the Middle East (the refugee crisis, terrorism) on Western foreign policy mistakes, both take issue with international integration and espouse pro-sovereignty views, and both disapprove of the spread of secularism and progressivism.

Support from Russia takes many forms: the League and the FPÖ have signed cooperation agreements with Putin’s United Russia party, RN has taken loans worth millions of euros from banks that have connections to the Kremlin, Russian businessmen have invested in the Greek media to bolster outlets supporting Syriza, and many parties have developed close relations

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205 Brownstein, “Putin and the Populists.”
206 Adrienne Klasa et al., “Russia’s Long Arm Reaches to the Right in Europe,” May 23, 2019, [https://www.ft.com/content/48c4bfa6-7ca2-11e9-81d2-f785092ab560](https://www.ft.com/content/48c4bfa6-7ca2-11e9-81d2-f785092ab560).
207 Ibid.
208 Bowyer, “Countering Russian Influence in Europe and Eurasia.”
with right-wing Russian elites such as Aleksandr Dugin and Konstantin Malofeev.\textsuperscript{209} This backing is paying off. Supporters of right-wing populist parties are more likely than those of mainstream parties to support Putin’s leadership and to want stronger economic ties with Russia.\textsuperscript{210} What’s more, many populist parties have promoted Russian interests by arguing that the annexation of Crimea was justified, that NATO activities should be scaled down, and that sanctions against Russia should be lifted.\textsuperscript{211}

\textit{Russia: Friend or Foe?}

Given all of the above, it is sensible to expect that the hypothesis about populist parties that are pro-Russia opposing NATO membership and vice versa would stand. That is the case for some parties (53\% of them, to be specific): parties including KSČM, RN, and The Left believe that NATO harms regional security and stability by stroking Russian aggression, calling instead for a system that includes Russia and facilitates Eurasian economic and social cooperation. On the other hand, numerous parties (62\%) see Russia as a major threat to their security and therefore support NATO as a necessary deterrent. As TS-LKD explains, “It is our belief that the strengthening of the European military power of NATO, which is mostly comprised of European states, and the transatlantic relationship with the USA for the purpose of deterring Russian aggression and ensuring the safety of Europe is no less important now than it was in the period of the Cold War.”\textsuperscript{212}

\footnotesize

\textsuperscript{209} Weiss, “With Friends Like These: The Kremlin’s Far-Right and Populist Connections in Italy and Austria,” 7.


\textsuperscript{211} Klasa et al., “Russia’s Long Arm Reaches to the Right in Europe.”

\textsuperscript{212} “The Homeland Union-Lithuanian Christian Democrats Declaration: We Believe in Europe,” 4.
Interestingly, however, the inverse relationship between attitudes towards Russia and NATO membership does not hold for most parties, thereby invalidating the hypothesis that if a populist party supports close ties with Russia and views Russia positively, it will oppose NATO membership due to the antagonistic relationship between NATO and Russia, and conversely.

42% of EU populist parties support closer ties with Russia while simultaneously supporting NATO membership. This stance is rooted in their desire for a pragmatic peace: these parties do not want to antagonize Russia, a proximate military power that is not afraid to use force, but also want to keep NATO’s Article 5 guarantee, and maintain transatlantic security and political cooperation.213 Furthermore, many populists believe that their nation benefits from good relations with Russia in the realms of security, economy, culture, and energy. As SNS Chairman Andrej Danko once explained, “Our nations are very close to each other—culture and language. In addition, Russia is one of Slovakia's most important trading and investment partners outside the EU” which makes the extent of “energy, trade, investment, tourism and joint projects with regions of the Russian Federation” very important.214 What’s more, the pro-Russia anti-NATO hypothesis does not even hold when only right-wing populist parties, which tend to have closer links to the Kremlin than their left-wing counterparts, are considered: 53% of right-wing pro-Russia parties oppose NATO membership, 40% support it, and 7% are indeterminate.

The influence Russia has over the parties it has ties to is quite limited: these parties talk the talk, but rarely walk the walk. While leaders of pro-Russia populist parties may speak in favor of warmer relations with Russia and support some of the Kremlin’s most controversial actions,


they do not behave in a manner that breaks EU consensus on Russia-related issues. The League is a useful case study here. Its leader and then Deputy Prime Minister Matteo Salvini publicly threatened to veto the rollover of Russia sanctions in 2018 but did not act on his threat, leading many to conclude that the remark intended to energize his supporters (many of whom were harmed by the drop in Russian exports) without seriously jeopardizing Italy’s alliances.\(^{215}\) That being said, it is also not the Kremlin’s expectation that parties it has links to do a complete 180 on their policies. As Putin himself said in response to a question about the possibility of Italy relaxing sanctions, “Do we expect any restrictions to be relaxed? No…because Italy is a disciplined participant and a member of the European Community, a disciplined member of NATO. No changes are foreseen here that would lead to Italy independently making decisions that run counter to today's mainstream trends...in the Western community...the world today is not ready for such a level of sovereignty.”\(^{216}\) The pragmatic approach embraced by the League is also evident in its platform, which states that “The détente and openness to collaboration with the Russians should not be seen as an alternative or accomplished at the expense of the relationship with the United States of America, which remains Italy's reference ally.”\(^{217}\)

The final group of parties worth discussing are the 29% that disapprove of both NATO and Russia. These are primarily left-wing parties that associate both with destructive militarism, aggressive expansionism, and human rights abuses. For example, the Socialist Party in Ireland paints NATO as an interventionist and imperialist organization that threatens regional peace; at the same time, it denounces Russian aggression and considers Putin a nationalist authoritarian

\(^{215}\) Weiss, “With Friends Like These: The Kremlin’s Far-Right and Populist Connections in Italy and Austria,” 11.
\(^{217}\) “2018 Election Government Program.”
who does not care about the Russian people.\textsuperscript{218} In sum, we can conclude that pro-Russia does not necessarily mean anti-NATO, and vice versa.

**Conclusion**

There is a lot of variation when it comes to the topic of EU populist parties’ foreign policies, at least with regard to international institutions and alliances that are related to NATO. It is evident that there is no single “populist foreign policy,” though it is useful to note that most parties are Euroskeptic and oppose EU membership. These differences among populist party stances can be used to classify foreign policies of populists with regard to Euro-Atlantic matters. This chapter has primarily focused on the relationship between populist parties’ stances on NATO membership and those on the EU, the United States, and Russia. It sought to analyze the explanatory power these positions have regarding parties’ attitudes towards NATO. The stances that best account for or parallel populist parties’ stances towards NATO membership are summarized in the table below.

*Table 6. Relationship between EU Populist Parties’ Various Foreign Policy Stances and NATO Membership*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Likely to Support NATO Membership</th>
<th>Likely to Oppose NATO Membership</th>
<th>Inconsequential</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Not Euroskeptic</td>
<td>• Negative view of the United States</td>
<td>• Euroskeptic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Positive view of the United States</td>
<td>• Against EU membership</td>
<td>• For EU membership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• View of Russia</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chapter VII: Conclusion

For the past few years, increasingly powerful and vocal populist parties across Europe have been dismantling the core tenets of the Western postwar order, such as liberal democracy, multiculturalism, and internationalism. Academics, politicians, and journalists across the world have been ringing alarm bells in response, warning us that the values and institutions we too often take for granted are in grave danger.

The EU has become the main foe of anti-institutional Euroskeptic populists. Especially in the aftermath of Brexit—an extreme example of populist agenda-setting—there has been a surge in the literature about clashes between populists and the Union. However, the emphasis on the EU has left out another pillar of multilateralism: NATO. Though one is a transatlantic consensus-based military-political alliance while the other is a supranational European organization with more competences, the Alliance and the Union still have many commonalities. Numerically, they share 22 members (26 including PfP countries). Politically, they work in tandem to promote democratization as a prerequisite for continental peace and prosperity, and both organizations continually emphasize the importance of compromise and collaboration in harnessing the benefits and combating the evils of globalization. It is therefore surprising that few have examined the relationship between populism and NATO or questioned whether the Alliance is under threat by the rising tide of anti-institutional populism that has become a formidable opponent of the Union. What makes this dearth of research even more surprising is the unintuitive observation that there is not widespread populist opposition to NATO membership, which runs counter to the assumption that populists despise elite-run institutions that constrain national sovereignty and therefore, the will of “the people.”
This is a timely topic, as it comes on the heels of NATO’s 70th anniversary. As the Alliance enters a period of self-reflection and celebrates its transformation from a Cold War deterrent to a modern transatlantic anchor of democracy and security, it must grapple with emerging political and military challenges both within and beyond its borders. Populism is one such challenge that cannot, and should not, be ignored.

The Question

Responding to the lack of literature on populism and NATO, this thesis sought to answer the following question: what are the attitudes of EU populist parties towards NATO membership and why? I strived to understand which factors explain the variability of populist party stances on NATO membership and what this variation reveals about the diversity of populist worldviews.

I examined the programs of 43 EU populist parties with a discernible stance on NATO membership. I prioritized party platforms because I was curious about populist stances and ideologies rather than their policies once in power, which are subject to various constraints and do not always clearly reflect how populists perceive the world around them. I tested two sets of hypotheses to see which factors best account for populist parties’ decisions to support or oppose NATO membership, and in doing so, provide insights into patterns in populist foreign policy stances. It is worth emphasizing that a party can be influenced by any and all of the factors that I examined; my intention was to understand which of these factors were most prominent and why.

The Results

Domestic Party Competition

My first set of hypotheses asked how different forms of domestic party competition affect populist parties’ stances on NATO membership, given the crucial role competition plays in
democratic party systems. I found that domestic explanations did not sufficiently explain the variability in populist stances on NATO membership.

With the exception of a few pacifist radical left-wing parties, a populist party’s left-right orientation did not determine its stance on NATO membership, thereby refuting my hypothesis that right-wing parties would support NATO membership while left-wing ones would oppose it as a result of their diverging opinions on military affairs. This is likely a result of the diversity of attitudes on military affairs that exist on both sides of the political spectrum, which are not captured by a simple dichotomous left-right classification. It may also be an indication that other factors are more influential in shaping populists’ stances on NATO membership. I then moved onto examining the relationship between populists and the mainstream parties (i.e. the political elite) they so often demonize.

One of the main reasons people support populists is because they have lost faith in mainstream parties as a result of the decline of their representative function due to elite capture, party convergence, and internal divisions. Opportunistic populists have won votes by differentiating themselves from mainstream parties by articulating unorthodox policy ideas and airing grievances mainstream parties have long refused to engage with. However, NATO membership does not seem to be a major differentiating factor between populists and the political mainstream, thereby nullifying my “protest party” hypothesis. There is an elite consensus (i.e. mainstream party agreement) surrounding NATO membership in all countries except Finland and Sweden. Interestingly, only 16 out of 41 populist parties in countries with an elite consensus took a stance *contrary* to that of mainstream parties. Although the protest party hypothesis failed to express variation across the board, it is important to note that these 16 parties did fit the bill of protest parties: their rhetoric on NATO membership depicted the decision to join NATO as an opaque one made by inconsiderate and traitorous politicians with no regard for the people’s
wishes. What about the other 27 parties? These parties may not go against the elite consensus due to a variety of reasons, including public opinion (e.g. NATO membership is not a salient issue, or it is a valence issue) and other, more important commitments (e.g. the desire to deter Russian aggression trumps the desire to set the party apart from its mainstream opponents).

I then turned to the other extreme: populist-mainstream agreement. More specifically, I analyzed whether populists and mainstream parties engage in valence competition regarding NATO membership in the 11 countries where NATO membership is a valence issue (i.e. countries where greater than two-thirds of the electorate would vote to stay in the Alliance in a referendum). The valence competition hypothesis did not fare much better than the protest party hypothesis, as I found that although the 16 populist parties in EU Member States where NATO membership is a valence issue agree with their mainstream counterparts, none of them are more invested in membership than mainstream parties. Populists either displayed comparable levels of commitment to the Alliance as their mainstream counterparts (similar levels of appreciation, similar proposals such as increasing defense spending) or were less enthused about the topic (pushing for fewer deployments, less national involvement etc). These findings may be explained by issue salience (i.e. the public may not care about how much a party supports NATO) and policy constraints (e.g. there is nothing populists can suggest that mainstream parties have not already proposed).

In assessing the domestic hypotheses, I also examined the principal reasons populist parties support and oppose NATO membership. Those in the former group believe that the Alliance strengthens national security, bolsters national credibility and influence on the international stage, and anchors the country in a group of European and North American states with similar values and foreign policy orientations. Parties that are against membership see the Alliance as breaching national sovereignty, going against national interests by eroding domestic
control over defense and foreign policy matters, and disabling pragmatic policymaking. They also posit that NATO violates international laws and imposes unjust monetary costs on its members. The reasons for opposition in the case of populist parties in non-members (Austria, Ireland, Finland, and Sweden) are similar, though they mainly center on the continued commitment to the long-standing principle of neutrality/non-alignment.

There were three significant instances of populist divisions, where populist parties in the same country are divided on NATO membership. An analysis of divisions among populists in Bulgaria, Germany, and Slovenia led me to the conclusion that when two populist parties in the same country disagree about NATO membership, this divergence can be understood in the context of their differing worldviews that result in fundamental differences in terms of foreign and security policy priorities, which their stance on NATO membership is a manifestation of.

International Explanations

Some scholars have argued that populists share not just their Manichean people-versus-elite worldview, but also certain foreign policy stances. However, there is not much consensus on what these traits are and which populists they apply to, especially since most of the literature on populism in Europe is focused on right-wing parties and their aversion to the EU. The international set of hypotheses thus sought to understand the relationship between NATO membership and populist parties’ positions on other international alliances and institutions.

It is important to highlight that EU populist parties do not have identical stances on many important NATO-related foreign policy issues identified by the literature. Though a clear majority are Euroskeptic and oppose EU membership, they remain divided on NATO membership, and relations with Russia and the United States. These differences contribute to laying the foundation for possible populist foreign policy typologies, at least in the Euro-Atlantic
affairs realm. For instance, populist parties in each group can be examined individually, such as asking what pro-US populists have in common and how their Washington friendly orientation has affected their other issue positions.

I then moved onto the explanatory power of these stances with regard to NATO membership. I found that populist parties that are not Euroskeptic support NATO membership due to the benefits of Euro-Atlantic integration and the similarities between the EU and NATO. Attitudes about the United States also mirror those about NATO, which makes sense given the close links between Washington and the Alliance in terms of history, spending, and influence. Pro-US pro-NATO populists see the United States as a valuable part of the Alliance, furthering NATO’s mission of deterrence and the protection of important liberal values. Anti-US, anti-NATO parties see the United States as a neocolonialist, reckless and unreliable hegemon that uses NATO to further its own aims at the expense of the interests of other members. A populist party’s stance on EU membership has some explanatory power: parties that want to leave the EU generally want to leave NATO as well, given the similarities between the two institutions and general concerns about sovereignty. However, there is no clear trend among parties that want to stay in the EU.

Euroskepticism and attitudes towards Russia do not have much explanatory power. The former lacks explanatory power because it is a broad bucket, ranging from calling for fewer EU competences to completely abandoning the project of European integration. Thus, Euroskepticism is not a useful proxy for anti-EU membership or anti-institutionalism in general, as it does not capture the degree of a party’s hostility to these matters. The failure of the Russia hypothesis is perhaps the most surprising, given Russia’s antagonistic relationship with NATO and the close links between Moscow and European populists. The lack of explanatory power may be due to parties’ desire for a pragmatic peace (maintaining good relations with Russia while also
relying on NATO’s protective capabilities), left-wing ideologies that oppose both Russian authoritarianism and NATO’s militarism, and the limited impact of Russian support on party policies.

Implications

There are numerous implications of these findings, both in terms of the theoretical understanding of populism and the future of geopolitics. First, my results have affirmed that populism is not a homogenous category, at least in the realm of foreign policy. Populist parties across the EU do not share a single clear-cut conceptualization of international affairs, especially with regard to NATO-related issues. There is one extreme of parties that are all for Euro-Atlantic integration and another of parties that are determined to reclaim their sovereignty, and distance themselves from the West and its institutions at all costs. There are also dozens of parties that fall somewhere in between these groups. Furthermore, there is more to populism than anti-elite attitudes: domestic competition does a surprisingly poor job of accounting for the variability in populist stances on NATO membership, likely because populists do not design their programs with the sole purpose of differentiating themselves from the mainstream parties they love to hate.

Second, we can take some comfort in knowing that NATO is not threatened by populism to the extent that the EU is, though there is a significant overlap of anti-EU and anti-NATO membership parties. It is also worth noting the importance of transatlantic relations in anchoring some populist parties in the pro-NATO camp, given that attitudes towards the US are an important determinant of those towards NATO membership. Every time Washington seriously strains its economic, military, and political relations with its allies across the Atlantic Ocean, it is putting NATO in jeopardy. Interestingly, the same cannot be said for Moscow, given the more puzzling relationship between attitudes towards Russia and NATO membership.
Third, we can sketch out possible impacts of populist parties’ opposition to NATO. Chapter III took a stab at this from a more theoretical perspective, since there is no systematic analysis of populist foreign policy accomplishments across Europe. While it is undeniable that all parties face constraints in office (balancing promissory and anticipatory agendas, veto powers, and public opinion to name a few) the literature is divided on the extent to which populists face additional constraints, since they generally tend to be less-experienced junior coalition partners and need to navigate their insider/outsider status. In other words, no one is entirely sure how big the gap between rhetoric and reality is in the case of populist parties, though there is agreement that populists are effective at making a difference on their “core issues.” It might not even matter if populists ever come to power or enter into coalitions, since their policies may become amplified or legitimized by other parties who co-opt or ostracize populist positions. In essence, it appears that if populists decide to make NATO membership their hill to die on, they will likely have an impact. This also true for other issues that may have a knock-on effect; if a populist party committed to disengaging from Europe in favor of an alliance with Russia or China comes to power, NATO membership may be a related casualty even if it is not the party’s main call to action. This is worrying, since populists’ contemporary core issues—refugees, Islamic radicalization, leaving the EU—are becoming less salient and as such, these parties will soon be forced to pick new calls to action to stay relevant.

Onwards and Upwards

Limitations and Next Steps

As with any study, this thesis contains limitations and ideas worth examining further. One of the main limitations that does not have an easy solution is the number of populist parties. Although 43 parties may sound like a lot as it accounts for the entirety of populist parties with a
discernible stance on NATO membership across the EU, it is not a number that yields itself to robust quantitative analysis, especially given some of the shortcomings in the data (e.g. not all parties have identifiable stances regarding the United States). As a result, my methodology steered towards more qualitative and deductive analysis.

Although they are generally the clearest and most direct way of understanding a party’s ideology and policy stances, party platforms also have their own limitations. It is difficult to determine how much effort and thought a party puts into creating its program, how many voters actually read it, how often it is updated, and whether it reflects the party’s true intentions. As such, it would be interesting to assess populist attitudes towards NATO or foreign policy writ large using other measures, such as party leaders’ speeches or the policies they push for once in office.

Perhaps the most important next step is to undertake a more comprehensive analysis of populist foreign policy stances and make connections between them to create a more holistic, overarching understanding of populist worldviews. For instance, it would be interesting to see if pro-Russia parties are anti-US and anti-EU, what that reveals about populist alliance politics, and how these stances are influenced by other variables like geography, public opinion, history, economics, and so on. This approach could result in the creation of broader categories of populist parties based on their interactions with the international sphere (e.g. anti-West parties, sovereigntist parties, pragmatic parties).

*Alternative Explanations*

There are four other factors that may influence a party’s position on NATO membership that merit further analysis (Appendix B). The first is military strength: do populists in countries with relatively powerful militaries oppose NATO membership because their national capabilities
are strong enough without NATO support? A cursory glance at the numbers reveals that there is *not* a significant difference between the average military strength of countries pro-NATO populist parties belong to and those that anti-NATO populist parties belong to. I quantified a country’s military strength using the Global Firepower PowerIndex score, which takes into account a nation’s manpower, equipment, resources, finances, and geography to determine its military power, with zero representing the “best” possible score.²¹⁹ Pro-NATO populist parties are found in countries that are weaker based on mean but stronger based on median military power. A two-tailed t-test comparison of the two groups’ mean military power yielded a p-value of 0.8686, which is not significant at p < 0.05. While means, medians, and t-tests have their own limitations, it is still curious that a nation’s military strength may not be an important determinant of a populist party’s support or opposition to NATO membership.

The second factor worth considering is proximity to Russia. It can be hypothesized that parties in countries closer to Russia may feel more endangered by Russian resurgence and thus rely on NATO as a potent deterrent. I recorded the distance between national capitals and Moscow (crow flies, rounded to the nearest kilometer) for each country and found that populist parties that support NATO membership tend to be in countries closer to Russia in terms of mean and median distance, though not by much compared to the anti-NATO camp. A t-test of the mean capital-to-capital distance of countries of pro-NATO populists and those of anti-NATO populists yields an insignificant p-value of 0.2995. Once again, this is an unintuitive finding worth investigating.

The third potential research topic is public opinion beyond valence competition. Are populists in countries where a simple majority of the electorate would vote to remain in NATO in a referendum more likely to support membership? The public opinion data gathered in NATO member countries suggests that the answer is maybe (Fig. 3). After public support for membership crosses the 70% mark, there are clearly more populist parties that support it, while populists lean both ways on membership when public support for it is in the 50-70% range.

The fourth and final potential consideration is attitudes towards international organizations (IOs) outside of the EU, such as the United Nations and the International Monetary Fund. It is reasonable to predict that if a populist party supports membership and participation of IOs such as these, it is likely to support NATO membership due to the perceived benefits of liberal institutionalism, and conversely. A quick analysis of populists’ stances on IOs lends credence to this hypothesis: 81% of 21 pro-IO parties support NATO membership while 14% of them oppose it, and 100% of the 7 anti-IO parties oppose NATO membership. That being said, I was unable to determine the IO-related stances of almost a dozen parties and it is difficult to identify a party’s stance on IOs as a whole, and then draw parallels between those organizations and NATO.

Democracy, Development, and the Rule of Law

Populist parties are gaining momentum because considerable segments of the public are losing faith in the liberal international order and the principles it is grounded in, which NATO

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embodies. The transatlantic commitment to democracy, pluralism, the rule of law, and multilateralism has successfully prevented the return of the undemocratic, intolerant and dangerous nationalism that embroiled Europe in conflict for centuries; however, the preservation of this democratic peace is being jeopardized by the rise of the populist “illiberal international.” It is certainly concerning that almost half of populist parties across the EU are in favor of leaving (or staying out of) NATO, though one can also take a “glass half full” approach and be grateful that a slim majority still support membership. Regardless of the way one looks at the glass, however, it is evident that institutions that are the mainstays of Euro-Atlantic peace and collaboration are facing an uphill battle.

_Peace at Home, Peace in the World_

Although the primary focus of this thesis has been populist foreign policy, one cannot ignore the relationship between the domestic sphere and the international one, especially the way in which the domestic state of democracy, development, and the rule of law affects the world beyond national borders. As explained in the earlier chapters, populism is not inherently undemocratic. That being said, populism often _leads to_ democratic backsliding because of three principal incompatibilities between liberal democracy and populism. First, populist parties adopt an exclusionary definition of the people, which usually comes at the expense of minority groups (e.g. ethnic, religious, economic minorities) and results in the erosion of minority rights. Second, populists weaken formal institutions of democracy such as courts and regulatory agencies, painting them as bodies that further the interests of the elite and constrain the implementation of the volonté generale. Third, populists tarnish informal norms of democracy

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like transparency and accountability, frequently depicting opposition parties illegitimate and limiting the rights and freedoms of critical media outlets.

More broadly, populism is about sowing division and erecting walls: the people versus the elites, the true citizens versus the unwelcome minorities, domestic politics versus international politics, allies versus enemies. The authoritarian tendencies of populists and the popularization of their Manichean worldview is troublesome because major transnational threats, including democratic backsliding, can best be countered through unity. NATO’s actions are most successful and legitimate when there is political cohesion and a collective commitment to liberal democratic principles, as exemplified by its interventions in the Balkans, which were not driven by Article 5 or a UN mandate, but rather, a commitment to human rights.\textsuperscript{222} Internal divisions are dangerous, and they bleed into the international realm. As Benjamin Haddad and Alina Polyakova explain, “The more internally divided Europe is, the more it will find itself at the mercy of...opportunistic great powers. This is a recipe for a Europe once again roiled by nationalism...a transatlantic alliance in which Europe has little influence and the United States lacks a strong partner.”\textsuperscript{223} Moreover, NATO’s transformative leverage is contingent on its democratic credentials: it cannot convincingly require aspiring members to have “a functioning democratic political system based on a market economy; fair treatment of minority populations; a commitment to resolve conflicts peacefully;...and a commitment to democratic civil-military relations and institutions” if current members do not meet that same criteria.\textsuperscript{224} In short, divisions and democratic backsliding within national borders rarely stay contained to the domestic realm.

\textsuperscript{222} Wallander, “NATO’s Enemies Within.”
\textsuperscript{223} Polyakova and Haddad, “Europe Alone.”
Even if we completely ignore populist actions in the realm of international affairs, populist victory in domestic politics can result in a NATO that can no longer credibly promote its founding values or undertake impactful operations motivated by them.

The Perils of Populism

Article 2 of the North Atlantic Treaty affirms that NATO is more than a military alliance, declaring that “The Parties will contribute toward the further development of peaceful and friendly international relations by strengthening their free institutions, by bringing about a better understanding of the principles upon which these institutions are founded, and by promoting conditions of stability and well-being. They will seek to eliminate conflict in their international economic policies and will encourage economic collaboration between any or all of them.”

There is a reason that this clause is known as the “Canadian Article”: it was included in the Treaty as a result of the tireless lobbying of then Secretary of State for External Affairs (and later Prime Minister) Lester B. Pearson and the rest of the Canadian delegation, who believed that NATO should represent a commitment to political and economic cooperation anchored in democratic principles.

In his memoir, Pearson reflects on his time as the Secretary of State of External Affairs and recalls, “I knew that peace was a policy as well as a prayer. I knew also that, even if politics was the art of the possible, the political arts could and should be practised without the loss of vision or idealism.”

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Perhaps we are in the midst of a populist zeitgeist because publics and parties across Europe have lost the vision and idealism that were instrumental to the triumph of liberal democracy over its challengers. We must restore our confidence in the values that have underpinned peace and progress for over half a century, and fight division with union.
Appendix A

Table 7. Additional Factors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Military Strength</th>
<th>Capital Distance to Moscow (Crow flies, km)</th>
<th>Stance on International Organizations</th>
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## Appendix B

*Table 8. Mainstream Party Stances*

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