

Institutional change, sovereigntist contestation and the limits of populism: evidence from southern Europe

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The growing significance of populist politics has recently called attention to its tendency to contest multilateral institutions, especially those which embody or reflect the liberal international order.¹ Generally, populists oppose the delegation of more decision-making to supranational actors and organizations and to a transnational elite perceived as detached from the needs of the people, while emphasizing sovereignty.² Aggravated by the eurozone and migration crises,³ populist contestations against the European Union have followed this pattern over time. The economic crisis which ensued from the closures during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020–2021 once again brought existential questions about the EU to the forefront of the political agenda. During the initial and acute phase of the pandemic, many predicted that the EU was on the precipice of collapse,⁴ in part because some populists blamed it for accentuating the pandemic's gravity.⁵ For a brief period, markets priced a possible dissolution into the bonds of weaker member states.⁶ The solution to the COVID-19 pandemic's economic fallout, however,

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¹ Daniel F. Wajner, Sandra Destradi and Michael Zürn, 'The effects of global populism: assessing the populist impact on international affairs', *International Affairs* 100: 5, 2024, pp. 1819–33, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iaae217>.

² Fredrik Söderbaum, Kilian Spandler and Agnese Pacciardi, *Contestations of the liberal international order: a populist script of regional cooperation* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2021); Angelos Chrysosgelos, 'Populism in foreign policy', *Oxford Research Encyclopaedia*, 27 July 2017, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.467>.

³ Chih-Mei Luo, 'The COVID-19 crisis: the EU Recovery Fund and its implications for European integration—a paradigm shift', *European Review* 30: 3, 2022, pp. 374–92, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S106279872100003X>.

⁴ *Le Figaro* via YouTube, 'Qu'est-ce que l'Europe aujourd'hui? Emmanuel Todd face à Alain Minc', 4 June 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ofHwtdpdihc>; Edoardo Ongaro, Fabrizio Di Mascio and Alessandro Natalini, 'How the European Union responded to populism and its implications for public sector reforms', *Global Public Policy and Governance*, vol. 2, 2022, pp. 89–109, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s43508-022-00034-1>. (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 5 July 2024.)

⁵ As the Italian leader of Lega Nord, Matteo Salvini, was reported to have said in April 2020, 'The EU has shown itself in recent weeks closer to the interests of bureaucrats, banks and financial powers. Far from the cry of pain of the peoples who founded it, including the Italians ... We have to re-examine the EU and Italy's role in it. [During the pandemic] it has not come to our aid at all.' Quoted in Oli Smith, 'Anti-EU fury: Italian mayors rip down EU flags in outrage as row with Brussels intensifies', *Express*, 5 April 2020, <https://www.express.co.uk/news/world/1264946/EU-coronavirus-fury-flag-Brussels-Italy-European-Union-aid-latest-news>.

⁶ 'The COVID-19 pandemic puts pressure on the EU', *The Economist*, 14 May 2020, <https://www.economist.com/briefing/2020/05/14/the-covid-19-pandemic-puts-pressure-on-the-eu>.

represented a major shift in the EU's political evolution. For the first time, Germany and France, and later the other EU member states, agreed to the creation of a European sovereign bond, initially called the Recovery Fund and later NextGenerationEU (NGEU), issued by the European Commission, which would then allocate the revenue to member states on the basis of need, not contribution. Here, Germany ceded to southern European demands for Europe-level debt and spending.⁷ Scholars have called the response 'revolutionary', in part because it signalled that Europe was moving away from the neo-liberal austerity adopted during previous crises and towards a solidaristic, redistributionist, Keynesian model.⁸

As this article aims to show, this paradigm shift towards more solidaristic responses to crisis management led to a shift in the discourses of populists in southern European countries receiving NGEU funds. Italy's exit from the euro and/or the EU, which in various guises had been endorsed by the country's populists,⁹ was now clearly off the table. Spanish populists, too, adjusted their discourses in a less sovereigntist and more 'European' direction, towards disputes over how the new source of revenue would be spent. In France the shift was palpable but more subdued. How should one explain this shift in populist discourses after a consistent sovereigntist trend that had consolidated over time? We will argue that this discursive shift among populists, particularly in Spain and Italy, occurred because the NGEU exerted immense pressure, as they were net beneficiaries, and it became politically unfeasible to refuse this money. Consequently, populists had to contend with the new context which pressured them to soften or discard some of their sovereigntist impulses. They aligned closer to mainstream parties on the value of European solutions to continent-wide problems.

This has several important implications. It is widely recognized that populists challenge international organizations, but scholars have not explored how transformations of international institutions can limit, constrain or even reverse this trend. In this article we aim to fill this gap by systematically highlighting how an international organization's transformation into a more solidaristic agency led to a reduction in populist contestation based on sovereigntism. This outcome suggests that by adopting solidaristic, redistributionist approaches to crisis management, along the lines of the NGEU, international organizations can undermine populist opposition to their activities and enhance their legitimacy, providing more effective solutions to problems that transcend borders, from climate change to future pandemics.

To identify a consolidated trend of populist contestation and a shift as a consequence of the NGEU, we will examine discourses from four successive crises in the EU's history: the referendum on the Constitutional Treaty of 2005, the Greek referendum of 2015, the Brexit referendum of 2016 in the United Kingdom, and the COVID-19 crisis/establishment of the Recovery Fund/NGEU in 2020.

⁷ Ulrich Krotz and Lucas Schramm, 'Embedded bilateralism, integration theory, and European crisis politics: France, Germany, and the birth of the EU Corona Recovery Fund', *Journal of Common Market Studies* 60: 3, 2022, pp. 526–44, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.13251>.

⁸ Luo, 'The COVID-19 crisis'.

⁹ Ongaro et al., 'How the European Union responded to populism'.

The acute phases of these crises have particular importance, because they were instances when the EU's structure and identity were at stake and became the input for Europe-wide debates on the future of European integration. Moreover, political conflict became structured around a clash between populists on the one side and mainstream actors on the other, overtaking traditional left/right ideological contests. Lastly, these four case-studies allow us to observe discursive trends before and after the pandemic and confirm that populists, especially in Spain and Italy, went in a less sovereigntist direction as a result of the NGEU.

Theoretical framework: populism and sovereigntism

There is a growing literature on the connections between populism and international affairs, especially on the question of how the elite/people distinction becomes projected transnationally.¹⁰ Populists, of both the left and the right, tend to be sceptical or hostile to various elements of globalization, in part because they are fuelled by the loss—perceived or real—of popular sovereignty as more decision-making power is delegated to international bodies to address transnational problems which transcend borders.¹¹ In relation to globalization, including economic integration, populists therefore tend to propose policies to bring back, defend or place sovereignty where it belongs—with the 'true people' and not the elites who staff international agencies. Scholars have characterized this as the demand to *reterritorialize* sovereignty.¹²

Scholars disagree on whether the programmatic content of these proposals arises from underlying 'thick' ideologies such as those of the extreme left or right,¹³ or from a populist core that transcends these political ideologies.¹⁴ A prominent account of the latter is defended by Angelos Chrysogelos¹⁵ and by Fredrik Söderbaum et al.¹⁶ They apply the concept of *sovereigntism* to capture populists' discursive construction of the people and the elite, and how this motivates the defence of the former's political agency in relation to various international actors conceived as the corrupt enemy—such as multilateral or supranational institutions, financial markets or regional hegemons perceived to be agents of globalization. 'Corrupt

¹⁰ Georg Löffmann, 'Introduction to special issue: the study of populism in international relations', *British Journal of International Relations* 24: 3, 2022, pp. 403–15, <https://doi.org/10.1177/13691481221103116>.

¹¹ Michael Zürn, *A theory of global governance: authority, legitimacy, and contestation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

¹² Linda Basile and Oscar Mazzoleni, 'Sovereigntist wine in populist bottles? An introduction', *European Politics and Society* 21: 2, 2020, pp. 151–62, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23745118.2019.1632576>.

¹³ Bertjan Verbeek and Thorsten Wojczewski, 'Digging new western European trenches: populism and the foreign policies of Germany and the Netherlands', in Philip Giurlando and Daniel F. Wajner, eds, *Populist foreign policy: regional perspectives of populism in the international scene* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023).

¹⁴ Paolo Mossetti, *Mil mascaras: la deriva del nacionalpopulismo italiano* (Madrid: Siglo XXI de España Editores, 2021); Alfredo Ramírez Nardiz, *Guía urgente para entender y curar el populismo: (resultados no garantizados)* (Barcelona: J. M. Bosch, 2017); León Buil Giral, *Ideología y praxis de los populismos* (Zaragoza: Editorial Comunitat, 2020); Roger Eatwell and Matthew Goodwin, *Nacionalpopulismo: por qué está triunfando y de qué forma es un reto para la democracia* [first publ. in English 2018] (Barcelona: Diagonal, 2019).

¹⁵ Angelos Chrysogelos, 'State transformation and populism: from the internationalized to the neo-sovereign state?' *Politics*, 40: 1, 2020, pp. 22–37, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263395718803830>.

¹⁶ Söderbaum et al., *Contestations of the liberal international order*.

elites' include the mainstream parties seen to be the domestic agents of these international actors. This discursive construction is partly fuelled by underlying sociological changes induced by globalization, financialization and technological change, which has led to new political cleavages that transcend left and right.¹⁷

It follows that when there are political conflicts related to globalizing processes, populists are more likely to adopt positions in favour of the people's *sovereignty*, and this position reflects a populist core that transcends their underlying political ideologies. In France, for example, La France Insoumise (LFI) and the Rassemblement National (RN, formerly the Front National) come from very different ideological families. The former is led by a Marxist professor and the latter by an ethnic nationalist. And yet both are in favour of the *référendum d'initiative citoyenne* (RIC),¹⁸ which would allow more referendums, including on international treaties which have significant international implications. The shared assumption—which remains unstated but nonetheless operative—is that ordinary people can decide on issues better than out-of-touch elites, including on complex matters which transcend borders. It is this sovereigntist logic that, in other studies, accounts for shared positions against regional hegemons,¹⁹ supranational agencies²⁰ and various facets of globalization²¹ among populists with very different ideological orientations.

The existing literature has examined some of the structural constraints that populists face when contesting elements of globalization. One important factor is whether populists are minor members of coalition governments or have full control of the executive.²² Other branches of government can also 'tame' populism.²³ Some scholars look at geopolitical pressures—populists in weaker states, for example, have fewer options given the weight of regional or global hegemons.²⁴ However, scholars have not examined the effects on populism of a transformation of an international organization, as occurred when the EU adopted the NGEU. It is now recognized that, at the level of public opinion, the NGEU has increased trust in European institutions *especially* in the countries worst hit by the pandemic.²⁵ In

¹⁷ David Held and Anthony McGrew, *Globalization/anti-globalization: beyond the great divide* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2007); Liesbet Hooghe and Gary Marks, 'Cleavage theory meets Europe's crises: Lipset, Rokkan, and the transnational cleavage', *Journal of European Public Policy*, 25: 1, 2018, pp. 109–35, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2017.1310279>.

¹⁸ The RIC is a proposal demanded by the Gilet Jaunes (the non-partisan protest movement which politically destabilized Emmanuel Macron's government in 2018) which would allow referendums with a wide scope, including approval or abrogation of legislation and international treaties, modifying the constitution or removing elected officials from office.

¹⁹ Michael Dodson and Manojeh Dorraj, 'Populism and foreign policy in Venezuela and Iran', *Whitehead Journal of Diplomacy & International Relations* 9: 1, 2008, pp. 71–88.

²⁰ Söderbaum et al., *Contestations of the liberal international order*.

²¹ Chrysogelos, 'Populism in foreign policy'.

²² Bertjan Verbeek and Andrej Zaslove, 'The impact of populist radical right parties on foreign policy: the Northern League as a junior coalition partner in the Berlusconi governments', *European Political Science Review* 7: 4, 2015, pp. 525–46, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755773914000319>.

²³ Cas Mudde, 'Three decades of populist radical right parties in Western Europe: so what?', *European Journal of Political Research* 52: 1, 2013, pp. 1–19, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ej.1475-6765.2012.02065.x>.

²⁴ Heike Krieger, 'Populist governments and international law', *The European Journal of International Law* 30: 3, 2019, pp. 971–96, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ejil/chzo46>.

²⁵ Achillefs Papageorgiou and Walteri Immonen, 'How supranational institutions benefit from crises: member states' solidarity and the EU's image during the COVID–19 pandemic', *European Union Politics* 24: 3, 2023, pp. 601–21, <https://doi.org/10.1177/14651165231156846>.

this article, we also discern the significant impact of the NGEU, but on populist parties; the redistributionist and solidaristic shift made it politically unfeasible to reject the solutions on offer. Investigating this shift contributes to our knowledge of the factors which may limit populists' contestation of international institutions.

Methodology

Scholars who have investigated the sovereigntist logic of populism in international affairs have generally adopted the following methodology: identifying commonalities among populists from very different ideological families. The pioneers in this regard were Michael Dodson and Manoj Dorraj,²⁶ who examined the shared populist foreign policies of former Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and former Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez to highlight how their transnational projection of the elite/people divide reflected a populist logic rather than their underlying ideologies (respectively, conservative Islamist and Marxist). Chrysogelos²⁷ followed their path by accounting for shared positions among right and left populists in relation to Vladimir Putin's Russia, global governance and American hegemony. Söderbaum et al.²⁸ applied the same approach in their study of Hungarian president Viktor Orbán (conservative nationalist), Chávez (Marxist) and the former president of the Philippines, Rodrigo Duterte (ideologically ambiguous), examining their discourses and identifying a shared logic of *sovereigntism*.

We follow this approach by looking for commonalities among six different populist parties—on the right, the RN, the Lega Nord (rebranded as the Lega in 2017) and VOX, and on the left, LFI, the Five Star Movement (hereafter 5SM) and Podemos—in three southern European countries, France, Italy and Spain, respectively. These countries were selected because left- and right-wing populists have enjoyed high levels of support in each, and because this selection allows some variation in the observed outcomes: Spain and Italy were the greatest beneficiaries of the NGEU, while France is a net contributor, and so we expect that the effects on sovereigntist discourses will be more pronounced in the first two countries. In all three, we search for patterns concerning populists' shared commitment to popular sovereignty over multilateralism, supranationalism or globalism, in the discourses of the party leaders and significant party members (for example, members of the legislatures of each country) on the occasion of and in relation to the four crises detailed above—the Constitutional Treaty referendum, the Greek referendum, the Brexit referendum and the COVID-19 crisis/adoption of the NGEU. In each case the EU's structure and identity were at stake and each crisis sparked debate on the future of the EU in all member states.

We begin with the referendum on the Constitutional Treaty in 2005 because it helps to highlight the consolidated trend of populist contestation in southern Europe, whereby a populist alignment overtook the mainstream left/right divide.²⁹

²⁶ Dodson and Dorraj, 'Populism and foreign policy in Venezuela and Iran'.

²⁷ Chrysogelos, 'Populism in foreign policy'.

²⁸ Söderbaum et al., *Contestations of the liberal international order*.

²⁹ Nonna Mayer and Olivier Rozenberg, 'France: when Euroscepticism becomes the main credo of the opposi-

As we will see, a similar populist vs mainstream dynamic became prevalent in the subsequent cases, too. These events are also important because they were culminating moments of successive crises. Deindustrialization as a result of globalization contributed to the 2005 referendum's outcome in France; shortly afterwards, in 2009, the financial crisis began which culminated in the Greek referendum of 2015. The Brexit referendum of 2016 was partly generated by the same sovereign debt crisis. And the COVID-19 pandemic's economic fallout in early 2020 was related to the previous debt crisis, as southern European countries had less fiscal capacity when the pandemic arrived.³⁰ The successive and cumulative character of these crises also makes them apt for identifying variation of populist contestation before and after the pandemic.

To identify patterns in the discourses, we selected sources of populist and mainstream communication, such as social media (Twitter/X and YouTube), leaders' and parties' blogs, leaders' interviews with the traditional media, and parliamentary debates. To find the relevant texts in the media, we inputted into the search engines a series of simple word combinations of the name of the relevant political leaders/parties and the event. For example, for the Constitutional Treaty, we typed 'Mélénchon' and 'referendum 2005', or 'Grillo' or 'Lega Nord' and the same event, and retained only information that was pertinent to the event. In all cases except the Brexit referendum, we limited our searches to three-year time periods: the year which preceded the event, the year in which it happened, and the year which followed. Brexit was a longer, drawn-out process, and so we included commentary from 2019, three years after the actual referendum.

For parliamentary debates, we consulted the online databases of transcribed parliamentary sessions provided by the parliaments of France, Italy and Spain. All three are equipped with search engines, in which we searched for the name of the event ('Constitutional Treaty', 'Greek referendum', 'Brexit', 'COVID-19 crisis/Recovery Fund/NGEU'). If no specific thematic debate existed, we searched for debates referring to the event up to two months before and two months after the event date. This simpler search was appropriate for parliamentary debates, given there was relatively less content to analyse.

All sources allowed us to identify the interpretations of the European integration process and were closely read with the key interpretative frame of the defence or promotion of the people's sovereignty, as opposed to mainstream arguments defending integration or supranational agencies. This allowed us to identify the structure of political conflict during these events and permits us to track the stability or change of said political conflict. We now turn to the discourses in relation to the four crises and show a consolidated trend of populist contestation based on sovereigntist arguments until 2020, when a change did occur as a result of the adoption of the Recovery Fund/NGEU.

tion', in Michael Kaeding, Johannes Pollak and Paul Schmidt, eds, *Euroscepticism and the future of Europe: views from the capitals* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021).

³⁰ Vicente Navarro, 'The consequences of neoliberalism in the current pandemic', *International Journal of Social Determinants of Health and Health Services* 50: 3, 2020, pp. 271–5, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020731420925449>.

The Constitutional Treaty referendum

During the Constitutional Treaty referendum of 2005, in France traditional left/right battles were replaced with a contest that we would now call ‘sovereigntists vs the mainstream’.³¹ La France Insoumise did not yet exist, but its founder, Jean-Luc Mélenchon, then on the hard left wing of the Socialist Party, expressed the sovereigntist critique, as did the hard-right Front National led by Jean-Marie Le Pen. The substance of their main critiques was remarkably similar, in part because they were appealing to a similar pool of voters—namely, working-class citizens who had been disadvantaged by France’s deindustrialization.

In his public statements, Mélenchon emphasized two themes, one political and the other economic. With respect to the latter, he attacked the Treaty because ‘the most important principle in the draft document was free trade’.³² It would, consequently, strengthen *mondialisme sauvage* (savage globalization), while further weakening the state’s capacity to intervene in the economy to protect workers or engage in industrial strategy. Mélenchon’s critique of the treaty’s political dimensions was that it would be almost impossible to reform, and hence it undermined France’s democratic agency. Jean-Marie Le Pen’s accusations went along much the same lines.³³ A vote for Yes, said Le Pen, was a vote in favour of ‘extreme free trade’, ‘cosmopolitanism’, strengthening processes, European integration and globalization (the two are interchangeable in his speech) which have caused deindustrialization, unemployment, precariousness and offshoring. And like Mélenchon, he appealed directly to the working class, the poor and ‘ordinary’ people to vote No.³⁴ This framing worked, as the working class overwhelmingly voted against the treaty.³⁵ Following the vote, on 15 June 2005, deputy Marie-George Buffet of the Communist Party spoke in the French national assembly to praise the ‘people’s’ democratic revolt against the imposition of neo-liberalism by financial and supranational ‘elites’.³⁶ Here, she was responding to mainstream deputies who defended Europe in terms of peace and prosperity and argued that

³¹ Alain-Marc Delbouys, ‘Mélenchon: “La force énorme du non”’, *La Dépêche*, 6 April 2005, <https://www.ladepeche.fr/article/2005/04/06/317339-melenchon-la-force-enerme-du-non.html>.

³² Delbouys, ‘Mélenchon: “La force énorme du non”’ (authors’ translation).

³³ Jean-Marie Le Pen, ‘Déclaration de M. Jean-Marie Le Pen, président du Front National, sur les raisons de voter “non” au référendum sur la Constitution européenne du 29 mai’, *Vie Publique*, 1 May 2005, <https://www.vie-publique.fr/discours/146639-declaration-de-m-jean-marie-le-pen-president-du-front-national-sur-le>.

³⁴ Unlike Mélenchon, however, Le Pen also framed this with references to identity, as a kind of resistance which is part of a long history of France’s fighting for national independence against foreign empires, from antiquity to the Middle Ages, including Rome and Islam.

³⁵ Importantly for the future of French politics, this set the stage for an enduring cleavage between sovereigntists and globalists which persisted long after the referendum. Jean-Marie Le Pen’s daughter, Marine, leading the Rassemblement National, and Mélenchon, with La France Insoumise, performed very well in subsequent elections, and in the 2017 presidential poll their scores mapped very closely with the distribution of votes for No in the referendum of 2005. See Alexandre Léchenet, ‘Les communes qui ont voté “Non” en 2005 ont-elles voté Le Pen ou Mélenchon?’, *Slate*, 13 May 2017, <https://www.slate.fr/story/145509/second-tour-de-2017-spectre-2005>. In part because of the trauma of this loss, no referendums were contemplated in France for the subsequent treaties including Lisbon, Nice and Amsterdam.

³⁶ Assemblée Nationale, ‘Déclaration du gouvernement sur le Conseil Européen et débat sur cette déclaration’, 15 June 2005, <https://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/12/cr/2004-2005/20050226.asp>.

France must ratify the treaty regardless of the vote,³⁷ as it was essential for the European project to move forward.

Podemos and VOX were not yet on the Spanish political scene in 2005, but the sovereigntist critique was expressed at that time by the hard-left party Izquierda Unida (IU). (IU would eventually join forces with Podemos, leading to the creation of the Unidos Podemos coalition.) IU cheered³⁸ the result of the 2005 referendum on the grounds of sovereigntist content, along the same lines as their counterparts in France. According to IU leader Gaspar Llamazares, the proposed Constitutional Treaty crystallized a regressive neo-liberalism, undermined democratic agency and strengthened the oligarchy, who benefited from economic globalization underwritten by America, while harming society's weakest members.³⁹ In contrast Spain's centre-left prime minister, José Zapatero of the Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE), decried the result, saying the constitution was the solution to Europe's challenges.⁴⁰

In Italy, the Lega Nord expressed a strong defence of people's sovereignty against the intrusiveness of European integration, denouncing the top-down process of the Constitutional Treaty.⁴¹ Its leader, Umberto Bossi, commented in 2005 that the French result was the end of a European integration project that had been built against the people and that was now backfiring and falling apart.⁴² Another leading member, Roberto Calderoli, highlighted that national legislatures should not succumb to the European Parliament, which had no popular legitimacy, and promoted a 'Europe of the peoples' as opposed to the existing European bodies.⁴³ Roberto Maroni, then minister of labour, promoted constitutional changes to allow a referendum in Italy too.⁴⁴ Although the 5SM was yet to be born, the Lega's defence of people's sovereignty was echoed by 5SM founder Beppe Grillo. In his blog, Grillo greeted the outcome of the French referendum as the response of the French people against European elites.⁴⁵ Meanwhile, members of parliament from more mainstream parties blamed the result on those who depicted Europe as a bureaucratic and useless burden.⁴⁶ Support for the furthering of the European

³⁷ Assemblée Nationale, 'Déclaration du gouvernement sur le Conseil Européen et débat'.

³⁸ 'Llamazares cree que es la hora de "una nueva política europea"', *El País*, 31 May 2005, https://elpais.com/diario/2005/05/31/internacional/1117490414_850215.html.

³⁹ 'Gaspar Llamazares ha pedido el "no" a la Constitución Europea porque cristaliza una política regresiva y minusvalora la democracia', Cadena SER, 15 Feb. 2005, https://cadenaser.com/ser/2005/02/15/actualidad/1108434560_850215.html.

⁴⁰ 'Texto íntegro de la declaración de Zapatero sobre el referéndum en Francia', *El Mundo*, 30 May 2005, <https://www.elmundo.es/elmundo/2005/05/30/internacional/1117456367.html>.

⁴¹ Speech by MP Provano (Lega Nord), Senato, meeting no. 813, 31 May 2005.

⁴² 'Bossi: "È la fine dell'Europa"', *Corriere della Sera*, 1 June 2005, https://www.corriere.it/Primo_Piano/Politica/2005/05_Maggio/29/cartaue.shtml.

⁴³ Adalberto Signore, 'Intervista al coordinatore della segreteria della Lega che commenta l'esito del referendum francese', *Il Giornale*, 30 May 2005, <https://www.ilgiornale.it/news/intervista-coordinatore-segreteria-lega-che-commenta-l-esito.html>.

⁴⁴ 'Bossi: "È la fine dell'Europa"'.

⁴⁵ Beppe Grillo, 'Test di Europositività', Il blog di Beppe Grillo, 2 June 2006, <https://beppegrillo.it/test-di-europositivita>.

⁴⁶ See the speech by MP Ranieri (Democratici di Sinistra), Camera dei Deputati, meeting no. 617, 27 April 2005.

integration process and references to a misplaced interpretation of sovereignty were emphasized.⁴⁷

The referendum in Greece

Four years after the French referendum, the European debt crisis began; its onset was in 2009. The first domino to fall was Greece, contributing to a crisis of extreme proportions which finally led to a populist electoral victory in January 2015. Alexis Tsipras, who came to power as prime minister at the head of the leftist Syriza party, called a referendum for July on the terms of a bailout agreement proposed by Greece's international creditors (including the 'troika' comprising the European Commission, European Central Bank—ECB—and IMF), framing it as a referendum on whether Greece should accept the creditors' austerity demands, while French president François Hollande, German chancellor Angela Merkel and Italian prime minister Matteo Renzi agreed that a No vote would mean that Greece would have to leave the currency union, and potentially the EU itself—in other words, it could lead to 'Grexit'.⁴⁸ Despite the prospect of crashing out of the currency union, 62 per cent of Greeks voting in the referendum chose No. This event generated much attention, and, like the other crises studied in this article, revealed fault lines which transcended centre-left and centre-right categories.

The two main populist parties in France, FN and LFI, interpreted the Greek referendum very similarly to the way in which the 2005 referendum on the Constitutional Treaty had been understood—namely in terms of the will of the people against that of the corrupt establishment. In this interpretation, Greeks were revolting against German hegemony and its imposition of austerity.⁴⁹ Moral weight was added by framing the contest as one between the oligarchy on one side and democracy on the other, with 'the people' comprising the latter valiantly resisting the former.⁵⁰ This interpretation was in stark contrast to how mainstream parties understood the events, as a dispute between two equal and sovereign democratic governments amenable to negotiation, or, elsewhere, as the consequence of Greek corruption and irresponsibility, which required German and/or European discipline.⁵¹

When Greeks voted No in the July 2015 bailout referendum, Marine Le Pen praised the result as a 'monstrous' democratic slap in the EU's face.⁵² It was, she

⁴⁷ See, for instance, the interview excerpts of Romano Prodi, then leader of the centre-left alliance L'Unione, and Piero Fassino, then leader of the Democratici di Sinistra, reported in 'Bossi: "È la fine dell'Europa"', and the speech by Sergio Mattarella, then MP of Margherita, Camera dei Deputati, meeting no. 642, 21 June 2005.

⁴⁸ Philip Giurlando, *Eurozone politics: perception and reality in Italy, the UK, and Germany* (Routledge: New York, 2015).

⁴⁹ 'Référendum grec: "Une leçon de dignité" pour Pierre Laurent', Radio 1, 5 July 2015, <https://www.radio1.pf/referendum-grec-une-lecon-de-dignite-pour-pierre-laurent>.

⁵⁰ Rassemblement National, 'Réaction de Marine Le Pen à la victoire du non en Grèce', 6 July 2015, <https://rassemblementnational.fr/communiqués/reaction-de-marine-le-pen-a-la-victoire-du-non-en-grece>.

⁵¹ See Yanis Varoufakis, *Adults in the room: my battle with the European and American deep establishment* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2018).

⁵² Jean-Baptiste Vey, 'Marine Le Pen salue la "gifle monstrueuse" de la Grèce à l'UE', *Capital*, 26 Jan. 2015, <https://www.capital.fr/economie-politique/marine-le-pen-salue-la-gifle-monstrueuse-de-la-grece-a-l-ue-1008097> (authors' translation).

said, an expression of democracy and liberty in the most noble sense of the word, and not a question of left or right. Another FN spokesman, Florian Philippot, had in 2011 explicitly connected the outcome to the French referendum in 2005,⁵³ as an expression of democracy and resistance to the dictates of technocrats in Brussels. Mélenchon, in 2016, said it was a ‘victory of the people’ against the devious and calamitous designs of the Eurogroup (the informal body of Eurozone finance ministers which became a centre of power during the financial crisis), which was, he asserted, an instrument of German power to impose austerity on weaker members. It was an appropriate reaction among Greeks to a Europe which ‘excludes, attacks the weak, pillages the poor’.⁵⁴ In the French National Assembly, extreme left and extreme right also coalesced around a sovereigntist interpretation. Highlighting the event’s importance, there were three parliamentary debates devoted to it: in all three, sovereigntists blamed austerity, the detested troika and German hegemony, while mainstream parties were more likely to blame Greece for ‘not following rules’ or ‘not implementing reforms’.⁵⁵

In Spain, the reaction of Podemos—and specifically of its leader, Pablo Iglesias, who in 2016 was a self-described ‘sovereigntist’⁵⁶—was similar to those of RN and LFI. When Greeks voted No, Iglesias called it a ‘victory of democracy’.⁵⁷ Although he did not publicly clarify over what, or whom, it was a victory, comments from Podemos’ soon to be coalition partner, IU—such as the deputy Alberto Garzón—in the Spanish parliament, made clear that the ‘elite enemy’ was precisely the one identified by populists in other countries, mainly, the ‘oligarchy’, referring to financial interests and technocrats, backed by German hegemony and carried out by supranational agencies and their ‘lackeys’ among mainstream parties of the left and right. It was simple and ordinary people who were the victims of these elite machinations.⁵⁸ Behind closed doors, Podemos’s leadership contemplated the possibility of a similar referendum in Spain.⁵⁹ In contrast, the incumbent centre-right prime minister, Mariano Rajoy of the Partido Popular, blamed Greece for not respecting its ‘obligations’ towards a Europe that was sufficiently solidaristic.⁶⁰

⁵³ Rassemblement National via YouTube, ‘Référendum grec: soutien de Marine Le Pen face au mépris de Sarkozy pour les peuples’, 2 Nov. 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ycPI5bzgcDc>.

⁵⁴ Jean-Luc Mélenchon via YouTube, ‘Brexit: L’Union européenne actuelle est faite pour les ultrariches’, 24 June 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_7dsSDQIIZM (authors’ translation).

⁵⁵ Assemblée Nationale, ‘Questions sur la situation économique et financière de la zone euro’, 1 June 2015, <https://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/14/cr/2014-2015/20150245.asp#P542649>; Assemblée Nationale, ‘Dette souveraine des états de la zone euro’, 7 May 2015, <https://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/14/cr/2014-2015/20150225.asp#P521084>; Assemblée Nationale, ‘Déclaration du gouvernement sur la situation de Grèce et les enjeux européens’, 8 July 2015, <https://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/14/cr/2014-2015-extra/20151010.asp#P577027>.

⁵⁶ Chrysosgelos, ‘Populism in foreign policy’.

⁵⁷ Pablo Iglesias (@PabloIglesias) via Twitter/X, ‘Hoy en Grecia ha ganado la democracia’, 5 July 2015, <https://x.com/PabloIglesias/status/617764053117747200>.

⁵⁸ Intervention of Alberto Garzón Espinosa during legislative session: ‘Comunicación del gobierno en la que solicita la celebración de un debate sobre la contribución española ante un tercer programa de ayuda a Grecia’, 18 Aug. 2015, https://www.congreso.es/public_oficiales/L10/CONG/DS/PL/DSCD-10-PL-300.PDF#page=38.

⁵⁹ John B. Judis, *La explosión populista: cómo la Gran Recesión transformó la política en Estados Unidos y Europa* [first publ. in English 2016] (Barcelona: Deusto, 2018).

⁶⁰ ‘Rajoy sobre el referéndum en Grecia: “No gusta a nadie”’, ABC Internacional, 27 June 2015, <https://www.abc.es/internacional/20150627/abc-rajoy-referendum-grecia-201506271424.html>.

In Italy, the Lega and the 5SM were also in favour of the Greek referendum and welcomed its outcome. The leader of the Lega, Matteo Salvini, interpreted the crisis as an opportunity either to rewrite the terms of the EU, or to exit from it.⁶¹ As soon as the results were published, he posted a tweet backing a ‘new Europe’, based on respect for the *Popoli* [‘Peoples’].⁶² The 5SM, for whom direct democracy was crucial and a referendum on the Italian exit from the euro had become a goal, was unambiguously supportive of Tsipras and the Greek referendum. The party sent a high-profile delegation to Greece on the day of the vote and framed it as a referendum to regain freedom, ‘break the chains of the euro’ and ‘emancipate’ the people.⁶³ In parliamentary debates, both the Lega and the 5SM referred to a subjugation of the Italian government to Germany on the referendum,⁶⁴ criticizing a European currency and project that they claimed existed to defend the banks rather than the people, and asking for direct democracy.⁶⁵ On the mainstream side, Italy’s foreign minister Paolo Gentiloni, a member of the centre-left Partito Democratico (PD), tweeted against a weak EU,⁶⁶ and the leader of the centre-right Unione di Centro, Lorenzo Cesa, castigated Tsipras, stating ‘Europe is the only lifeline’ for Greece.⁶⁷

Brexit

Brexiters on the right and the left⁶⁸ interpreted the debacle in Greece as confirmation that the EU was an anti-democratic, technocratic instrument of German power. They pressured UK prime minister David Cameron to call the referendum and, as with the Constitutional Treaty and the Greek referendum, populists in France, Italy and Spain aligned and went against mainstream positions on European integration.

⁶¹ Fanpage.it via YouTube, ‘Salvini sul referendum in Grecia: “Tsipras poco serio, in Europa ci sono dei criminali”’, 5 July 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eLoV6nOk7RQ>.

⁶² Matteo Salvini (@matteosalvinimi) via Twitter/X, ‘Si a Nuova Europa fondata su rispetto dei Popoli ...’, 5 July 2015, <https://x.com/matteosalvinimi/status/617759178891915265>.

⁶³ 5SM, ‘Grecia: referendum per la libertà’, Il blog delle stelle, 28 June 2015, https://www.ilblogdellestelle.it/2015/06/grecia_referend.html; 5SM, ‘Beppe con Temistocle ad Atene: OXI—OXI—OXI!’, Il blog delle stelle, 5 July 2015, https://www.ilblogdellestelle.it/2015/07/beppe_con_temistocle_ad_atene_oxi_-_oxi_-_oxi.html.

⁶⁴ See, in particular, Senato, meeting no. 481, 9 July 2015; Camera dei Deputati, meeting no. 452, 1 July 2015; and Camera dei Deputati, meeting no. 471, 29 July 2015.

⁶⁵ For MP Volpi (Lega) the people were opposed to a ‘grey Europe made of bureaucrats that doesn’t know what a worker is’. See Senato, meeting no. 481, 9 July 2015. In the lower chamber, MP Cominardi (5SM) hailed the referendum as an element of democracy and sovereignty, while criticizing the technocratic ‘troika’ of the European Commission, European Central Bank and IMF. MP Villarosa (5SM) expressed distrust for the IMF and Europe, denouncing a conspiracy of the banks and the financial markets against the poor people. MP Giorgetti (Lega) explicitly framed the issue as related to sovereignty. See Camera dei Deputati, meeting no. 452, 1 July 2015.

⁶⁶ Paolo Gentiloni (@PaoloGentiloni) via Twitter/X, ‘#Grecia Ora è giusto ricominciare a cercare un’intesa. Ma dal labirinto greco non si esce con un’Europa debole e senza crescita’, 5 July 2015, <https://x.com/PaoloGentiloni/status/617760669451087872>.

⁶⁷ ‘Grecia: Cesa, Tsipras comprenda che UE è unica ancora salvezza’, Unione di Centro, 3 July 2015, <https://www.udc-italia.it/greciacesatsipras-comprenda-che-ue-e-unica-ancora-salvezza>.

⁶⁸ Owen Jones, ‘The left must put Britain’s EU withdrawal on the agenda’, *Guardian*, 14 July 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/jul/14/left-reject-eu-greece-euro-sceptic>.

For LFI, Mélenchon rejected the interpretation proffered by some on the centre left in Europe that the UK referendum exhibited the racism and xenophobia of Brexiters.⁶⁹ Rather, he claimed that it was a vote by ordinary people against austerity, and in particular against the economic model, represented by the City of London, of financialization, savage capitalism and consequent inequality. He added some cultural critiques as well: ‘It’s the rejection of the stone-cold faces of the European Commission ... a Europe that is the commercialization of everything’, and geopolitical ones: ‘it’s the failure of the German government’. Brexit, said Mélenchon, demonstrated the need for Paris to ‘demand fiscal and social harmonization’, and that a referendum on membership would only proceed if these demands were not met. When the interviewer reminded Mélenchon that Marine Le Pen also wanted a referendum, he replied ‘she copies me!’.⁷⁰

Marine Le Pen, for the Front National, praised the result of the Brexit vote as an expression of a desire for liberty and democracy.⁷¹ Like Mélenchon, to whom she was ostensibly ideologically opposed, she stated that a government led by her would have asked to repatriate powers back to France, and if those demands were rejected, she would have organized a referendum to give French citizens the final say.⁷² A similar contest was observable in the French National Assembly. In a long and detailed debate on the topic of Brexit, mainstream parties of the left (the Parti Socialiste) and right (Les Républicains) blamed bad leadership and misinformation, and defended Europe in terms of peace, liberty and geopolitical strength. Meanwhile, sovereigntists of both the left and right blamed the EU, accusing it of the standard litany of transgressions including elitism, technocracy, supranational authoritarianism, as well as being a tool of financial interests and of German hegemony.⁷³

In Spain, prime minister Rajoy labelled the referendum irrational⁷⁴ echoing the words of Pedro Sánchez of the centre-left PSOE, who blamed a ‘confluence between an irresponsible right [wing] and populism’.⁷⁵ For Podemos, Iglesias, while publicly supporting the Remain camp, said the result of the referendum was a revolt of the working class against the financial elites in London.⁷⁶ His party comrade, the deputy Sònia Farré Fidalgo, made similar claims in the Congreso de los Diputados, describing Brexit as the consequence of an EU which prioritized

⁶⁹ Mélenchon, ‘Brexit: L’Union européenne actuelle est faite pour les ultrariches’.

⁷⁰ Mélenchon, ‘Brexit: L’Union européenne actuelle est faite pour les ultrariches’ (authors’ translations).

⁷¹ Olivier Faye, ‘Marine Le Pen célèbre le “Brexit”’, *Le Monde*, 29 June 2016, https://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2016/06/30/marine-le-pen-celebre-le-brexit_4961139_823448.html.

⁷² ‘Brexit—Conference de Presse de Marine Le Pen’, Rassemblement National, 24 June 2016, <https://rassemblementnational.fr/conferences-de-presse/brexit-conference-de-presse-de-marine-le-pen>.

⁷³ Assemblée Nationale, ‘Débat sur les suites du référendum britannique et la préparation du Conseil européen’, 28 June 2016, <https://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/14/cr/2015-2016/20160226.asp#P823706>.

⁷⁴ ‘Rajoy sobre el Brexit: “Estoy convencido de que va a ganar la opción de permanecer en Europa”’, Partido Popular, 23 June 2016, <https://www.pp.es/actualidad-noticia/rajoy-sobre-brexit-estoy-convencido-que-vaganar-opcion-permanecer-europa>.

⁷⁵ Pedro Sánchez: “El Brexit es fruto de la confluencia entre una derecha irresponsable y el populismo, y yo no quiero eso para España”, Partido Socialista Obrero Español, June 2016, <https://www.psoe.es/actualidad/noticias-actualidad/pedro-sanchez-el-brexit-es-fruto-de-la-confluencia-entre-una-derecha-irresponsable-y-el-populismo-y-yo-no-quiero-eso-para-espana>.

⁷⁶ Fort Apache via YouTube, ‘El Brexit es una revuelta de la clase trabajadora—Pablo Iglesias’, 9 July 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7sI7Inhanho>.

elites, banks and neo-liberalism, generating inequality and leading to the ‘loss of people’s sovereignty’.⁷⁷ An important lesson, according to Iglesias, was that EU member states needed to ‘recover sovereignty’.⁷⁸

VOX’s leader, Santiago Abascal, also commented on Brexit. He used the language of the left, calling it a vote of the ‘people’ against the ‘European oligarchies’ in Brussels.⁷⁹ He also used language characteristic of the right, accusing these actors of collaborating with the ‘ecological [and] feminist’ lobbies,⁸⁰ all of whom he accused of imposing their will from distant capitals with the connivance of Spanish mainstream parties and, in so doing, betraying democracy.

In Italy, while mainstream parties interpreted the Brexit outcome as an opportunity to relaunch a reformed EU in a more solidaristic direction,⁸¹ the Lega applauded the referendum as a path to regain sovereignty and avoid being suffocated by European rules.⁸² As the result was made public, Salvini tweeted: ‘Hurrah for the courage of free citizens! Heart, intelligence and pride defeated lies, threats and blackmail. THANK YOU UK, now it’s our turn.’⁸³ He also specified the areas over which he wanted Italy to reclaim sovereignty from the EU as a consequence of Brexit.⁸⁴ In parliamentary debates the Lega defined the Brexit referendum as an example of democracy, calling for greater popular sovereignty.⁸⁵

The 5SM greeted the Brexit referendum and interpreted the outcome as the direct result of the EU’s mismanagement of the economic and migration crises that had taken place in Europe.⁸⁶ Before the referendum, Grillo had warned about an ever more intrusive anti-democratic and German-centric system in which states of the eurozone would be reduced to colonies and called for the dismantling of the

⁷⁷ Intervention of Sònia Farré Fidalgo during legislative session of: ‘Ponencia para el estudio de las consecuencias derivadas de la salida del Reino Unido de Gran Bretaña e Irlanda del Norte de la Unión Europea’, 11 Feb. 2016, https://www.congreso.es/public_oficiales/L12/CORT/DS/CM/DSCG-12-CM-7.PDF#page=5.

⁷⁸ ‘Pablo Iglesias rechaza el Brexit pero pide que los miembros de la UE recuperen soberanía’, 23 June 2016, InfoLibre: https://www.infolibre.es/politica/pablo-iglesias-rechaza-brexit-pide-miembros-ue-recuperen-soberania_1_1127795.html. Some commentators in Spain recognized the gap between Podemos’s support for the Remain camp and the underlying substance of its position, highlighting that only recently, many members wanted to exit the euro on the grounds that it was an instrument of German domination to impose austerity, and that even in mid-2016, its partners in the Unidos Podemos coalition had approved a document calling for Spain’s exit. See M. Muro and D. Soriano, ‘Iglesias interpreta el Brexit a su manera: los ingleses quieren irse porque no pagan lo suficiente’, *Libre Mercado*, 24 June 2016, <https://www.libremercado.com/2016-06-24/iglesias-interpreta-el-brexit-a-su-manera-los-ingleses-quieren-irse-porque-no-pagan-lo-suficiente-1276577064>.

⁷⁹ Santiago Abascal, ‘Abascal responde al consenso globalista de PSOE, PP y Cs: “Formen ustedes Bruselas suma”’, *VOX*, 11 Sept. 2019, <https://www.voxespana.es/notas-de-prensa/abascal-responde-consenso-globalista-pp-psoe-cs-formen-bruselas-suma-20190911>; Santiago Abascal, ‘Abascal achaca el “Brexit” a la deriva de las oligarquías europeas’, *RTVE*, 11 Sept. 2019, <https://www.rtve.es/play/videos/noticias-24h/abascal-achaca-el-brexit-a-la-deriva-de-las-oligarquias-europeas/5385430>.

⁸⁰ Abascal, ‘Abascal responde al consenso globalista de PSOE, PP y Cs’.

⁸¹ See, in particular, then-prime minister Matteo Renzi’s speech, Senado, meeting no. 646, 27 June 2016.

⁸² Andrea L. P. Pirro and Stijn van Kessel, ‘Populist Eurosceptic trajectories in Italy and the Netherlands during the European crises’, *Politics* 38: 3, 2018, pp. 327–43, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263395718769511>.

⁸³ Matteo Salvini (@matteosalvinimi) via Twitter/X, ‘Evviva il coraggio dei liberi cittadini! Cuore, testa e orgoglio battono bugie, minacce e ricatti. GRAZIE UK, ora tocca a noi. #Brexit’, 24 June 2016, <https://x.com/matteosalvinimi/status/746210618391224320> (authors’ translation).

⁸⁴ ‘Salvini spinge Fi sulla linea anti-UE “Va cambiato nome all’alleanza”’, *La Repubblica*, 26 June 2016, <https://ricerca.repubblica.it/repubblica/archivio/repubblica/2016/06/26/salvini-spinge-fi-sulla-linea-anti-ue-va-cambiato-nome-allalleanza16.html>.

⁸⁵ See MP Giorgetti (Lega), Camera dei Deputati, meeting no. 642, 27 June 2016; MPs Centinaio (Lega) and Tosato (Lega), Senado, meeting no. 646, 27 June 2016.

⁸⁶ Pirro and van Kessel, ‘Populist Eurosceptic trajectories in Italy and the Netherlands’.

eurozone or for Italy to exit from the euro.⁸⁷ As the referendum results came out, another post in the party's official blog attributed the result to an EU for which austerity, banking and finance were more important than citizens.⁸⁸ While the 5SM greeted the experiment of direct democracy and British self-determination,⁸⁹ and denounced the failure of EU governance, emphasizing the need to change the EU, another blog post made it clear that the 5SM had no intention to promote an Italian exit from the EU; rather, the party wanted to transform the EU from the inside.⁹⁰ In parliamentary debates, however, the 5SM still called for the abolishment of the euro.⁹¹

A paradigm shift—the pandemic and the adoption of the Recovery Fund/NGEU

The COVID-19 pandemic represented a further challenge in the seemingly interminable sequence of events which together comprise what some scholars call Europe's 'polycrises'.⁹² It put a major strain on Europe, not only because of the infections and deaths it brought and mitigation efforts which included lockdowns that paralysed entire economies, but also because previous challenges, particularly the eurozone crises, had left some countries in southern Europe with a reduced fiscal capacity to ride out the storm. In particular, Spain and Italy were under severe pressure because of austerity-inspired cuts to health care spending,⁹³ demanded by creditors during the sovereign debt crisis. The economic fallout of the pandemic deepened when financial markets started pricing in the risk of a crack in the euro's edifice, particularly for countries in southern Europe, leading to renewed predictions of imminent collapse.⁹⁴ In part this was because populists, especially in Italy, denounced the perceived indifference or cruelty of European partners, or they blamed the EU for worsening the crisis; in April 2020, an unprecedented 49 per cent of Italians were reportedly willing to leave the EU.⁹⁵

⁸⁷ Beppe Grillo, 'Il referendum in UK spaccherà l'Europa, prepariamoci al piano B #brexit', Il blog di Beppe Grillo, 6 Nov. 2015, <https://beppegrillo.it/il-referendum-in-uk-spacchera-leuropa-prepariamoci-al-piano-b-brexit>.

⁸⁸ 5SM, 'La UE o cambia o muore', Il blog delle stelle, 24 June 2016, https://www.ilblogdellestelle.it/2016/06/la_ue_o_cambia_o_muore.html.

⁸⁹ Beppe Grillo, 'Il commento di Beppe Grillo sulla Brexit che il Guardian non ha pubblicato', Il blog delle stelle, 31 March 2017, https://www.ilblogdellestelle.it/2017/03/il_commento_di_beppe_grillo_sulla_brexit_che_il_guardian_non_ha_publicato.html.

⁹⁰ 5SM, 'Brexit o Bremin? Oggi si vota. Ecco dieci punti per capire meglio', Il blog delle stelle, 23 June 2016, https://www.ilblogdellestelle.it/2016/06/brexit_o_breima.html; Andrea Picardi, 'Sì all'Europa e no all'euro. Ecco la linea dei cinquestelle dopo la Brexit', *Formiche*, 27 June 2016, <https://formiche.net/2016/06/brexit-m5s>; Francesco Zaffarano, 'Il M5S non vuole più lasciare l'Europa e l'Euro', *La Stampa*, 25 June 2016, <https://www.lastampa.it/politica/2016/06/25/news/il-m5s-non-vuole-piu-lasciare-l-europa-e-l-euro-1.34992844>.

⁹¹ See MPs Di Battista (5SM) and Battelli (5SM), Camera dei Deputati, meeting no. 642, 27 June 2016; MP Fattori (5SM), Senato, meeting no. 646, 27 June 2016.

⁹² Jonathan Zeitlin, Francesco Nicoli and Brigid Laffan, 'Introduction: the European Union beyond the polycrisis? Integration and politicization in an age of shifting cleavages', *Journal of European Public Policy* 26: 7, 2019, pp. 963–76, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2019.1619803>.

⁹³ Navarro, 'The consequences of neoliberalism in the current pandemic'.

⁹⁴ *Le Figaro* via YouTube, 'Qu'est-ce que l'Europe aujourd'hui?'; Ongaro et al., 'How the European Union responded to populism'.

⁹⁵ Charles Grant, *CER insight: coronavirus is pushing the EU in new and undesirable directions* (London, Brussels and Berlin: Centre for European Reform, 2020).

Populists went so far as to ask Cuba, Russia and China for help with the provision of medical equipment and personnel.⁹⁶

A coalition of Mediterranean countries, led by France, saw an opportunity to promote a proposal made during the eurozone crisis for a bond, issued by the European Commission, which could generate the necessary resources to help vulnerable countries. Unlike in the eurozone crisis, during the pandemic northern European countries could not interpret the economic crisis in terms of moralistic tales of irresponsible and/or pleasure-seeking southern Europeans,⁹⁷ and so their opposition to a common debt—based on the supposition that money earned by northern Europeans would be transferred to southerners—held less weight. A breakthrough was announced in May 2020, when Chancellor Merkel and French president Emmanuel Macron held a press conference outlining the details of the plan. To finance what would be known as the Recovery Fund, and subsequently as the NextGeneration EU (NGEU), the Commission would raise €750 billion on secondary markets: €390 billion would be allocated as grants, and €350 billion as loans. Substantively, the proposal meant that the financial and economic power of northern ‘creditor’ countries would back deficit spending in highly indebted southern member states. Spain and Italy, among the worst hit by the pandemic, were among the greatest beneficiaries.⁹⁸ Academics echoed mainstream parties in calling the fund a major leap forward towards the aspiration of ‘ever closer union’, and a historical turning point; some called it—not without exaggeration—a ‘Hamiltonian moment’,⁹⁹ ‘revolutionary’ or a ‘paradigm shift’.¹⁰⁰ The reactions of populists are instructive, as the sovereigntist content from previous crises, including during the acute phase of the pandemic, almost completely disappeared from their discourses. In Spain and Italy in particular, populists aligned closer to the mainstream *vis-à-vis* the European project.

In Spain, the Unidos Podemos coalition was part of the government that participated in negotiations on the NGEU; thus, Podemos had a seat at the table where decisions were made as to how the fund would be distributed. It is perhaps not surprising that it shared the enthusiasm of the PSOE, its mainstream coalition partner. Iglesias compared the plan to the ‘New Deal’ policies implemented by US president Franklin D. Roosevelt in the 1930s, a structural economic transformation led by an activist government.¹⁰¹ Here was a historic opportunity for Spain to invest in the technologies of the future, and hence in the well-being of its citizens. VOX, despite being in opposition, recognized that Spain urgently

⁹⁶ Andrea Kendall-Taylor and Carisa Nietsche, ‘The coronavirus is exposing populists’ hollow politics’, *Foreign Policy*, 16 April 2020.

⁹⁷ Philip Giurlando, ‘Stigma, hierarchy, and the eurozone’, *European Politics and Society* 23: 5, 2022, pp. 679–97, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23745118.2021.1928818>.

⁹⁸ Catherine Bosley and Maeva Cousin, ‘Spain and Italy are big beneficiaries of EU recovery deal’, Bloomberg, 28 July 2020, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-07-28/spain-and-italy-are-big-beneficiaries-of-eu-recovery-deal-chart>.

⁹⁹ Otmar Issing, ‘The COVID–19 crisis: a Hamilton moment for the European Union?’, *International Finance* 23: 2, 2020, pp. 340–47, <https://doi.org/10.1111/inf.12377>.

¹⁰⁰ Luo, ‘The COVID–19 crisis’.

¹⁰¹ Podemos via YouTube, ‘Pablo Iglesias presenta el plan de recuperación y transformación de la economía española’, 7 Oct. 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=z-ndrBiDbNE>.

needed the funds and that the country must embrace the opportunity; in the words of Iván Espinosa de los Monteros, VOX's former parliamentary leader, 'obviously the funds are good for Spain'.¹⁰² VOX seemed more concerned about excessive conditionality;¹⁰³ for its part, Podemos expressed its wariness about the funds being used to consolidate neo-liberal reforms.¹⁰⁴ An analysis of populist commentary in Spanish parliamentary debates, from both VOX and Podemos, highlights the absence of sovereigntist content as observed in previous events.¹⁰⁵ Essentially, both parties agreed with their mainstream counterparts on the value of the NGEU, notwithstanding minor technical disagreements as to how, and where, the money would be allocated.

In Italy, the 5SM was in government during the onset of the pandemic, with the Lega in opposition. Initially, the two parties—which had recently participated in a short-lived populist governing coalition that ended in acrimony—had different reactions towards the NGEU. After renewed calls for a 'new Europe' and new instruments to face the crisis, and issuing warnings about the consequences,¹⁰⁶ the 5SM reacted enthusiastically to the news coming from the EU and praised prime minister Giuseppe Conte for the outcome. On 21 July 2020, the 5SM tweeted: 'The #Recovery Fund is a historic result for Italy and the whole of Europe. Because in this crisis nobody saves himself alone, we will only come out of it working together.'¹⁰⁷ The following day, the official 5SM blog signalled a change in the party's mood by mentioning the Italian belief in the value of this 'great community' (the EU).¹⁰⁸ The capability to impose the Italian interest and be heard remained evident, but the change was considered extraordinary,¹⁰⁹ and the party's support for the 1941 Ventotene federalist European integration project was perceptible.¹¹⁰ 5SM's position was in line with that of the mainstream PD, whose leader Nicola Zingaretti saluted the EU's change of pace and asserted his party's support for a European solidarist model.¹¹¹

¹⁰² Ivan Espinosa (@ivanedlm) via Twitter/X, 'Este "paquete" no está en los Presupuestos. No viene de Europa. No se parece nada a los paquetes reales de ayuda de otros países, que se ofrecieron hace 7 meses, y que de media eran de un importe 7 veces superior a este.', 25 March 2021, <https://x.com/ivanedlm/status/1375000563834880002>.

¹⁰³ Grupo Parlamentario de VOX en el Congreso (@VOX_Congreso) via Twitter/X, 'La apuesta del Gobierno a la entrada del dinero de los fondos europeos esta provocando "una dependencia total de la Unión Europea y por tanto una pérdida de libertad y de soberanía". ...' 26 May 2021, https://x.com/vox_congreso/status/1397567726735052804.

¹⁰⁴ Íñigo Errejón (@ierrejon) via Twitter/X, 'El plan para gestionar los fondos europeos apunta a ser dinero para los de siempre para hacer lo de siempre: la política del 2008 con palabras bonitas. El Gobierno debe corregir.', 28 Jan. 2021, <https://x.com/ierrejon/status/1354878847460769794>.

¹⁰⁵ 14th Legislature's debates and interventions on the NextGenerationEU, 20 Dec. 2021, https://www.congreso.es/public_oficiales/L14/CORT/DS/CM/DSCG-14-CM-106.PDF#page=17.

¹⁰⁶ Among others, 5SM, 'Indietro non si torna, serve una nuova Europa', Il blog delle stelle, 28 March 2020, <https://www.ilblogdellestelle.it/2020/03/indietro-non-si-torna-serve-una-nuova-europa.html>.

¹⁰⁷ 5SM (@Mov5Stelle) via Twitter/X, 'Ci siamo riusciti. Per la prima volta siamo davvero andati in Europa a "battere i pugni sul tavolo" raggiungendo l'obiettivo. Il #RecoveryFund è un risultato storico per l'Italia e tutta l'Europa. Perché in questa crisi nessuno si salva da solo, ne usciremo solo lavorando insieme', <https://x.com/Mov5Stelle/status/1285529961021857792> (authors' translation).

¹⁰⁸ Vito Claudio Crimi, 'Siamo il motore del cambiamento (e della legislatura)', Il blog delle stelle, 22 July 2020, <https://www.ilblogdellestelle.it/2020/07/siamo-il-motore-del-cambiamento-e-della-legislatura.html>.

¹⁰⁹ Among others, MP Gubitosa (5SM), Camera dei Deputati, meeting no. 366, 6 July 2020.

¹¹⁰ MP Galizia (5SM), Camera dei Deputati, meeting no. 366, 6 July 2020; MP Crippa (5SM), Camera dei Deputati, meeting no. 377, 22 July 2020.

¹¹¹ 'Recovery Fund, Zingaretti: "Scelte UE fanno ben sperare su un cambio di passo"', *Repubblica*, 27 May 2020,

Being in opposition, the Lega did not initially share the newly found enthusiasm of the 5SM.¹¹² However, as the perspective of the NGEU became more realistic, the party moderated its position. In September 2020, Salvini declared that the Lega looked forward to collaborating.¹¹³ Although dissenting voices were raised,¹¹⁴ in December 2020 and January 2021, their complaints were limited to the lack of involvement of the Lega in the decision-making process as well as the inability of the government to spend the funds properly.¹¹⁵ In February 2021, just before re-entering government as part of the new 'grand coalition' led by former ECB governor Mario Draghi, the Lega announced that it was its involvement in the decisions concerning the funds that had led to its change in attitude.¹¹⁶ Those voices which had been the most critical towards the EU declined in visibility, the Italian exit from the EU exited from the political agenda, and pragmatically avoiding the subject became the 'new normal'.

In France, President Macron's movement, La République En Marche (later renamed Renaissance), naturally interpreted the outcome of the NGEU debate as confirming its position on the value of finding European solutions to continent-wide problems.¹¹⁷ Meanwhile, we found very little commentary among French populist parties, giving the impression that they preferred to avoid the issue. When it was raised by the RN, the principal criticism was that Macron had negotiated a bad deal, on the grounds that France would be contributing more money than it would be receiving.¹¹⁸ For LFI, Mélenchon gave a relatively long speech on the subject in the National Assembly, accusing the government of planning to allocate the money to businesses and not to the people.¹¹⁹ He demanded that the money should be used to protect French workers by preventing French firms from 'delocalizing' production; in criticizing the disbursement of funds rather than the policy itself, he implicitly accepted the NGEU despite its being implemented by the supranational technocrats he previously condemned. Meanwhile, François Ruffin, the once presumed successor to Mélenchon, said 'Europe has shifted

https://www.repubblica.it/politica/2020/05/27/news/recovery_fund_zingaretti_scelte_ue_fanno_ben_sperare_su_un_cambio_di_passo_-257756720.

¹¹² *La7 Attualità* via YouTube, 'Recovery fund, Matteo Salvini: "Dei signori di Berlino e Bruxelles non mi fido"', 3 June 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8Z28R7Wx8xo>.

¹¹³ 'Recovery Fund, Salvini: "Pronti a collaborare"', *Sky TG24*, 16 Sept. 2020, <https://video.sky.it/news/politica/video/recovery-fund-salvini-pronti-a-collaborare-615650>.

¹¹⁴ See MP Borghi (Lega), Camera dei Deputati, meeting no. 453, 18 Jan. 2021.

¹¹⁵ See, among others, MP Molinari (Lega), Camera dei Deputati, meeting no. 440, 9 Dec. 2020, and MP Gusmeroli (Lega), Camera dei Deputati, meeting no. 443, 18 Dec. 2020.

¹¹⁶ 'Governo Draghi, Salvini: "Sul Recovery Fund c'è un cambio di atteggiamento e di fiducia della Lega"', *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, 9 Feb. 2021, <https://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2021/02/09/governo-draghi-salvini-sul-recovery-fund-ce-cambio-di-atteggiamento-e-di-fiducia-della-lega/6095735>; Massimiliano Cassano, 'La Lega diventa europeista e vota il Recovery Fund (approvato) al Parlamento UE', *Il Riformista*, 10 Feb. 2021, <https://www.ilriformista.it/la-lega-diventa-europeista-e-vota-il-recovery-fund-approvato-al-parlamento-ue-194824>.

¹¹⁷ 'UE: l'eurodéputé Sandro Gozi décrypte le plan de relance européen', *Tous Politiques!*, 2020, <https://touspolitiques.fr/ue-leurodepute-sandro-gozi-decrypte-le-plan-de-relance-europeen>.

¹¹⁸ Caroline Quevrain, 'Un plan de relance européen "catastrophique pour la France", comme l'affirme Marine Le Pen?', *TF1 Info*, 19 Jan. 2022, <https://www.tf1info.fr/economie/un-plan-de-relance-europeen-catastrophique-pour-la-france-comme-l-affirme-marine-le-pen-2207610.html>.

¹¹⁹ Assemblée Nationale, 'Règlement du budget et approbation des comptes de l'année 2020', XVe législature, session ordinaire de 2020–2021, 16 June 2021, <https://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/dyn/15/comptes-rendus/seance/session-ordinaire-de-2020-2021/seance-du-mercredi-16-juin-2021#2555711>.

... [because after the pandemic] Brussels and Frankfurt opened their wallets ... and the Commission became less dogmatic and less willing to be the guardian of neoliberal orthodoxy as it was during the Greek crisis'.¹²⁰ One reason for the more subdued reaction of populists in France, we contend, was that France would benefit much less than Spain and Italy in terms of the balance of economic contributions and benefits.¹²¹ Another reason might be that, unlike in Italy and Spain, there were no populists in government. Macron had full control of the executive and did not have to consult either Le Pen or Mélenchon. Disentangling these two factors could be the subject of future research.

Conclusions

Populists often approach multilateral and supranational organizations in a way that flows from their distinctive understanding of politics—that is, the main societal conflict being that between the people and the elite. This discursive construction is projected internationally, especially during major events like referendums or crises which implicate the nation's future in terms of globalizing processes. Here, traditional right/left political conflicts are replaced with the populist/sovereignist-mainstream divide, whereby populists contest supranational or multilateral governance.

We also find, however, that this tendency can be disrupted under some conditions. The fourth crisis under investigation alters a consolidated trend, in that populists were faced with the breakthrough agreement to generate revenue via European sovereign bonds and distribute that revenue to countries in need. Suddenly, accusations of German colonialism, French arrogance and the EU's soulless undemocratic imposition of regulations on the 'pure people' held less weight, and populists, especially in Spain and Italy, were forced, as it were, to contend with a new reality that did not fit their previous framings—which had resonated with the voting public. Thus, the international projection of the elite/people dichotomy that is in tension with multilateralism is not always deterministic. When organizations adopt redistributionist policies like the NGEU, populists—at least, in countries which are major beneficiaries of such policies—may pragmatically change their strategic calculations in a way that aligns them closer to the mainstream on major questions related to the political organizations of which they are members.

For the EU, the policy implications of this disruption are significant. There, populists had advanced earlier and more extensively than in North America, in part because Europe had gone further in delegating decision-making power to international agencies, creating the widely held impression of the loss of the 'people's' sovereignty. Consequently, populists gained popular support, leading to several significant outcomes, including preventing the passage of the Consti-

¹²⁰ Francois Ruffin, 'A Jacques Delors le grand marche unique europeen reconnaissant', *Le Monde Diplomatique*, Feb. 2024, <https://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/2024/02/RUFFIN/66572> (authors' translation).

¹²¹ 'Plan de relance européen: l'anti-victoire', *Les Echos*, 6 Aug 2020, <https://www.lesechos.fr/idees-debats/cercle/plan-de-relance-europeen-lanti-victoire-1228948>.

tutional Treaty; Greece coming close to leaving the euro; and Brexit. These polycrises created the impression of an EU in which an existential reckoning was always in the background or just around the corner—an impression which was vividly on display in the early and acute phase of the pandemic, just before the announcement of the Recovery Fund/NGEU. Very few now predict the EU's collapse, particularly in Spain and Italy, but also in France, where populists have seemingly made a grudging peace with the project. The chaos of Brexit may also have contributed here¹²²—but even in late 2018 populists in Italy, for example, were calling for a referendum on the euro. After 2020, our research found few demands for referendums, and one reason may be that the NGEU represented a paradigm shift in how the EU dealt with crises.

This pattern seems to hold in southern Europe at least, but in northern Europe, Euroscepticism remains potent among populists. One implication is that the NGEU has potentially created a divergence between populists in net-beneficiary and net-contributor countries.¹²³ Populists in the latter strongly oppose the EU becoming a transfer union, which is one reason why northern countries insisted that the NGEU be a one-off event to address the pandemic. However, by 'co-opting' southern European populists, the NGEU has expanded and hence strengthened the coalition in favour of a more activist role for the European Commission; that coalition now includes some populists who, before the pandemic, were more likely to contest any increase in power for Brussels. Italy is 'Exhibit A' in this respect. In January 2023 the right-wing populist government led by Giorgia Meloni of Fratelli d'Italia called for a 'European sovereign fund' to protect European companies.¹²⁴

The evidence is mixed on whether, for populists in southern Europe, the observed shift represents a substantial change or a temporary pragmatism. One possibility is that if the plan succeeds in its objectives to create sustainable economic growth in the sectors of the future, especially environmental sustainability and digitalization, it will further strengthen mainstream positions on the value of European integration. At a minimum, we can expect that, for the duration of the NGEU (2021–2027), southern European countries may avoid battles with Brussels that could result in the loss of this money.

The examples of Hungary and Poland highlight how the NGEU increases the European Commission's margin of manoeuvre *vis-à-vis* populism. Hungary, it was announced on 11 December 2023, would receive the first tranche of 920 million euros, and the rest would be conditional on 'reforms related to the fight against corruption, the strengthening of judicial independence and the establishment of audit systems'.¹²⁵ Money for Poland was delayed in 2023 because of disputes with

¹²² Many thanks to the anonymous reviewer of *International Affairs* for pointing this out.

¹²³ The example of France supports this expectation, as it is a net contributor to the NextGenerationEU Fund. Many thanks to Michael Zürn for this observation.

¹²⁴ 'Meloni: serve un fondo sovrano europeo. Gentiloni: pronti a più aiuti di Stato green', *Il sole 24 ore*, 30 Jan. 2023, <https://www.ilssole24ore.com/art/meloni-serve-fondo-sovrano-europeo-AEDUHodC>.

¹²⁵ Jorge Liboreiro, 'Hungary set to receive 920 million euros in EU recovery funds with no strings attached', *Euronews*, 11 Dec. 2023, <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2023/11/23/hungary-to-receive-920-million-in-eu-funds-with-no-strings-attached-despite-rule-of-law-co>.

the European Commission over the rule of law,¹²⁶ and, during campaigning for the country's legislative election in October 2023, the mainstream opposition used this delay to highlight how populists threatened to separate Poland from Europe.¹²⁷ In part because of concerns about the country's EU membership, populists lost votes in Poland and were unable to continue in government; instead, the Civic Coalition of former prime minister and president of the European Council Donald Tusk gained enough votes to be able to establish a new governing coalition. One of Tusk's stated priorities is to unblock the money from the NGEU.¹²⁸ This highlights different—but perhaps equally important—mechanisms through which the European Commission's new activist role can pressure populists in ways related to eastern Europe's distinct regional context.¹²⁹ Populism there is more identity-based and less tied to economic conditions than it is in France, Italy or Spain. Moreover, both Hungary and Poland are outside the eurozone, hence, neither experienced austerity demanded by the Troika, as occurred in southern Europe, during the sovereign debt crisis. We expect that these factors would condition their responses to the NGEU, and future research can better elucidate the dynamics of different populists in distinct regions including southern, northern and eastern Europe.

On a conceptual level, the present study confirms the value of the discursive account of populism and international relations, which conceives of populism as a distinct form of political contestation that can transcend underlying political ideologies. This does not presume, of course, that these ideologies are unimportant. But on many issues related to the globalization process, left- and right-wing populists coalesce around the need to defend, recover or promote 'sovereignty'. There is disagreement as to whether they are referring to national¹³⁰ or the people's¹³¹ sovereignty. Our work is consistent with the latter: when populists mobilized against the Constitutional Treaty, against the treatment of Greece, and against Brussels during Brexit and the acute phase of the pandemic, their conception of the 'people' involved Europeans who, they claimed, were victims of the selfish and corrupt machinations emanating from elites in Brussels, Berlin, Frankfurt or Paris.

Finally, there are important policy implications for other multilateral and international organizations. Mainstream actors in leading states—particularly the United States, but also its partners in the G7—aim to uphold the institutions of

¹²⁶ Jo Harper, 'EU commissioner upbeat Poland's blocked EU funds could be released soon', Anadolu Agency, 24 June 2023, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/economy/eu-commissioner-upbeat-poland-s-blocked-eu-funds-could-be-released-soon/2930152>.

¹²⁷ 'Kaczyński will lead Poland out of EU if PiS win elections, claims Tusk', *Notes from Poland*, 13 Oct. 2023, <https://notesfrompoland.com/2023/10/13/kaczynski-will-lead-poland-out-of-eu-if-pis-win-elections-claims-tusk>.

¹²⁸ Aleksandra Krzysztozek, 'Tusk to use "any method" to unblock EU recovery money', *Euractiv*, 26 Oct. 2023, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/tusk-to-use-any-method-to-unblock-eu-recovery-money>.

¹²⁹ For the distinctive regional dynamics of populism, see Giurlando and Wajner, *Populist foreign policy*.

¹³⁰ Basile and Mazzoleni, 'Sovereignist wine in populist bottles?.'

¹³¹ Daniel F. Wajner, 'The populist way out: why contemporary populist leaders seek transnational legitimisation', *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 24: 3, 2022, pp. 416–36, <http://doi.org/10.1177/13691481211069345>.

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the liberal international order, on the assumption that economic globalization, and the international agencies that manage it, are optimal. Populists around the world disagree, and for this reason, especially in Latin America and other parts of the global South, have promoted alternative international arrangements organized around solidarity and redistribution. Here, we see echoes with the NGEU, suggesting that members of the global North could potentially contribute to reforms of international agencies organized along more solidarist lines, and in so doing help to reduce the sense among many in the global South that the people's sovereignty has been thwarted by corrupt and selfish international elites.