

Hungary's Populist Government and the Contestation of EU Foreign Policy Co-Operation at the United Nations: Dogs That Bark Do Not Bite?

CARLA MONTELEONE,¹ PATRICK MÜLLER²  and TATIANA COUTTO³

¹Department of Political Sciences and International Relations, University of Palermo, Palermo ²University of Vienna, Vienna ³Vienna School for International Studies, Vienna

Abstract

This article provides an analysis of Hungary's role in EU foreign policy co-operation at the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) in the period from its accession to the EU in 2004 till 2021, which involved the shift from mainstream parties to successive governments led by the populist radical right (PRR) Fidesz party. Shifting attention to norm contestation in EU foreign policy co-operation, it examines the extent to which Hungary's PRR government has contested or adapted to the EU's culture of co-operation in its UNGA voting behaviour. Our empirical analysis compares Hungary's voting record at the UNGA under the PRR government that gained power in 2010 to both previous mainstream governments in Hungary and mainstream governments in other EU member states. The article shows that populist contestation dynamics at the level of foreign policy behaviour are more limited than often assumed, whilst also pointing to the robustness of key procedural Common Foreign and Security Policy norms.

Keywords: contestation; EU cohesion; EU foreign policy; populism; UNGA

Introduction

The ascent of populist parties to power in countries like Hungary and Poland has been identified as a key challenge to the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) (Balfour et al., 2016; Chaudhury, 2020). Populist governments have been considered as drivers of a growing politicisation and contestation of substantive EU foreign policy norms and positions, such as human rights, the rule of law and support for multilateral institutions (e.g., Biedenkopf et al., 2021; Cadier and Lequesne, 2020; Jenne, 2021). Often, claims about the populist challenge to co-operation in the EU – and in other international institutions – have been based on their ideological positions as expressed in their foreign policy speeches, party manifestos or election programmes (Balfour et al., 2016; Henke and Maher, 2021; Koch, 2021; Söderbaum et al., 2021). This places the focus on the discursive dimension of contestation, rather than on 'behavioural contestation' (Shannon, 2000; Stimmer and Wisken, 2019, p. 516) that is concerned with foreign policy actions. The relatively few works that have actually engaged with the populist contestation of foreign policy actions have often focused on a small number of issues that are often highly politicized, such as (external) migration governance (e.g., Badell, 2020; Rivera Escartin, 2020). This raises the question how representative such high-profile cases of populist contestation are for the larger universe of foreign policy issues addressed in the CFSP framework.

Addressing this research gap, this article explores the role of Hungary's populist government in EU foreign policy-making at the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA).

Dealing with a broad range of international issues, including threats to peace and security, development, human rights, migration and the environment, the UNGA constitutes an important setting for EU foreign policy co-operation (Smith, 2010, p. 224). Moreover, EU member states face expectations to contribute to the EU's unity at the UNGA and to adhere to common procedural CFSP norms of consensus-building, information sharing and the respect of established EU positions and substantive norms (Kissack, 2007). As such, the UNGA setting also allows us to generate valuable new insights about the extent to which populist governments in EU member states contest or adapt to core procedural norms underpinning CFSP's informal culture of co-operation in their foreign policy conduct. At the same time, Hungary's government led by the populist radical right (PRR) Fidesz party can be considered a particularly likely case for populist contestation of EU foreign policy co-operation (EURACTIV, 2021; Meunier and Vachudova, 2018). In 2010, Fidesz won a comfortable majority in Parliament that it defended in subsequent elections, placing it in a strong position to shape Hungarian foreign policy for more than a decade. Moreover, the Fidesz-led government of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán soon gained a reputation for promoting an illiberal political agenda and for its verbal assaults launched against multilateral institutions and key EU foreign policy norms and positions (Müller and Gazsi, 2023).

Whilst much attention has been paid to the way populists in government erode formal liberal democratic institutions and rules, the focus on informal norms and practices shifts attention to a less visible, but central aspect of democratic governance. Informal norms and practices have been described as “soft guardrails of democracy” (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2019: 101) and as central for the EU's cohesion as an international actor (Costa et al., 2024). At the same time, informal norms and practices often originate from longstanding socialization processes that can span several decades, meaning that a damage to these norms and practices can also be particularly difficult to reverse. The article will proceed as follows. We first develop a novel conceptual framework to study the scope and degree of populist contestation and its impact on the robustness of key procedural CFSP norms, which involve ‘consensus-building’, ‘consistency’ and the ‘justification’ of defection from majority EU positions. In our subsequent empirical analysis, we provide a longitudinal analysis of Hungary's voting behaviour in the UNGA between 2004, when Hungary joined the EU, till 2021. This will allow us to compare the extent of Hungary's PRR government's support for EU foreign policy co-operation in the period 2010–2021 not only to that of mainstream governments in other EU member states but also to the record of previous mainstream governments in Hungary (2004–2010). Our analysis of Hungary's voting behaviour is based on a novel, author-generated dataset on UNGA voting that covers the period 2004–2021. Subsequently, we examine the impact of populist contestation on CFSP's culture of co-operation and its core procedural norms, building on insights gained from 15 semi-structured interviews conducted with representatives from EU member states and with officials from the EU's delegation in New York as well as with (former) Hungarian diplomats and government officials in Budapest.¹ The conclusion discusses our main findings and the way they speak to the research focus of this symposium.

¹The semi-structured interviews were conducted with representatives from EU member states and EU institutions in New York via Zoom and with Hungarian diplomats in Budapest in the period between October 2020 and June 2023.

I. Populism and EU Foreign Policy Co-Operation at the UN

During the past two decades, eight member states have had populist parties as head of government (38 cabinets in total) whilst 12 have had a populist party as a minor partner in a coalition for varying periods of time (Rooduijn et al., 2019; Döring et al., 2022). The presence of populist parties in government raises interesting questions about the way populists in government engage with EU foreign policy co-operation, which may range from a widespread contestation of EU foreign policy co-operation to a far-reaching adaptation to established CFSP positions and its culture of co-operation. Bridging between works on EU foreign policy co-operation and scholarship on the relationship between populism and foreign policy, we develop competing hypotheses to account for different modes of populist engagement with EU foreign policy co-operation. Moreover, we provide key indicators to assess the impact of populist contestation on the EU's culture of co-operation and the robustness of its underpinning procedural norms.

Populism and CFSP's Culture of Co-Operation: Foreign Policy Contestation or Adaptation?

Populist parties have been described as 'political parties for which populism represents a core ideological concept' (Mudde, 2004, 2007; Zulianello and Larsen, 2021). From such an ideational perspective, populism constitutes a 'thin-centred ideology' that focuses on an antagonistic divide between the 'corrupt elite' and the 'virtuous people' (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017). The 'thin-centred' populist ideology can accommodate different political projects that serve as 'host ideology' (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 6), resulting in a variety of different ideological brands of populism (Koch, 2021). The 'host ideology' of PRR parties is generally provided by nationalist and nativist ideas. PRR parties are known for their 'illiberal' political agenda and their often critical attitude towards substantive EU foreign policy norms, such as human rights and good governance issues (Bilková, 2019; FMPRC, 2021). Although PRR parties often do not outright reject these fundamental EU values, they frequently disagree about their 'true' meaning and relative weight (Müller and Gazsi, 2023).

Placing strong emphasis on national sovereignty, PRR parties also tend to be critical of governance through supranational institutions, supranational rules and trans-governmental networks (Hettyey, 2021; Müller and Gazsi, 2023), which are often considered to undermine the ability of populist leaders to act on behalf of the will of the people (Posner, 2017, p. 797). This critical attitude towards governance beyond the nation state also produces important tensions with core procedural CFSP norms. As we argue in more detail below, effective EU foreign policy co-operation at the UNGA depends on the member states' voluntary commitment to CFSP's 'culture of cooperation', based on consensus-seeking, consistency and justification of defections from EU-majority positions (Juncos and Pomorska, 2021; Müller et al., 2021; Costa et al., 2024). Conformity with these norms has been facilitated by processes of elite socialization within CFSP institutions (Tonra, 2015, p. 187), which also have been observed in the context of EU foreign policy co-operation on UNGA voting (Chelotti et al., 2022). Populist parties joining governments in EU member states thus face a basic choice between emphasizing ideological 'principles' that are close to their ideological foreign policy profile and assuming a 'pragmatist' foreign policy posture

that is more in line with common EU foreign policy positions and interests. The former can be expected to lead to a growing contestation of core EU foreign policy norms and positions that are at odds with populist ideas and narrowly defined national interests, whereas the latter suggests a certain readiness to adapt to the EU's culture of co-operation.

Contestation relates to situations where populist actors indicate objection to, or breach established EU norms, practices and policy positions (Wiener, 2020). Contestation may be 'discursive' in nature, that is, when 'relevant political actors engage in discursive debates about different understandings of the meaning and/or relative importance of a norm' (Stimmer and Wisken, 2019, p. 520). At the same time, it may involve 'behavioural contestation', relating to situations where the 'actions of relevant actors imply the existence of conflicting understandings of the meaning and/or (relative) importance of a norm' (Shannon, 2000; Stimmer and Wisken, 2019, p. 520). In particular, this is the case when the behaviour of a norm addressee is inconsistent with a given norm. In the context of EU foreign policy co-operation, adherence to key procedural norms is generally understood to facilitate more joint EU foreign policy outputs at the UNGA (Chelotti et al., 2022; Smith, 2017). By the same logic, a lack of support for common EU action at the UN can serve as an indicator for norm contestation. If populism indeed poses a key ideological challenge to EU foreign policy co-operation, we can expect a greater propensity of contestation of key EU foreign policy norms and positions under populist governments than under mainstream governments. Patterns of populist contestation may not be uniform across the different issue areas covered by EU foreign policy co-operation since not all international matters resonate equally with the political profile of a populist party. Still, expectations that the mix of populism and nationalist ideas that make up the ideology of PRR parties will lead to a greater contestation of EU foreign policy positions and norms are commonplace in the literature (e.g., Biedenkopf et al., 2021; Cadier and Lequesne, 2020; Jenne, 2021). Here, populist governments are considered to be guided by principled foreign policy preferences, with ideological considerations playing an important role in orienting their foreign policy behaviour. Hence, it can be hypothesized:

H1 (populist contestation): PRR governments will show a stronger tendency to contest EU foreign policy positions and norms than mainstream governments.

Although populist ideology reveals apparent tensions with core CFSP norms, populists in power may also opt for a more pragmatic approach. Pragmatism and ideological moderation may be understood as part of the responsibility to govern (Lefkofridi and Nezi, 2020; Tepe, 2019), as populists become subject to various political and institutional constraints when they join governments in the multi-layered EU governance system. After all, contesting EU foreign policy co-operation is not cost free, as defection from CFSP's institutionalised culture of co-operation can involve social sanctions, peer pressure and a reputational damage that bears the risk of losing support amongst European partners (Chelotti et al., 2022). Similarly, pragmatism may also be the result of a certain neglect and disregard of foreign policy issues by populists in government, if they consider that foreign policy is not central to their political agenda (Wajner and Wehner, 2023). If a PRR party in government opts for adaptation to the EU's culture of co-operation, we expect no major digress from previous levels of support for EU positions and norms in their voting behaviour at the UNGA.

H2 (adaptation): PRR governments will adapt their foreign policies to EU foreign policy norms and positions, showing a similar tendency to contest EU foreign policy positions than previous mainstream governments.

The Scope and Degree of Populist Contestation: Voting Behaviour at the UNGA

To provide a clear understanding of what we mean by the contestation of the EU's culture of co-operation, we first need to clarify key procedural norms that underpin EU foreign policy co-operation at the UNGA. The unity of the EU at the UNGA is regarded as a central EU objective. Despite the institutional changes brought up by the Treaty of Lisbon and an increasing presence at the UN since 2011 (UN document A/RES/65/276), the EU's representation at the UNGA continues to face important limitations that need to be overcome through close co-ordination amongst EU member states (Laatikainen, 2010). Member states play an important role in the representation of the EU, which itself cannot vote at the UNGA (Blavoukos and Bourantonis, 2017). To facilitate a common EU approach in the absence of member states' delegating their right to vote, EU co-operation at the UNGA needs to rely on the member states' voluntary commitment to informal, co-operative norms related to consensus-building, consistency and justification of UNGA voting decisions.

The first important co-operative CFSP norm at the procedural level is 'consensus-seeking'. EU member states face strong expectations and peer pressure to actively co-ordinate with their partners on UNGA voting, to share information and to work towards a common EU position (consensus-building norm). EU co-ordination amongst EU member states at the UN is intense and highly institutionalized, with routine EU co-ordination meetings taking place every morning across different committees during UNGA sessions (Chelotti et al., 2022, p. 5). In their co-ordination in New York, national representatives are also supported by the EU delegation and have access to a so-called 'table of action', a digital tool which, amongst other things, provides information on the way the EU member states voted on particular resolutions in previous years and the position held by different member states (interviews 10, 11, and 13). With respect to the 'consensus-seeking norm' we consider contestation as defections of a member state from the EU majority in UNGA voting that stand out from 'normal' behaviour in terms of scope and degree. We measure vote defection by considering whether the Fidesz government voted with or against the majority position of the EU in the UNGA. Whilst occasional defections may be well in line with the consensus-building norm (Costa et al., 2024; Müller et al., 2021), it is clearly at odds with continuous and repetitive patterns of defection that cover a broad scope of issues. Formally, the member states have the right to vote in line with their national preferences. Yet, within the consensus-oriented culture of CFSP they are expected to exercise self-control and restraint to facilitate EU coordination at the UN, which in the context of democratic governance has been described as 'forbearance' (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2019: 9). In terms of UNGA voting, we consider the scope of contestation to involve the number of instances/issues on which an EU member state defects from the EU majority. The EU's majority position is defined as the voting option that receives the most votes – and at least a simple majority – of EU member states in a given ballot, which can take the form of 'yes', 'abstention' or 'no' (Burmester and Jankowski, 2018, p. 660) as well

as ‘absence’. When measuring changes in the number of defections under PRR governments over time, we also distinguish between all votes and votes on resolutions that were repeated every year from the 55th till the 75th session. The latter will ensure that voting choices made in the UNGA ‘are comparable from session to session, rather than subject to the varying agenda of that body’ (Mattes et al., 2015, p. 284). Contestation may be relatively broad in scope, thus affecting voting patterns on a broad set of UN resolutions covering a wide range of geographic and thematic themes, or it may be relatively narrow, affecting only a few policy issues.

Contestation of the consensus-building norm can also differ in degree. Following Luif (2003), we establish the degree of contestation by assessing a member state’s voting distance from the EU majority, with abstentions and absences being less severe (0.5) than an opposite vote (1) (e.g., the EU voting ‘yes’ and a member state ‘no’). This makes the measure comparable over time because it weighs the number of votes in a session. Moreover, we measure the degree of vote defections by examining the way in which a member state positions itself vis-à-vis the other EU member states, with deviation from unanimity being considered a particularly bold breach of CFSP’s culture of co-operation (see Burmester and Jankowski, 2018). We introduce a defection scale ranging from ‘strong’ defections (a single member state defecting from the EU majority position alone and in total opposition) to ‘medium’ forms of defection (defecting with up to four other EU member states) to weak defection (with five or more other member states).

The ‘consistency norm’ concerns the respect of previously agreed common EU positions (so-called ‘agreed language’). Here, we establish the degree of contestation by examining the extent to which an EU member state defects from repeated resolutions on which the EU had held a relatively strong consensus in the past. At the UNGA, several resolutions are repeated every year, many of which involving no or only minimal changes to the original text (so-called ‘roll overs’). A member state’s defection from established EU voting patterns can be considered to be particularly severe if it fails to respect agreed EU positions. Besides examining contestation in terms of defection at the voting stage, we also consider the way defections are justified at the negotiation stage (justification norm). Adherence to the justification norms requires representatives from EU member states to inform their counterparts early on in the EU coordination process if they cannot support a common EU line, or even previously established EU positions. As we do not have direct access to CFSP negotiations, we rely on interviews to assess the perceptions of EU member state representatives regarding norm conform behaviour. Based on our interview data, we examine whether other EU member states consider Hungarian representatives to generally adhere to the justification norm, informing their partners early in the coordination process and providing clear reasoning related to legitimate national interests and reservations.

The Impact of Populist Contestation on CFSP’s Culture of Co-Operation

To assess potential wider implications of populist contestation on the EU’s culture of co-operation, we focus on the robustness of its core co-operative norms of consensus-building, consistency and justification. Yet, whilst norm contestation is generally understood to facilitate social change (Wiener, 2014, p. 2), the direction of this change may vary from

strengthening and legitimizing a norm through contestation to undermining a norm through too much contestation (see Juncos and Pomorska, 2021, p. 372; Costa et al., 2024). Following Deitelhoff and Zimmermann, we consider norm robustness in terms of ‘applicability’, ‘validity’ and ‘facticity’ (Deitelhoff and Zimmermann, 2020). Again, we rely on both information gained through interviews with CFSP participants and data on the way EU member states behave at the voting stage at the UNGA to assess the robustness of the ‘consensus-building’, ‘consistency’, and ‘justification’ norms.

‘Applicability’ relates to the people and situations to which a norm applies. As Shannon has pointed out, a norm generally includes certain ‘parameters’ that specify under what situations its prescriptions apply (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998; Shannon, 2000, p. 295). In terms of norm applicability, we establish to what extent members of the CFSP community – that is, national representatives from EU member states and the EU delegation in New York – consider core procedural norms to remain applicable and valid in the face of populist contestation. Hence, we inquire if they still feel that core CFSP norms are applicable to all CFSP actors under the agreed circumstances, or if they contest established ‘parameters’ related to their applicability. Norm ‘validity’, in turn, is considered high if a norm’s core claims remain considered to be valid for its addressee (Deitelhoff and Zimmermann, 2019). Here, we examine the extent to which members of the CFSP community consider core procedural CFSP norms to be valid in terms of their acceptance of the righteousness of the norms’ main claims.

Finally, a norm’s ‘facticity’ relates to the way in which a norm guides the actions of the norm addressees (Deitelhoff and Zimmermann, 2019, p. 3). It is considered high if addressees demonstrate behaviour that is guided by shared understandings about the meaning and/or (relative) importance of key CFSP norms. We examine the behavioural support for the EU’s culture of co-operation by examining the member states’ voting cohesion at the UNGA. In particular, we rely on an adjusted ‘Agreement Index’ (AI) of Hix et al. (2005). Initially used to examine party group cohesion in the European Parliament, the AI has later been applied to analyse EU voting cohesion in the UNGA (Ferdinand, 2014). We adjust it to include abstention and absence.² As EU unity is highly valued and closely monitored, the decay of core procedural CFSP norms can be expected to result in growing intergovernmental disagreement, a reduced capacity for compromise and hence a reduction in EU voting coherence at the UNGA, particularly in areas of populist contestation. A high degree of robustness of key CFSP norms, in turn, involves situations where populist contestation does not lead to any significant weakening of the voting cohesion amongst the remaining EU member states. Though EU unity may be affected by multiple factors other than CFSP’s culture of cooperation, we believe that the AI index, in combination with insights gained from our semi-structured interviews, can serve as a general indicator for the behavioural support of consensus-oriented CFSP norms.

²The AI takes a value between 0 and 1, with 0 meaning that the votes by the member states were equally divided between the voting options and 1 meaning that all member states selected the same voting option. For each vote at the UNGA, the AI is calculated based on the formula $AI = \text{MAX} \{Y, N, A, AB\} - 0.5 * [(Y + N + A + AB) - \text{MAX} \{Y, N, A, AB\}] / (Y + N + A + AB)$. Y refers to the number of ‘yes’ votes, N to the number of ‘no’ votes, A to the number of ‘abstentions’ and AB to the number of absences, whilst $\text{MAX} \{Y, N, A, AB\}$ represents the voting option that has been chosen most often by the EU member states.

II. Hungary and EU Foreign Policy Co-Operation at the UN: Widespread Adaptation and Limited Contestation

To establish the scope and degree of EU foreign policy contestation by Hungary's PRR government (consensus-seeking norm), we first compare Hungary's voting behaviour in the period when Hungary joined the EU till the Fidesz-led government came to power (2004–2010) to the voting behaviour of successive Fidesz-led governments (2010–2021). This allows us to identify whether Hungary's RRP-government acted in (dis-)continuity with its predecessors. The cut-off point will be considered between the 64th (2009–2010) and the 65th (2010–2011) sessions, as the Fidez-led government in Hungary was formed when the 64th session was ending. Moreover, our data allow us also to establish whether the voting behaviour of Hungary's Fidesz-led government differs significantly from the voting behaviour of other EU member states.

Dataset on UNGA Voting

For our empirical analysis, we rely on a novel, author-generated data set for which we collected UNGA voting data on all the 27 EU member states and the United Kingdom in the period 2004–2021 from the UN Digital library (Pdf-protocols of the meetings/official meeting records).³ We first scraped the meeting records with the programming language Python to establish text files. Afterward, we searched for signal words (in favour, against, abstained and subsequent signalling of vote change) in the programming language R and identified absentees. We then applied different steps of computerized and manual data cleaning. The dataset covers votes on resolutions but also votes on operative paragraphs and decisions, as these too are relevant to understand divisions within the EU (Luif, 2003). Positions recorded are 'yes', 'no', 'abstain' but also 'absence'. Except for states with very small delegations the latter is often best understood as a political position (purposely not attending) rather than situational in terms of being unable to attend (US Department of State, 2021, p. 10). This is particularly the case for EU member states, which are supported by their European partners, including the other member states and the EU delegation, through practices of co-operation and burden-sharing. Moreover, we identified 46 resolutions that were repeated every session and on which voting took place at least once between the 55th and the 75th sessions.

To distinguish populist parties from mainstream parties in EU member states, we rely on the open-access PopuList dataset version 2.0. PopuList provides information about whether a party is populist, far-right, far-left or Eurosceptic (Rooduijn et al., 2019). We utilized the ParlGov dataset (Döring et al., 2022) to determine whether a specific party was in power – either as the head of government or as a minor partner in a coalition – end of September of a given year. This date was chosen as it aligns with the General Assembly, thereby allowing us to assess the occurrence of populist governments at the General Debate as well as when most of the resolutions are voted. Governments were considered mainstream when no populist party was present. This distinction allows a comparison of the behaviour of Hungary with mainstream EU governments, controlling for potential effects of populist parties in coalition governments in other EU member states.

³Most UN resolutions are approved by consensus. Recorded votes are required on the most contested votes.

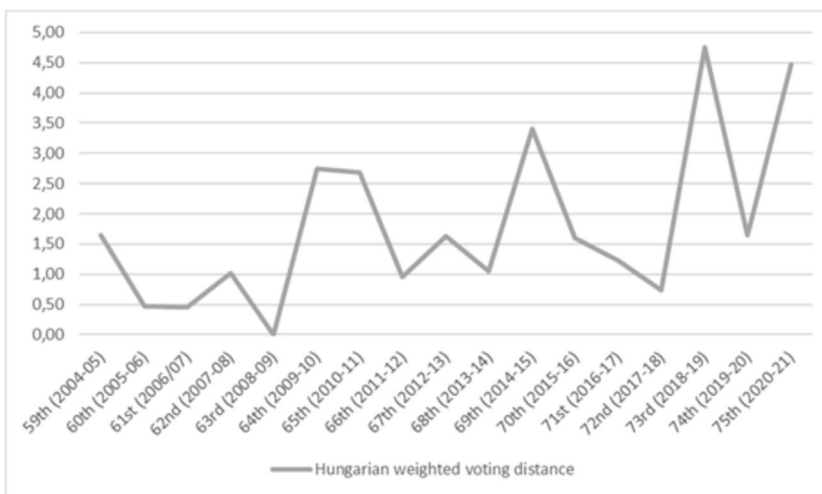
The Scope and Degree of Populist Contestation: Consensus-Seeking and Consistency

In terms of voting behaviour, populist contestation of the consensus-building norm should be reflected in a higher number of Hungarian defections from the EU-majority after the Fidesz-led government took power in 2010 (H1). Whilst we see a certain increase in the scope and degree of contestation under Hungary's PRR government, this trend seems moderate and not exceptional when compared to other EU countries. In the analysed period, the Hungarian voting cohesion with the EU majority never went below 93% and Hungary never was the country with the lowest voting cohesion with the EU majority position. Looking at the votes in which an EU majority formed, Hungary's voting distance started increasing in the 64th session (that is, right before the Fidesz government). It slightly increased over time (the index goes from 0, minimum distance, to 100, maximum distance), showing a certain – although rather limited – upward trend (Figure 1). It is only since the 73rd session that Hungary adopted a tougher stance, voting 4 times in full opposition to the EU position and then repeating this behaviour in the 75th session. Until then, Hungary preferred to defect only partially from the EU position and with a relatively large group of states. The overwhelming majority of Hungarian defections were 'weak' and only in the 75th session Hungary engaged in cases of extreme defection, repeatedly voting alone in opposition to the EU majority position or defecting with only a small number of other EU member states (Figure 2).

Under its PRR government, Hungary also increasingly defected in votes on repeated resolutions. In the 75th session, this behaviour was particularly pronounced (Figure 3). This implies a greater degree of contestation of the consistency-norm, as going against 'agreed EU language' is particularly sensitive in terms of the EU's culture of co-operation that values the respect for established EU positions.

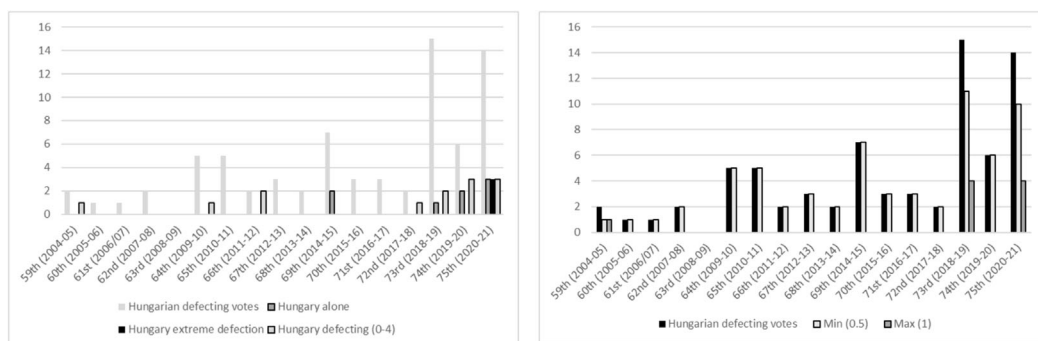
When comparing the voting behaviour of Hungary's PRR government to the voting behaviour of member state governments involving parties identified as 'mainstream',

Figure 1: Hungarian Voting Distance Weighted by the Number of Votes.



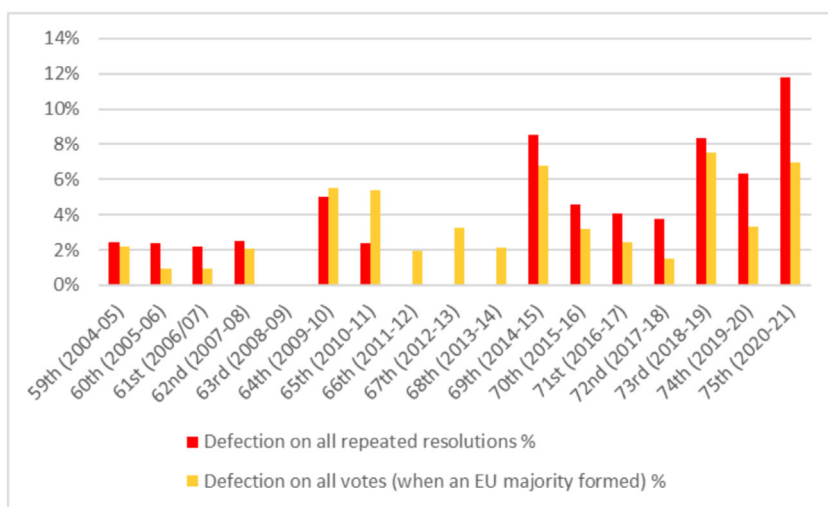
Source: Authors' elaboration based on the authors' dataset.

Figure 2: Degree of Opposition, Absolute Numbers.



Source: Authors' elaboration based on the authors' dataset.

Figure 3: Comparison of Defection on Repeated Resolutions and All Votes, Percentages. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

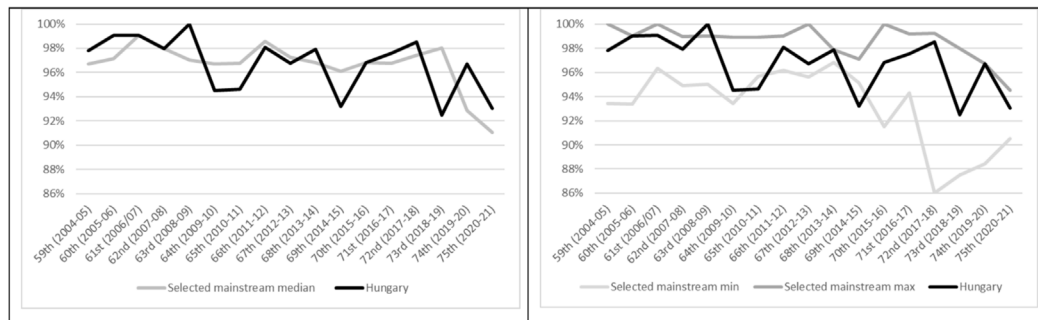


Source: Authors' elaboration based on authors' dataset.

we also see a moderate trend towards greater contestation. The countries with mainstream governments selected were Germany, Spain, Italy, Sweden, Finland, Czechia and Slovenia.⁴ The comparison between Hungary and the selected mainstream countries in relation to their voting cohesion with the EU majority (Figure 4) shows that whilst under previous governments Hungary's voting cohesion with the EU majority was consistently

⁴France was excluded because France is a permanent Security Council member. The selected countries were included only when no populist party was in the government coalition.

Figure 4: Comparison With Selected Mainstream Countries.



Source: Authors’ elaboration on authors’ dataset, PopuList and ParlGov.

above the line of the median position of mainstream governments, in the 64th session its cohesion dropped. And subsequently, it was mostly less cohesive with the EU position than mainstream governments. However, exceptions exist. In the latest two sessions included in our analysis, Hungary was more cohesive with the EU position than the selected mainstream governments. Indeed, comparing the Hungarian voting cohesion with the minimum and maximum cohesion of the selected mainstream governments shows that, for the most part, Hungary under its PRR government was more cohesive than the ‘minimum mainstream’. Since the 70th session, for instance, the Hungarian cohesion with the EU has been higher than it was the case for Sweden or Germany.

Under its populist governments, Hungary also defected more, but the comparison with mainstream governments shows that Hungarian defections in the analysed period were still rather limited and not exceptional when compared to other EU member states. However, over time, Hungary became bolder in the degree of its defections. Although the compared periods cover different time frames, since joining the EU in 2004, Hungary defected 11 times in the sessions 59th–64th (under mainstream governments) and 62 times in the sessions 65th–75th (under PRR-governments). In Table 1, the thematic issues involving defections were coded, and when needed, up to two codes were applied (Table 1).

Issues like migration, supranationalism and human rights that are often identified to be close to the political profile of PRR parties like Fidesz are amongst the issues subject to growing defection under Hungary’s PRR government. Of the eight defections where Hungary acted in full opposition to the majority of EU member states in the second period, five concerned migration and refugees, with supranationalism as a second code for three of them (‘Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees’ in the 73rd, 74th and 75th sessions), and they occurred since the 73rd session. Yet, these issues were already contentious under previous Hungarian mainstream governments and are not the only relevant issues on which it defected. The other three votes in total opposition were on the Middle East (with one having as a second code human rights). Moreover, in the Hungarian voting history, a particularly important issue is armaments and nuclear weapons. On this issue, the Hungarian defections under its PRR-government have been particularly pronounced, but also in line with the behaviour of previous Hungarian mainstream governments. This is also a traditionally divisive issue for EU member states.

Table 1: Defection Issues (All Votes).

	<i>59th–64th</i>		<i>65th–75th</i>	
	<i>Code 1</i>	<i>Code 2</i>	<i>Code 1</i>	<i>Code 2</i>
Human rights	3(1)	0	5(1)	7(5)
Middle East	2	0	9(7)	8(8)
Nuclear/arms	3(3)	0	31(18)	0
Supranationalism	2(2)	2	10	5(3)
Migration/refugees	1	0	7(3)	0

Source: Authors' elaboration on authors' dataset.

Notes: Amongst parentheses the number of votes on repeated resolutions.

Focusing on repeated resolutions, it is even more evident that the issues of higher defection of the Hungarian PRR government are armaments and nuclear weapons and the Middle East.

Justifying Defections: Populist Contestation at the Negotiation Stage

As our analysis of Hungary's voting behaviour at the UNGA has shown, its populist government has displayed a considerable readiness to act in conformity with CFSP's consensus-building and consistency norms. Strong defections have been relatively few in number and were mainly limited to issues like migration, human rights and the Arab-Israeli conflict. Moreover, Hungarian representatives are generally seen as professional partners committed to the EU's culture of co-operation and in conformity with the procedural requirements of the 'justification' norms. In this respect, diplomats from other member states involved in CFSP negotiations in New York have pointed out that they appreciate that Hungarian diplomats generally try to inform their partners early on in situations where they receive difficult instructions from their national capital and generally avoid behaviour that would complicate consensus-building amongst the remaining member states (interviews 10 and 11). Moreover, CFSP actors frequently distinguish between controversial positions and problematic rhetoric embraced by leading political representatives of the Orbán government and the largely professional attitude displayed by Hungarian diplomats in CFSP negotiations. Against this backdrop, CFSP actors also highlighted that important 'overriding national interests' have always constituted a legitimate reason for not supporting a common EU position (interviews 11 and 13). This suggests that they largely view cases where Hungary defects from the EU mainstream as part of normal EU politics, rather than as violations of the consensus-norm. What has generated some discomfort amongst representatives from mainstream EU governments, however, are situations where Hungarian representatives acted on instructions from Budapest that go against well-established EU positions and substantive norms, including human rights (interview 7). Still, the fact that such instances have been few allowed CFSP-actors to compartmentalize contentious foreign policy negotiations on difficult issues, allowing for a constructive engagement on a broad array of other issues debated at the UNGA on which Hungary tends to act as a professional partner that conforms to key procedural CFSP requirements and practices (interviews 12 and 15).

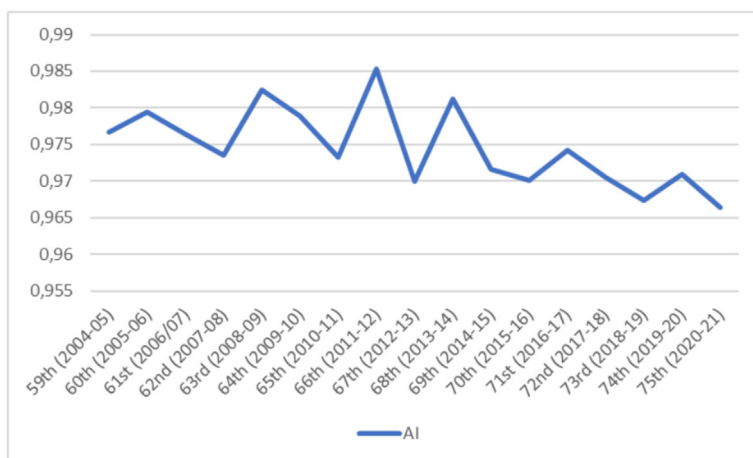
Populist Contestation and CFSP's Culture of Co-Operation

As our analysis has shown, Hungary's populist government did not opt for a widespread contestation of EU foreign policy co-operation in its voting behaviour at the UNGA, still performing better than some mainstream EU governments. Rather, Hungary's approach to EU foreign policy co-operation at the UNGA appears to involve a considerable degree of pragmatism, continuity and adherence to the EU's culture of co-operation, with its overall voting cohesion with the EU only decreasing moderately under PRR governments. Still, on some issues that are particularly sensitive for the EU, including matters related to human rights and migration as well as long established EU positions on the Middle East, we have seen a growing behavioural contestation under Hungary's PRR government. This raises the question how Hungary's approach to EU foreign policy co-operation, which on certain issues has become more assertive, has impacted on the robustness of key procedural CFSP norms in terms of 'applicability', 'validity' and 'facticity'.

Overall, our interviews suggest that representatives from the EU and its member states continue to consider key procedural CFSP norms to be valid and widely applicable to EU foreign policy co-operation at the UNGA. Diplomats from the EU and its member states frequently point to the importance of consensus-seeking, consistency and the justification of defections (interviews 11, 12, 13 and 14). Not only do they consider these norms as valid and share a common understanding of core aspects of their interpretation, but they also consider them to apply to all members of the CFSP community. Diplomats from the EU and its member states in New York frequently point out that Hungarian representatives engage constructively on the majority of issues debated in the UNGA and tend to respect key procedural CFSP norms (interviews 11, 12, 13, 14, and 15). Accordingly, diplomats from the EU and other member states also continue to involve Hungarian representatives in informal practices of information sharing and consensus-building that evolve around their formal co-ordination meetings (interviews 11 and 12). Similarly, Hungarian diplomats have pointed to the professional, expertise-based work culture in New York that have allowed them to contribute to EU unity on a broad range of issues even after Fidesz came to power (interviews 1 and 4).

Moreover, diplomats from the EU and its member states have also developed certain practices of dealing with the growing contestation of certain sensitive issues, which help to mitigate potential corrosive effects on the EU's culture of cooperation. As discussed above, CFSP actors have been confronted with a situation where Hungary has become a difficult partner on salient issues like migration, human rights and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Moreover, certain gender norms were pointed out as increasingly politicized and contested issues in EU deliberations. EU foreign policy negotiations on these contested issues can be really challenging, repeatedly moving up from the expert level to the level of permanent representatives.

A pragmatic approach to EU foreign policy negotiations on contested issues involved efforts on the part of CFSP actors to accommodate certain deviating positions of Hungary. Diplomats pointed towards the use of more 'neutral' language on contested issues to make it easier for Hungary, and other deviating member states, to agree to a unified EU stance (interview 11). The fact that UNGA resolutions not only depend on the support of EU countries but require the support of the majority of UN member states can facilitate intra EU compromise on the use of language that provides for a broader acceptance (interviews

Figure 5: EU Cohesion in the UNGA. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/jcms.13706)]

Source: Authors' elaboration on authors' dataset.

12 and 15). Similarly, Hungary has relied on softer forms of dissent. Importantly, it has become more common for Hungary to vote together with the EU members on a UNGA resolution, whilst simultaneously highlighting differences from the official EU position in an official explanation of vote. This allowed Hungary to cling to certain particularities in its national position without undermining the EU's unity in UNGA voting. Still, in cases where such mutual accommodation is not considered to be feasible, the remaining member states have then also sought to negotiate a common EU position without accommodating the defecting country (interview 11).

The fact that the EU's culture of co-operation at the UNGA has largely remained intact is also supported by behavioural criteria that relate to the 'facticity' of procedural CFSP norms in terms of guiding the actions of the norm addressees. The AI of EU member states decreased only marginally over the observed period of time (Figure 5). And even this moderate decrease needs to be put in context, as the number of cases in which UN members were called to express their vote significantly increased over time – reflecting both the increasing polarization of the assembly and its growing relevance as a political venue. As such, it is fair to say that even in light of Hungary's growing populist contestation in some issue areas, the EU's culture of co-operation still prevails in EU foreign policy co-operation at the UNGA.

Conclusion

Despite frequent warning about the populist challenge to EU foreign policy and international institutions, the findings of our article suggest that Hungary under its PRR governments has shown a considerable pragmatism and willingness to adhere to CFSP's culture of co-operation. This might come as a surprise to scholars and observers who consider PRR-governments as a challenge to multilateral cooperation and international institutions, not least as Hungary's Fidesz-led government represents a particular likely case for

populist contestation. It also suggests that whilst there is considerable evidence of PRR-governments speaking out against multilateral cooperation and international institutions like the UN, contestation at the level of foreign policy rhetoric and public statements must not necessarily be matched by foreign policy action. In fact, the case of the foreign policy behavior of Hungary's PRR-government shows that contestation of CFSP's consensus-seeking and consistency norms has been rather limited in scope, focusing on a relatively small range of issues related to migration, human rights and the Arab-Israeli conflict where Hungary defected in its voting behaviour from the EU majority. Here, Hungary was increasingly willing to break ranks with the majority of EU countries on issues that relate to core substantive EU values and long-established EU foreign policy positions.

In spite of some prominent cases of populist contestation, the member states' commitment to CFSP's culture of co-operation has largely remained intact. This also applies to Hungarian diplomats involved in EU foreign policy co-operation in New York, who are largely considered as 'normal' partners that adhere to key procedural CFSP norms, including the justification norm in case of defections. Hence, the case of Hungary suggests a notable contrast between the findings reached by works focusing on the discursive dimension of populist contestation in international fora, which highlight frequent populist verbal attacks on established international institutions, and the actual foreign policy conduct of populists in government. However, despite these findings, we should be cautious not to overestimate the capacity of international institutions to elicit populist adaptation to the requirements of core norms and procedures of multilateral co-operation. Over the past one and a half decade, PRR parties joined governments in a growing number of EU member states for varying periods of time, including in larger member states like Poland and Italy, calling attention for further research. Yet, overall, the centre still holds in the EU as the majority of EU countries, including Germany and France, continue to be governed by parties belonging to the political mainstream. Whilst today far-reaching contestation of established CFSP positions and norms involves the risk for populist governments to become isolated in the EU, it may become more prominent in a situation where populists in Europe continue to further increase their vote shares in elections.

Moreover, the fact that the process of EU coordination of voting behaviour at the UNGA constitutes a rather technocratic process that often involves issues that receive relatively little public attention might reduce its attractiveness as a venue for populist contestation. Finally, it is important that our interviews have also pointed to important practices that help to mitigate norm contestation at the negotiation stage. For instance, populist contestation during CFSP negotiations has encouraged other member states to opt for more conciliatory language to accommodate Hungarian positions and concerns. Moreover, it is important to point out that by focusing on defections, we do not systematically engage with 'milder forms' of dissent at the voting stage, for example, through official explanations of votes. Overall, it appears that thus far both Hungarian representatives and representatives from mainstream governments in EU member states have displayed a common interest in avoiding a situation where differences lead to an erosion of co-operative CFSP norms.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank Benjamin Burtscher for his support in compiling the author generated dataset on UNGA voting as well as the anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments and feedback.

Correspondence:

Patrick Müller, University of Vienna and Vienna School for International Studies,
 Universitätsstraße 7, 1010 Wien/Vienna, Austria.
 email: patrick.mueller@univie.ac.at

References

- Badell, D. (2020) 'The EU, Migration and Contestation: The UN Global Compact for Migration, From Consensus to Dissensus'. *Global Affairs*, Vol. 6, No. 4–5, pp. 347–362.
- Balfour, R., Emmanouilidis, J.A., Grabbe, H. *et al.* (2016) *Europe's Troublemakers: The Populist Challenge to Foreign Policy* (European Policy Centre).
- Biedenkopf, K., Costa, O. and Góra, M. (2021) 'Introduction: Shades of Contestation and Politicisation of CFSP'. *European Security*, Vol. 30, No. 3, pp. 325–343.
- Bílková, V. (2019) 'Populism and Human Rights'. In Nijman, J.E. and Werner, W.G. (eds) *Netherlands Yearbook of International Law 2018: Populism and International Law* (The Hague: T.M.C. Asser Press), pp. 143–174 doi:10.1007/978-94-6265-331-3_7.
- Blavoukos, S. and Bourantonis, D. (2017) 'The Politics of UNGA Resolution 65/276: A Tale of the EU Performance in the UNGA'. In Blavoukos, S. and Bourantonis, D. (eds) *The EU in UN Politics: Actors, Processes and Performances* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK), pp. 47–60 doi:10.1057/978-1-349-95152-9_3.
- Burmester, N. and Jankowski, M. (2018) 'One Voice or Different Choice? Vote Defection of European Union Member States in the United Nations General Assembly'. *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, Vol. 20, No. 3, pp. 652–673.
- Cadier, D. and Lequesne, C. (2020) 'How Populism Impacts EU Foreign Policy'. *EULISTCO Policy Paper Series* (8).
- Chaudhury, D. R. (2020) 'We Are Still a Player in Search for Identity: Josep Borrell'. *The Economic Times*, 16 January. Available from: <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/world-news/we-are-still-a-player-in-search-for-identity-josep-borrell/articleshow/73308318.cms> [Accessed November 2020].
- Chelotti, N., Dasandi, N. and Jankin Mikhaylov, S. (2022) 'Do Intergovernmental Organizations Have a Socialization Effect on Member State Preferences? Evidence From the UN General Debate'. *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 66, No. 1, p. sqab069.
- Costa, O., Juncos, A.E., Müller, P. and Sjursen, H. (2024) 'Contested but Resilient: Accounting for the Endurance of the European Union's Foreign Policy'. *Journal of Common Market Studies*.
- Deitelhoff, N. and Zimmermann, L. (2019) 'Norms Under Challenge: Unpacking the Dynamics of Norm Robustness'. *Journal of Global Security Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 1, pp. 2–17.
- Deitelhoff, N. and Zimmermann, L. (2020) 'Things We Lost in the Fire: How Different Types of Contestation Affect the Robustness of International Norms'. *International Studies Review*, Vol. 22, No. 1, pp. 51–76.
- Döring, H., Huber, C. and Manow, P. (2022) 'Parliaments and Governments Database (ParlGov): Information on Parties, Elections and Cabinets in Established Democracies'. Available from: <https://www.parlgov.org/data-info/> [Accessed March 2023].
- EURACTIV. (2021) 'Hungary Rejects Criticism Over Foreign Policy Blockages'. 8 June 2021, www.euractiv.com. Available from: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/hungary-rejects-criticism-over-foreign-policy-blockages/> [Accessed June 2023].
- Ferdinand, P. (2014) 'Rising Powers at the UN: An Analysis of the Voting Behaviour of BRICS in the General Assembly'. *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 35, No. 3, pp. 376–391.
- Finnemore, M. and Sikkink, K. (1998) 'International Norm Dynamics and Political Change'. *International Organization*, Vol. 52, No. 4, pp. 887–917.

- FMPRC. (2021) 'Chinese and Hungarian Foreign Ministers Agree on 'Four Goals' in Guiyang Talks'. Available from: https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1880356.shtml (Accessed September 2021).
- Henke, M. and Maher, R. (2021) 'The Populist Challenge to European Defense'. *Journal of European Public Policy*, Vol. 28, No. 3, pp. 389–406.
- Hettyey, A. (2021) 'The Europeanization of Hungarian Foreign Policy and the Hungarianization of European Foreign Policy, 2010–18'. *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, Vol. 29, No. 1, pp. 125–138.
- Hix, S., Noury, A. and Roland, G. (2005) 'Power to the Parties: Cohesion and Competition in the European Parliament, 1979–2001'. *British Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 35, No. 2, pp. 209–234.
- Jenne, E.K. (2021) 'Populism, Nationalism and Revisionist Foreign Policy'. *International Affairs*, Vol. 97, No. 2, pp. 323–343.
- Juncos, A.E. and Pomorska, K. (2021) 'Contesting Procedural Norms: The Impact of Politicisation on European Foreign Policy Cooperation'. *European Security*, Vol. 30, No. 3, pp. 367–384.
- Kissack, R. (2007) 'European Union Member State Coordination in the United Nations System: Towards a Methodology for Analysis'. London School of Economics and Political Science, European Foreign Policy Unit Working Paper 2007/1.
- Koch, C.M. (2021) 'Varieties of Populism and the Challenges to Global Constitutionalism: Dangers, Promises and Implications'. *Global Constitutionalism*, Vol. 10, No. 3, pp. 400–438.
- Laatikainen, K.V. (2010) 'Multilateral Leadership at the UN After the Lisbon Treaty'. *European Foreign Affairs Review*, Vol. 15, No. 4, pp. 475–493.
- Lefkofridi, Z. and Nezi, R. (2020) 'Responsibility Versus Responsiveness ... to Whom? A Theory of Party Behavior'. *Party Politics*, Vol. 26, No. 3, pp. 334–346.
- Levitsky, S. and Ziblatt, D. (2019) *How Democracies Die* (New York: Crown Publishing).
- Luif, P. (2003) 'EU Cohesion in the UN General Assembly'. European Union Institute for Security Studies, Paris.
- Mattes, M., Leeds, B.A. and Carroll, R. (2015) 'Leadership Turnover and Foreign Policy Change: Societal Interests, Domestic Institutions, and Voting in the United Nations'. *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 59, No. 2, pp. 280–290.
- Meunier, S. and Vachudova, M.A. (2018) 'Liberal Intergovernmentalism, Illiberalism and the Potential Superpower of the European Union'. *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, Vol. 56, No. 7, pp. 1631–1647.
- Mudde, C. (2004) 'The Populist Zeitgeist'. *Government and Opposition*, Vol. 39, No. 4, pp. 541–563.
- Mudde, C. (2007) *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press) Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511492037>
- Mudde, C. and Kaltwasser, C.R. (2017) *Populism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press).
- Müller, P. and Gazsi, D. (2023) 'Populist Capture of Foreign Policy Institutions: The Orbán Government and the De-Europeanization of Hungarian Foreign Policy'. *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, Vol. 61, No. 2, pp. 397–415.
- Müller, P., Pomorska, K. and Tonra, B. (2021) 'The Domestic Challenge to EU Foreign Policy-Making: From Europeanisation to De-Europeanisation?' *Journal of European Integration*, Vol. 43, No. 5, pp. 519–534.
- Posner, E.A. (2017) 'Liberal Internationalism and the Populist Backlash'. *Arizona State Law Journal*, Vol. 49, p. 795.
- Rivera Escartin, A. (2020) 'Populist Challenges to EU Foreign Policy in the Southern Neighbourhood: An Informal and Illiberal Europeanisation?' *Journal of European Public Policy*, Vol. 27, No. 8, pp. 1195–1214.

- Rooduijn, M., van Kessel, S., Froio, C., De Lange, S. and Halikiopoulou, D. (2019) 'The Popu-List: An Overview of Populist, Far Right, Far Left and Eurosceptic Parties in Europe'. *The PopuList*. Available from: <https://popu-list.org/> [Accessed October 2022].
- Shannon, V.P. (2000) 'Norms Are What States Make of Them: The Political Psychology of Norm Violation'. *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 44, No. 2, pp. 293–316.
- Smith, K.E. (2010) 'The European Union at the Human Rights Council: Speaking With One Voice But Having Little Influence'. *Journal of European Public Policy*, Vol. 17, No. 2, pp. 224–241.
- Smith, K.E. (2017) 'EU Member States at the UN: A Case of Europeanization Arrested?' *Journal of Common Market Studies*, Vol. 55, No. 3, pp. 628–644.
- Söderbaum, F., Spandler, K. and Pacciardi, A. (2021) *Contestations of the Liberal International Order: A Populist Script of Regional Cooperation* Cambridge University Press. Available from: <https://www.cambridge.org/core/elements/contestations-of-the-liberal-international-order/38D1CE56D4DDD75130933DB625E85648> [Accessed October 2022].
- Stimmer, A. and Wisken, L. (2019) 'The Dynamics of Dissent: When Actions Are Louder Than Words'. *International Affairs*, Vol. 95, No. 3, pp. 515–533.
- Tepe, S. (2019) 'The Inclusion-Moderation Thesis: An Overview'. 30 September, Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.788>
- Tonra, B. (2015) 'Europeanization'. In Jorgensen, K.E., Aarstad, A.K., Drieskens, E., Laatikainen, K. and Tonra, B. (eds) *SAGE Handbook of European Foreign Policy* (SAGE Publications Ltd).
- UN. (2011) 'UN Document A/RES/65/276 Participation of the European Union in the Work of the United Nations :: Resolution/: Adopted by the General Assembly'. Available from: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/702981> [Accessed June 2023].
- US Department of State. (2021) 'Report to Congress on Voting Practices in the United Nations for 2021 Report to Congress Submitted Pursuant to Public Law 101-246, 31 March 2022'. Available from: <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Report-Voting-Practices-in-the-United-Nations-2021.pdf>
- Wajner, D.F. and Wehner, L. (2023) 'Embracing or Rebuffing "the International"? Populist Foreign Policy and the Fourth Wave of Populism in Latin America'. *Global Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 3, No. 2, pp. 1–13.
- Wiener, A. (2014) *A Theory of Contestation* (Heidelberg: Springer).
- Wiener, A. (2020) 'The Concept of Contestation of Norms: An Interview'. In Reder, M., Filipovic, A., Finkelde, D. and Wallacher, J. (eds) *4 Yearbook Practical Philosophy in a Global Perspective*.
- Zulianello, M. and Larsen, E.G. (2021) 'Populist Parties in European Parliament Elections: A New Dataset on Left, Right and Valence Populism From 1979 to 2019'. *Electoral Studies*, Vol. 71, 102312.

Interviews

<i>Coding</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Affiliation code</i>
Interview #1	21 October 2020	Hungarian diplomat
Interview #2	18 November 2020	Hungarian diplomat
Interview #3	18 December 2020	Hungarian diplomat
Interview #4	18 December 2020	Hungarian diplomat
Interview #5	18 December 2020	Hungarian diplomat
Interview #6	18 December 2020	Hungarian diplomat
Interview #7	17 June 2022	Diplomat from EU member state
Interview #8	12 May 2023	Diplomat from EU member state
Interview #9	19 May 2023	Diplomat from EU member state
Interview #10	22 May 2023	Diplomat from EU member state
Interview #11	22 May 2023	Diplomat from EU member state
Interview #12	26 May 2023	Diplomat from EU member state
Interview #13	2 June 2023	Diplomat from EU member state
Interview #14	9 June 2023	EU representative
Interview #15	12 June 2023	EU representative