

A Tale of Two Populists: Javier Milei's and Nayib Bukele's Approach toward International Organisations

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Abstract

International organisations have formed the foundation of the global multilateral order since the end of World War II. In recent years, however, they have become the target of increasing criticism from populist politicians who are trying to demolish the foundations of the liberal international order. The aim of this academic essay is to contribute to the rapidly growing research on populist disengagement from the liberal international order by comparing the behaviour of Javier Milei and Nayib Bukele towards international organisations. The selection of these two particular populists fills a gap in the contemporary literature, which is mainly devoted to more straightforward right-wing populists, such as Viktor Orbán, or straightforward left-wing populists, like Hugo Chávez. The essay demonstrates that the approach of these two populist politicians toward international organisations differs drastically. Javier Milei is a clear example of an outsider populist with a radical stance toward the liberal international order. Nayib Bukele, on the other hand, represents a more pragmatic approach.

Keywords: international organisations, populists, Latin America, populist outsiders, OAS, UN

First published online on 19 December 2025, issue published on 19 December 2025

Introduction

Many people are watching Donald Trump's return to the US presidency with concern. The most frequently mentioned issues in this regard are the future of democracy in the US and continued support for Ukraine, which is under attack from Russia. However, the future of what we call the liberal international order is no less important. During his first term, Donald Trump proved that he is not the biggest fan of this system, and it seems that he could be even more radical in his second term. The situation is made worse by the fact that he is not alone in his worldview. A number of populist politicians around the world have reservations, to varying degrees, about the liberal international order. It is therefore extremely important to monitor and analyse these developments in detail.

Thanks to the importance of this topic, the number of highly relevant scientific studies published on this topic has increased significantly (e.g. Löffmann 2022; Pacciardi et al. 2024; Destradi & Vüllers 2024; Wajner et al. 2024). However, the small but important limitation of the current state of scientific research in this area is that it mostly focuses on a few well-known examples of populists such as Donald Trump, Viktor Orbán and Hugo Chávez, often neglecting populists from smaller and less influential countries outside the Euro-Atlantic sphere.

Good examples of these quite neglected politicians are Latin American populist presidents – Argentine President Javier Milei and Salvadoran President Nayib Bukele. Thanks to their effective use of social media, both politicians have become global phenomena (Maldonado 2024) who resonate beyond Latin America's borders. The media and the public often devote a lot of attention to them, but thanks to their excellent social media presence, they often have trouble distinguishing between reality and the image these two politicians and their supporters project. At the same time, their policies towards international organisations have not yet received much attention in academic literature. Both men support Donald Trump in words and deeds and, alongside Ecuador's president, Daniel Noboa, are among his closest allies among Latin America's ruling presidents. Moreover, they are also two very interesting populists in terms of their ideological foundations and practical politics. Both politicians are often classified as far-right populists, like Donald Trump and Viktor Orbán. In reality, though, they only partially overlap with this category. Javier Milei is, in some respects, far more liberal than the 'tropical Trump' and former president of Brazil, Jair Bolsonaro (Kestler 2022). Nayib Bukele is a pragmatic chameleon who has no problem changing his opinions and foreign policy orientation (Parthenay 2024). This difference alone makes them ideal subjects for expert analysis, because analysing their behaviour toward international organisations can tell us more about our current state of knowledge and

real politics than focusing on ruling populists who are more archetypally similar to Viktor Orbán or Donald Trump.

The aim of this essay is to fill this gap and contribute to the rapidly growing research on populist disengagement from the liberal international order by comparing the behaviour of Javier Milei and Nayib Bukele towards international organisations. To fulfill this goal, I apply the framework developed by Pacciardi, Spandler and Söderbaum (2024) and test three expectations regarding populist behavior toward international organisations. Two of these expectations¹ were developed by Wajner et al. (2024), and the last one follows the arguments from Levitsky and Loxton (2013) about the difference between maverick and outsider populists.

From a methodological perspective, this essay presents a comparative case study examining the discourse and policy of selected populist presidents toward international organisations. The timeframe of the case studies is limited by the time in office of both presidents. The case studies relied mainly on media reports, academic articles and reports from NGOs. I also closely followed the social media materials of both populists, as well as their official press releases. However, I often found the most important parts of their discourses in the media reports mentioned in the references. This is mainly due to their skills in public communication; the most influential discourses of both Milei and Bukele have consistently received a tremendous amount of media coverage.

Analytical framework

This essay draws on the conceptualisation of populism developed by Levitsky and Loxton (2013). These are drawn from Barr's (2009) synthesis, and define populism in terms of three key characteristics.

Populists mobilize mass support via anti-establishment appeals, positioning themselves in opposition to the entire elites. Second, populists are outsiders, or individuals who rise to political prominence from outside the national party system. Third, populists establish a personalistic linkage to voters, circumventing parties and other forms of institutional mediation by “vest[ing] a single individual with the task of representing ‘the people’”.

¹ Wajner, Destradi and Zühr (2024) formulate three expectations about populists and their foreign policy in their article. The first concerns the process of foreign policy decision-making, and the other two concern what foreign policy they then pursue. Given its objective, this essay focuses only on the latter two expectations. The decision to focus on these specific expectations is motivated by the special issue's thematic focus. The last expectation loosely follows on from the study by Levitsky and Loxton (2013). Its verification is very appropriate given the career differences between the two populists analysed.

According to them, every populist fulfills the first characteristic, i.e. anti-elitist appeal. However, in the case of the other two characteristics, there are instances where a populist does not fulfill both characteristics at the same time (Levitsky & Loxton 2013: 110). For the purposes of this essay, the most important distinction is whether populists fulfill the second characteristic. Based on this category, the authors of the concept divide populists into mavericks and outsiders. A maverick is a populist who is not an outsider and has previous political experience. A model example of such a populist was Ecuadorian President Abdalá Bucaram. Although he had a political party that served as his personal vehicle and distanced himself from Ecuador's ruling elites, he was by no means an outsider. He had been involved in politics his entire adult life (Levitsky & Loxton 2013: 119). A typical populist outsider was Peruvian President Alberto Fujimori. He was born into a working-class family of Japanese immigrants, which meant that in a country where the elite were predominantly white-skinned, he was an outsider from childhood. Before running for president, he served as rector of the relatively insignificant National Agrarian University and had no experience in political office (Levitsky and Loxton 2013: 121). According to some, he did not even plan to become president, and his candidacy was mainly a way to attract public attention to his senate campaign (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018: 72).

The relationship of populists towards international organisations is then analysed in this study through the concept of strategies developed by Pacciardi, Spandler and Söderbaum (2024). These researchers distinguish between four strategies that populists use to disengage international organisations: criticism, extortion, obstruction and exit. These strategies are rarely employed linearly, and it seems more useful to see them as potential strategies in a populist basket (2024: 2041). In their study, they clearly demonstrate that populists are able to dynamically change and combine their strategies in an effort to achieve the best possible result for themselves. Of course, non-populists can also apply these strategies to international organisations, and we often see this, for example, in the criticism of the functioning of the UN by democratic politicians in traditional parties. The difference between populists and non-populists, however, is that populists do so primarily in an attempt to satisfy their voters' demand for anti-establishment politics (Pacciardi et al 2024: 2028–2030).

Although the strategies that populists employ towards international organisations vary, in literature it is possible to come across several expectations regarding how populists will approach international organisations. I find three of them very interesting in relation to the populist presidents in Latin America analysed in this essay.

Expectation 1: All populists in power will tend to emphasise national sovereignty in foreign policy. The effect increases with authoritarian populists and over time.

The first expectation proposes that populists in power will contest international institutions because they claim to govern in the service of the people and that no other institution has the right to limit the will of the people. In this regard, they see international institutions as a threat to national sovereignty. Moreover, more authoritarian populists will be more skeptical of any limitation to national sovereignty (Wajner et al. 2024: 1825).

Expectation 2: Populists will increasingly tend to contest international institutions and the liberal international order the more power they gain and the more authoritarian they become.

The second expectation postulates that populists in power will contest international institutions ‘particularly where a high degree of authority has already been ceded to international institutions’ (Pacciardi et al 2024: 2043). In line with this argument populists tend to exit more often from international institutions with autonomous decision-making and enforcement powers than from low authority institutions. Again, we can expect more authoritarian populists will contest international institutions with a high degree of authority, because they did not want to make any concession of their possessed powers (Wajner et al. 2024: 1826–1827).

Expectation 3: Third, the populist outsider will be more likely to contest international institutions compared to a maverick populist.

The last expectations are inspired by the work of Levitsky and Loxton (2013). They argue that populist outsiders pose a greater threat to the survival of democratic institutions because they are political amateurs without prior experience with these institutions, have a limited understanding of them and are unable to cooperate effectively with them. I believe that we can extend this argument to some extent to the international institutions as well and expect that politicians who are unable to cooperate with democratic institutions at home will be unable to cooperate with institutions abroad. Moreover, we can expect that maverick populists will use aggressive rhetoric toward international institutions yet simultaneously possess a deeper understanding of the benefits of membership in these organisations.

Argentina under Javier Milei

Javier Milei was appointed as president of Argentina in December 2023. Before entering politics, he was an academic economist. However, he only came to the attention of a wider audience in Argentina as a media commentator. He was very successful in this role and was one of the economists who appeared most frequently in the local media. The COVID-19 pandemic greatly contributed to his even greater media visibility. During the pandemic, dissatisfaction with the left-wing government grew among the Argentine population, and Milei attracted the attention of younger voters who were forced to stay at home during the pandemic restrictions (Grinspan 2023).

One of the main reasons is that Milei is very eccentric and charismatic in his speeches and is completely at home on social media. Some even said he was a combination of a preacher and a rock star (Centenera 2023). However, he also attracted media and public attention by working his way up from a difficult family background, having his dogs cloned and teaching tantric sex (Jackson 2023).

His strengths, however, were not only his colorful personality but also his political programme, which was specific in the Argentine context and combined elements of a very liberal economy with opposition to what, from his point of view, is radical feminism (Heinisch et al. 2024). He presented himself as a staunch supporter of the free market and a critic of everything that, in his opinion, symbolises the left, communism and the existing political and bureaucratic elites (González 2023). Add to this the fact that Milei does not come from a family with ties to the political caste or bureaucratic elite and that he had only had a short career as a member of parliament at the time of his presidential candidacy, and he is a typical example of a charismatic populist outsider (Levitsky & Loxton 2013). The problem with politicians of this type, however, is that they are usually unable to function within the confines of democratic institutions, negotiate support for their actions and back down from their radicalism.

Moreover, Milei's success in the presidential election was largely due to the fact that he was seen by voters as a protest candidate, and his election was primarily a way for them to express their dissatisfaction with the economic situation and hold the outgoing Peronist administration accountable (Messari 2024). The most famous symbol of his entire campaign was a chainsaw, which was meant to symbolise the policy of cuts and curtailing the influence of what Milei disparagingly calls the political and bureaucratic caste (Ferre 2025). In Javier Milei's worldview, the lives of individuals are too constrained by all-powerful career politicians and bureaucrats, whom he does not hesitate to call parasites.

This stance is extremely important not only for Milei's domestic politics, but also for his foreign policy. In his thinking, international organisations represent another nest of bureaucrats who restrict the lives of people who strive to create value and live freely. Milei thus presents himself as a categorical critic of this state of affairs. Unlike other right-wing populists who also feel constrained by international organisations, however, Milei is strongly pro-market (Merke & Doval 2024) and does not favour protectionism like Jair Bolsonaro or Donald Trump.

With populists, however, there is often a difference between what they say during and after their campaigns and how they actually govern. Pacciardi and her colleagues aptly note that at the core of populist foreign policy is a balancing act between radical and pragmatic positions (Pacciardi et al. 2024: 2026). The first year and a half of Javier Milei's government shows that, with a few exceptions, the radical component has so far prevailed in his attitude toward international organisations.

The discord between Argentina and the Organization of American States (OAS) and the United Nations (UN) is mainly due to Javier Milei's opposition to Agenda 2030.² For the current Argentine president, this agenda is the embodiment of evil and a major obstacle to individual freedom in the world. At the OAS, Argentina voted against a resolution on sexual violence in Haiti (Merke & Doval 2024) and opposed the invitation of pro-abortion NGOs to the organisation's general assembly (La Derecha Diario 2025a). Both of these steps represent a rejection of what Milei considers a harmful gender ideology and ideological pressure from progressive circles and social justice warriors.

This stance is also visible in Argentina's actions at the UN. Milei's first speech as Argentine president in 2024 was very illustrative in this regard. In it, Milei accused the UN of pushing a progressive and socialist agenda. From his point of view, the UN has become a multi-tentacled leviathan that tries to tell people how to live (Buenos Aires Herald 2024), which is again in stark contrast to his worldview. In addition, he criticised the UN for supporting dictatorships such as Cuba and Venezuela and for mishandling the COVID-19 pandemic. However, neither Milei nor his government have threatened to withdraw their country from the UN as a whole. Nevertheless, Argentina has clearly and unambiguously expressed its disagreement with the aforementioned policies. This is particularly evident in its abstention from a number of votes. Argentina even voted against a UN resolution on the protection of women and girls in the digital environment, arguing that its implementation would unduly restrict freedom of speech (Buenos Aires Herald 2024b).

Another emblematic example is the Milei administration's decision to distance itself from the UN Pact for the Future.³ Here, Argentine representatives clearly state that they disagree with this policy, even considering it totalitarian and the proposed solutions to be wrong. Argentine Foreign Minister Diana Mondino said that negotiations on this pact began under the previous government and that Milei's government had offered constructive amendments that were not taken into account (Buenos Aires Herald 2024c).

The one time Milei did not categorically oppose gender equality and sustainable development goals was in the EU Mercosur agreement in December 2024. Argentina originally opposed the gender and development goals in this document, but later, despite harsh rhetoric, Milei agreed with the agreement between

- 2 Agenda 2030 is the UN's global sustainable development plan adopted in 2015. The plan aims to achieve 17 ambitious goals by 2030, such as eradicating poverty and hunger, improving climate protection and eliminating gender inequality (UN 2015).
- 3 The UN Pact for the Future is the UN's international agreement adopted in 2024. The agreement aims to improve global cooperation and adapt international institutions to the challenges of the 21st century. It covers a broad range of topics, including sustainable development, climate change and human rights (UN 2024).

Mercosur and the EU and valued the strategic role of MERCOSUR (Malamud and Schenoni 2025).

Besides these exceptions, the Argentina relationship with MERCOSUR is quite predictable. Milei is currently calling for greater liberalisation of this institution and even threatening that Argentina may leave the organisation if this help to cement a free-trade agreement with United States (Buenos Aires Times 2025). However, this is a rare case of the Milei administration resorting to extortion, as they usually opt for criticism and obstructions.

As for the fourth possible strategy, i.e. leaving an international organisation (exit), it has so far only been used with the WHO. Argentina ratified its withdrawal from this organisation in June 2025. The claimed reason is that this organisation has betrayed science and scientific standards and that bureaucrats within the WHO do not want to reform the organisation. On a practical level, however, this is primarily a follow-up to the steps taken by the US and thus an effort to achieve greater foreign policy convergence with Donald Trump. Incidentally, the withdrawal itself was symbolically ratified during RFK Jr's visit to Buenos Aires (The Guardian 2025).

A notable exception to the foreign policy practices described above is Milei's desire for Argentina to cooperate more with NATO. In April 2024, Argentina requested through its foreign minister to join the defence alliance as a global partner (AP 2024). This step is, of course, very pragmatic from Milei's point of view, as Argentina could benefit greatly from it, and it is also another way for Milei to distance himself from Russia or China. Even so, it is an interesting move, because from a theoretical point of view, we tend to expect populists in power to leave established international organisations rather than join them.

El Salvador under Nayib Bukele

Unlike Javier Milei, the current president of El Salvador is no newcomer to politics or the presidency. He has been president since 2019. Before that, he served as mayor of San Salvador, the capital of El Salvador, and even worked in political marketing. Nayib Bukele is therefore an experienced politician who, during his career, has managed to change his party affiliation, political ideology and his opinion on a number of issues (Wolf 2024). He began his political career as mayor for the left-wing FMLN party, before founding the more technocratic Nuevas Ideas party, and is now one of Donald Trump's closest allies, embracing some conservative ideas. Based on his previous political experience he is an example of a maverick populist.

Unlike Javier Milei, however, he abandoned democracy norms long ago and transformed his country into a typical electoral authoritarian regime. Dissimilar to traditional autocrats, he is a master of social media and new media and has turned himself into a highly marketable brand rather than a cult figure. This has

even enabled him to mobilise Salvadoran citizens not particularly interested in politics (Meléndez-Sánchez 2022) and gain numerous fans far beyond the borders of this small Central American state.

He has become more well-known abroad for legalising Bitcoin (Parthenay 2024) and cracking down on crime than for restricting the media and the opposition. Similar to Javier Milei, he was helped to victory by disillusionment and dissatisfaction with previous politicians and the state of the country – particularly high crime and corruption. Although it is difficult to determine whether he leans more right or left, he is a crystal-clear example of a classic populist who defends the interests of the good people against corrupt politicians, criminal organisations or critical voices from abroad (Wolf 2024).

His relationships with international organisations can be described as very flexible. Compared to Javier Milei, he is more pragmatic and reactionary in his relationship with the liberal international order and international cooperation. Like Hugo Chávez and Jair Bolsonaro, he is not afraid to clash with international organisations, but otherwise he is far more optimistic in his relations with them than the two aforementioned populist former presidents from Latin America (Thiers & Wehner 2023).

A good example of Bukele's willingness to change his mind is his relationship with the Organization of American States, and especially corruption in his own country. One of his key promises in the 2019 presidential election campaign was to establish an international anti-corruption body, CICIES. This was indeed established on the basis of an agreement with the Organization of American States, but two years after the agreement, the government of El Salvador withdrew. It turned out that Bukele's government also had a problem with corruption during the COVID-19 pandemic (Wolf 2024).

The situation was further complicated by the fact that OAS Secretary General Luis Almagro chose as his advisor a politician who belonged to the Salvadoran opposition and had been a long-time critic of Bukele. Bukele then declared that his country would seek other international organisations with which it could cooperate in the fight against corruption, and the opposition politician in question was arrested (Papadovassilakis & Robbins 2021). Since 2021, Bukele's stance toward the OAS has become much more critical. However, this is also related to the fact that the OAS regularly criticises the human rights violations in El Salvador during Bukele's administration.

An example of Bukele's critical stance towards the OAS is a tweet from 2022, in which he wrote: 'It is clear that the Ministry of Colonies in Washington, also known as the OAS, no longer has any reason to exist' (The Tico Times 2022). Compared to 2019, this is certainly a clear shift and, at the same time, a clear message not only to this international organisation but also to the US. At that time, Joe Biden was president, and his administration was far less favourable to

Bukele than the previous and current administrations of Donald Trump. Like the OAS, the Biden administration drew attention to human rights violations in El Salvador and the gradual autocratisation of the country (Parthenay 2024: 306). However, with the exception of exit from CICIES, Bukele's main strategy toward the OAS is criticism.

Bukele's relationship with the UN has been more positive so far. Although he occasionally criticises the organisation, his criticism in comparison to the OAS is milder and mainly performative. During his first speech at the UN in 2019, for example, he criticised the fact that political meetings were not yet held online (Peltz 2019). However, he has never questioned the very purpose of the organisation. In 2023, he stated that the UN and the General Assembly needed to be reformed, primarily to better address global issues. According to Bukele, the current General Assembly is mainly a discussion platform, where world leaders 'talk about different things, without achieving anything substantial to transform humanity'. Although Bukele desired changes and reforms, he did not question the organisation's very existence (Vega 2023). Moreover, Bukele continues to use the UN platform to promote himself and defend his government's actions, which have been met with international criticism. It is certainly not yet possible to say that El Salvador has significantly sabotaged the UN's activities or threatened to leave.

The only visible exception may be Bukele's changing stance on the aforementioned Agenda 2030. During his first presidential term, he at least publicly supported it. His government signed a cooperation agreement with the UN on this agenda and received financial support from the UN. However, in early 2024, he declared that such agendas were suspicious. Subsequently, his government dismissed 300 employees of the Ministry of Culture for allegedly promoting bad values, and an MP of Bukele's party responded to this statement by saying that Agenda 2030 had no place in El Salvador. Although El Salvador has not yet formally withdrawn from the agreement, its implementation is uncertain (Latin American Post 2024). In an authoritarian country, the likes of which El Salvador has become under Nayib Bukele's presidency, such developments should not be taken lightly.

Comparative summary

The previous two subchapters clearly show that Milei and Bukele have quite different attitudes toward international organisations. Their approaches are summarised in Table 1. Javier Milei has been acting more radically so far, and it is rather possible that he will continue at this pace. In his worldview, the current international system should look very different, and he believes that the bureaucratic elites of international organisations are doing it a lot of harm. However, some experts point out that Milei does not reject only international organisations, but the Westphalian system as well, which is related to his negative attitude towards the state as such. Merke and Doval, who have analysed Javier

Milei's attitudes toward the state in detail, point out that he considers the state an evil entity, even describing it as a mafia with legal backing. For Javier Milei, the 'state is not a legitimate actor in the international system, but a malevolent force' (Merke & Doval 2024: 94). In this respect, his views are truly unique, as other populists generally have no problem with the existence of states and, on the contrary, want to strengthen their influence at the expense of international organisations. At the same time, it is clear that Javier Milei is able to actively use all four strategies defined by Pacciardi, Spandler and Söderbaum and does not resort to mere performative criticism. So far, he has most often resorted to criticism and obstruction. However, there is one significant difference in how Javier Milei uses these two strategies towards the OAS and the UN. In the case of the OAS, he has so far only used these strategies to express his disagreement with gender policy. In the case of the UN, however, he uses these strategies against a much broader range of policies and even to express his disagreement with the organisation's functioning or direction. But if he persists in his radical stance, it is possible that exit will prevail at the end of his term.

Nayib Bukele, on the other hand, is an expert in performative criticism and otherwise has no serious problem with the existence of international organisations, as long as they are not extremely critical of him or his government. Table 1 shows that his most frequently used strategy so far is criticism. However, there is also a difference in how he criticises the UN and the OAS. In the case of the UN, his criticism is purely performative and does not question the organisation's existence as such. Regarding the OAS, in recent years Bukele has also questioned the very existence of the organisation. The most likely explanation is that the OAS is sharply critical of the restrictions on civil and political freedoms imposed in El Salvador during his government, which he understandably opposes. Unlike Milei, he has not yet comprehensively and openly defined his vision for the functioning of the international system. This is probably due to the fact that he himself is quite flexible on these issues. His criticism is therefore often quite technical and the ideas he proposes are very vague.

Table 1: Forms of disengagement from international institutions of Milei and Bukele

	Javier Milei	Nayib Bukele
Criticism	OAS, UN	OAS, UN
Extortion	MERCOSUR	
Obstruction	OAS, UN	
Exit	WHO	CICIES

Source: Author

Another question is to what extent policy toward international organisations is actually an important issue for Bukele's and Milei's voters. In almost every country, foreign policy is of less interest to voters than domestic policy. Experts often argue that populists pursue foreign policies that secure them support at home (Pacciardi et al. 2024: 2026). However, both politicians were elected primarily because of the poor political situation in their own countries and as a protest against the established political representation. In this sense, it is possible that strong opposition to international organisations is not what their voters primarily expect or care about. For example, for Javier Milei's voters, the state of the Argentine economy will certainly be more important than Milei's crusade against expressions of feminism at the UN.

This assumption that populists pursue foreign policies that secure support at home certainly holds true for right-wing populists, who are more nationalistically oriented, or traditional left-wing populists such as Hugo Chávez, who wanted to dismantle the international system as a symbol of imperialism. However, Javier Milei is certainly not a nationalist or proponent of economic protectionism (Kestler 2022). Javier Milei wants to dismantle the international system because he sees supranational institutions as another nest of an evil bureaucratic caste and believes these organisations are obstacles to economic freedom. Elements of nationalist rhetoric can be found in Bukele's speeches, for example when he emphasises that only the citizens of El Salvador will decide on the country's future and that other states or international organisations have no right to advise them (Wolf 2024: 301). Although, on a practical level, Bukele is seeking foreign development aid and investment, so he cannot afford to be too harsh.

Nevertheless, in relation to the first expectation, Bukele definitely emphasises national sovereignty. However, this appeal did not exist in Milei's discourse because for him the 'state is a malevolent force and not a legitimate actor in a society of States' (Merke & Doval 2024: 96). The first expectation cannot be confirmed in this study. However, two important points should be mentioned in this regard. The first is that Javier Milei remains a unique case among populists, so his existence alone cannot invalidate this theoretical assumption in general. In addition, the question arises as to how Milei's position should be assessed. It is clear from his speeches that he is not a proponent of the state. At the same time, however, he is the president of one state, and his domestic policies have so far certainly not been aimed at any radical deconstruction of this type of social order.

The second expectation also cannot be fully confirmed. Milei stepped back from the case of the EU-MERCOSUR agreement, which involved a low-power international institution. Nevertheless, he has a more radical stance toward high-power international institutions. The most visible examples are the announced exit from the WHO and obstructions in the UN. Both facts are in line with the theoretical second expectation. On the other hand, the more autocratic Bukele

has not yet had any major problems with the UN, but his exit from CICIES and his harsh criticism of the OAS contradict this expectation. Bukele's stance can also be explained in another way. Although both countries have a number of economic and other problems, Argentina is undoubtedly a much larger and richer country with more options for maneuvering in the international arena. El Salvador is a smaller, poorer and less economically developed country that can benefit more from membership in international organisations; for example, withdrawal or the threat of withdrawal from various UN agencies is far more disadvantageous for it. We should keep this aspect in mind, as it is often overlooked when analysing populists from wealthier and more influential Euro-Atlantic countries.

It seems that we can confirm the last expectation. Outsider Milei contested international institutions more than Bukele. It is clear that since taking power, Javier Milei has taken a far more radical stance toward international organisations than Nayib Bukele, which could indeed be due to his lack of experience with how they function. However, another factor is undoubtedly that, unlike Bukele, he has his own ideas about how the international system should change and opposes its current form.

However, it must be said that there is a key intervening factor that cannot yet be adequately assessed, namely Donald Trump and his future stance toward international organisations. In June 2025, the US administration threatened to withdraw from the OAS or cut its funding if the organisation did not begin to take more active measures against left-wing dictatorships in Latin America (La Derecha Diario 2025b). It can be expected that if the Trump administration were to take these steps, Argentina or El Salvador could follow suit. Javier Milei, for example, has a big problem with the left-wing dictatorships in Venezuela and Cuba, and Nayib Bukele does not take kindly to criticism of his regime from the OAS.

On the other hand, it should be noted that when the US left UNESCO during its first term in office, El Salvador did not follow suit. However, Argentina, like the US, has begun its withdrawal from the WHO, and the two countries are reportedly discussing the establishment of a new organisation that would play a similar role. We have not yet seen any similar considerations or steps from the El Salvador government, and this would be more costly for this country than for the US or Argentina. However, we can clearly see that Argentina under Milei and El Salvador under Bukele are trying to get as close as possible to Trump's America, and it is therefore possible that they will copy the steps of the US administration with regard to international organisations. Both countries need Donald Trump's support for negotiations with the International Monetary Fund and investment from the US investors. In this case, the populists' foreign policy can also serve as a way to secure support abroad, which is another dimension of populist foreign policy that has not been emphasised much so far.

Conclusion

The aim of this academic essay was to compare the actions of Javier Milei and Nayib Bukele towards international organisations. The essay clearly demonstrates that although both populists are grouped together as politicians around Donald Trump, their actions are quite distinct. Milei and Bukele differ in both their background and political practice. Milei is a textbook example of a radical populist outsider whose attitudes have not been dulled by his first year and a half in the presidential palace. Bukele, on the other hand, is more of a pragmatic opportunist who revels in performative criticism but stops there when it suits him.

Moreover, this essay demonstrates that two of the three expectations regarding populist attitudes toward international institutions formulated by Wajner et al. (2024) are not universally applicable. Both of the analysed presidents are more unique than these expectations expect. Javier Milei has a distinctly different approach to the Westphalian system (Merke & Doval 2024), and he does not prioritise national sovereignty in the traditional sense. Perhaps he cares about the sovereignty of ordinary people against bureaucratic elites in transnational organisations, but it is still a significantly different approach. Nayib Bukele is a typical example of a current autocrat who governs in a competitive authoritarian regime. However, his stance toward international institutions is very conformist, which is counterintuitive to the expectations of Wajner et al. (2024) regarding the more authoritarian populists. We can say that both of these politicians are unique, but we must be aware that more populists like Milei can lead countries in the near future, and our concepts and theories need to be prepared for this shift. These political changes could lead to shifts in domestic politics in several countries as well as in international institutions. We have already witnessed the US and Argentina leave the WHO, and other world leaders are considering following suit. It will be interesting to see whether a potential wave of departures from the WHO would result in the establishment of a new organisation with perhaps less authority to accommodate populist calls for national sovereignty or greater development of purely bilateral relations. There are reports that Argentina and the United States are proposing the creation of an alternative 'world health organisation' (Choi 2025), but no further details are yet known, and the question remains what such an organisation should look like so that Javier Milei does not label it another nest of totalitarian ideas and corruption.

On the other hand, this essay also examined promising expectations about the relationship between the background of populists and their attitudes towards international organisations. It seems that the expectations warrant further verification in future research. The findings of this essay are not only important for academic debate about contemporary populists and their relationships with international organisations, but they also have clear implications for policy prac-

tioners. It is clear that it does not make much sense to try to fit all of Donald Trump's political allies into the same category. This unnecessarily obscures the fundamental differences between these politicians, which makes it harder for us to understand them, respond appropriately to their actions or at least agree on some form of cooperation with them, which is necessary if we want to preserve the current liberal international order.



Funding

This output was supported by the NPO Systemic Risk Institute, number LX22N-PO5101, funded by the European Union—Next Generation EU (Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, NPO: EXCELES).

Conflict of interest statement

No conflict of interest was reported.

Data availability statement

No supplementary data associated with the article.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank anonymous reviewers and journal editors for their comments and suggestions which significantly improved the text. All remaining errors are solely my own.

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