CEJISS

CENTRAL EUROPEAN JOURNAL OF INTERNATIONAL AND SECURITY STUDIES

Contents

Volume 19, Issue 4, December 2025

Research articles

Thematic section
Populists in International Institutions

Conceptual Quality in Security and Defence Practice: The Case of Hybrid Warfare

Vojtěch Bahenský
Charles University, Prague, Czech Republic, ORCiD: 0000-0002-6860-085X,
corresponding address: vojtech.bahensky@fsv.cuni.cz

Abstract

It has become a norm to bemoan the unending stream of new concepts in defence policy, many of which sparked a lively debate on their actual novelty, utility and, more generally, added value. Those discussions often lack a shared language or benchmarks. The paper argues that the analytical utility of concepts for practical policy in areas of defence and security is fundamentally based on the same qualities that make concepts suitable for academic research, and that scholarly criteria for conceptual quality can therefore serve as a basis for evaluating and discussing the utility of concepts in practice. The article introduces one such set of scholarly criteria, discusses its applicability for practice and illustrates it through a case study of the concepts of hybrid warfare.

Introduction

Conceptual vocabulary in the area of security, defence and political violence has recently become an increasingly hotly debated subject, with the quality and utility

of many of the quite popular and possibly fashionable concepts being contested with varying degrees of success (Biegon, Rauta & Watts 2021a; Libiseller 2023; Libiseller & Milevski 2021; Milevski 2022, 2023; Rauta 2021). While the debates are a welcome sign of vibrant academic and expert debate, they are often also difficult and frustrating. Much of the difficulty arguably stems from implicit disagreements about the purpose of the particular concept and what makes a particular concept good at fulfilling this purpose.

While some of the difficulties might stem from the fact that the concept generally can't be empirically tested (as will be argued below), much can also be ascribed to the relative lack of attention paid to systematic thinking on the concepts and their quality. As vigorous debates on the merits of concepts such as 'hybrid warfare' highlight, this lack of a more explicit and systematic approach to conceptual quality did not stop the community from challenging concepts deemed of dubious value. However, the lack of shared criteria for judging concepts and the lack of shared language arguably hindered the discussion.

Not only do proponents and opponents of this particular novel concept, as noted by Lukas Milevski, 'usually talk past each other, each more effectively addressing his own rather than the other side' (2023: 718), but it is often unclear whether the fact that the concepts were found of dubious value by academia does (or should) damn the concept in the realm of security and defence practice. In other words, whether the same criteria apply to the theoretical and practical application of the concept.

Luckily, the question of quality and utility of concepts has received much-needed attention in recent years, with important contributions on what uses concepts have in strategic studies and what differentiates good (useful) concepts from the rest (Milevski 2022, 2023). This study builds on this literature to contribute to a more systematic approach to thinking about evaluating concepts in the realm of security and defence.

Specifically, I argue that formal frameworks for evaluating conceptual quality within the broader social sciences are applicable and useful for practice within the realm of security, strategy and defence. I further argue that using such a framework as a point of reference for concepts in these domains, including their (re)formulation and use, and debating their quality and utility, can contribute to better analysis and better policy.

This proposal is empirically anchored and illustrated by the concept of hybrid warfare, which has become a poster child for those concerned about the quality of concepts in the realm of security, defence and strategy (Libiseller 2023; Libiseller & Milevski 2021; Milevski 2022, 2023). The prominent position of the concepts of hybrid warfare in this scholarship is well earned. While dating back to the 2000s, the term experienced a meteoric rise in popularity after the Russian annexation of Crimea. Importantly for our context, the term has been adopted in defence, security, politics and popular consciousness (Eberle & Daniel 2023). Many trans-

formations and reinventions of hybrid warfare and vibrant discussion of its merits (Cox, Bruscino & Ryan 2012; Gray 2012; see, for example, Kofman 2016; Stoker & Whiteside 2020) make it a logical choice for improving the conceptual toolkit in security and defence.

The paper proceeds in three steps. The first chapter introduces the literature on concepts and examines their quality and utility, comparing their use in academic and practical settings. The second chapter introduces a scholarly framework for concept formation (Gerring & Christenson 2017) as one of the possible approaches to explicit thinking about the quality of concepts and discusses how it can be useful for the evaluation of concepts in practical policy-making. The third chapter then proceeds to show how this framework could be applied to a variety of concepts around the terms 'hybrid warfare' and 'hybrid threat'. The conclusion summarises the main findings and discusses their possible implications for practice.

Concepts between scholars and professionals

Discussion of concepts can be a frustrating exercise, since they are so foundational to the way we understand the world and communicate about it. Concepts are inescapable even in everyday communication, and much more so in any analytical endeavour. As Gerring notes, 'language is the toolkit with which we conduct our work, as well as the substance upon which we work' (Gerring 1999: 359). While the meaning of words in common language is determined by their usage and context, with the convention being codified in a dictionary based on this in a lexicographic approach to definition (Gerring 1999: 362; Sartori 2009a: 66–67; 88–89), the systematic analytical work generally requires a different approach. Words in the common language are rarely precise, and multiple meanings are often acceptable. A specialised field, therefore, generally needs to go beyond the common understanding of words and be conscious in elucidating and establishing meanings of words (Gerring 1999: 362–363; Sartori 2009a). To distinguish this from the common language understanding, we generally use 'term' rather than 'word' and 'definition' rather than 'meaning' (Gerring 1999: 358; Sartori 2009a: 67).

While logical and methodological aspects of 'fiddling with words and definitions' (Gerring 1999: 363) have received considerable attention throughout history (Gerring 1999: 358), they have received relatively limited explicit treatment in the social sciences, especially compared to questions such as theorising and data analysis. A foundational work with respect to the question of conceptual quality is Giovanni Sartori's article on *concept misformation* (1970), followed up by further research by Sartori (2009a, 2009b), John Gerring (Gerring 1999, 2012; Gerring & Christenson 2017) and Gary Goerz (2006).

It is necessary at this point to at least briefly outline how concepts are understood in the social sciences before addressing the question of the applicability of this scholarship for practice in the area of security and defence. There are three

basic components of concept: (i) the term, denoting the word or label used; (ii) the definition, or meaning, describing elements or attributes delimiting the content of the concept; and (iii) the real-world phenomena that are being defined (Gerring 1999: 357–358; Sartori 2009a: 66).

Analytically, concepts primarily serve as basic descriptive arguments. If we, for example, describe an event as a war, we communicate that this event (phenomenon) has the properties (attributes) that fit the definition of war, justifying the use of the term 'war'. At the same time, they also allow us to generalise beyond a single case. A range of events, based on their shared properties, can be categorised as war. In this sense, concepts (especially more abstract ones) allow us to 'carve nature at its joints'. This generalisation, in turn, allows general theorising about those general phenomena, such as war. We can expect phenomena, sharing critical properties, to behave in a similar manner in comparable situations. In this sense, while being primarily descriptive, concepts also have an implicit causal dimension (Goertz 2006). This range of purposes, serving also as the benchmark for scholarly discussions of conceptual quality, is further referred to as 'analytical use' or 'analytical utility'.[1]

This can be contrasted with what Milevski (2022) describes as the social utility of a concept,[2] lying in its ability to attract elite or public attention and/or funding, or focus bureaucratic efforts. This social utility is logically independent from analytical utility (Milevski 2022: 67), and it might indeed lie more in the realm of use of the term rather than concept. It should also be noted that the social utility of concepts is an issue shared by academics and practitioners alike (Libiseller 2023; Milevski 2022; Wicker 2023a), as scholars are by no means immune to efforts to attract attention or funding. Giovanni Sartori's complaints about 'novotism' in academia would fall well within the concept of social utility.

Before returning to the discussion of analytical utility, it is important to address a possible argument that some concepts in practice should be judged only on their social utility, as the social utility might, in the realm of practice, achieve collectively desirable outcomes in line with the primary collective purpose of security-provision.[3] This argument would have to rest on the possibility of keeping a concept used for its social utility separate from its analytical use. This might prove difficult, as the socially useful concept is likely to penetrate the practice through its use and

---

1 It could be argued that a communicative role could be treated as a separate form of utility or role cutting across both analytical and social utility (see below). As it is here understood as clearly and unambiguously signalling the intendent content (meaning), it is for simplicity folded under the umbrella of analytical utility.

2 The distinction between analytical and social utility can also be loosely mapped onto Elena Wicker's distinction between functional and performative use of terms (Wicker 2022).

3 As opposed to academia, where we would see the social utility of the concepts as furthering individual goals to the detriment of collective goals of knowledge production.

adoption by the audience rather than their users, as well as through the need of the users to maintain some level of consistency. If politicians speak about a threat conceptualised as hybrid, they are then expected to express this threat in official documents, such as strategies, and publicly demonstrate an effort to counter it (see, for example, Eberle & Daniel 2023). It therefore still seems prudent to discuss the analytical utility of concepts even if they are judged to be used primarily for their social utility.

Coming back to analytical utility, I argue that it is just as applicable in security practice as in the realm of scholarly work, as analysis and communication are practically impossible without it. Most direct evidence of the importance of concepts for analysis and communication are dictionaries establishing shared definitions of key terms within the military, as in the case of the DOD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms (Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff 2021) or even between militaries and their languages as in the case of the AAP-6 NATO Glossary of Terms and Definitions (NATO Standardisation Office 2021).

While the military terminology and dictionaries are fascinating topics in and of themselves (see: Wicker 2022), it is unlikely that anyone is losing sleep over the quality of concepts such as 'direct fire' (Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff 2021: 64) or how 'unwanted cargo' is defined (NATO Standardisation Office 2021: 134). The debates about conceptual quality and utility are instead centred on more abstract and multifaceted concepts, often capturing forms of war or warfare (e.g. Rauta 2021). This is logical, as the question of whether some definitions fit the reality and whether they excise the logical part of reality 'at the seams' is much more open to debate the further we move from the concrete concepts (Villani et al. 2022). While the question of conceptual quality can be theoretically applied to concrete concepts as well, this paper will focus on abstract concepts, as there is generally much less contestation of the concrete ones. This paper, therefore, focuses on abstract and contested concepts.

Even with this caveat, there are still arguments in favour of a different approach to concepts in theory and practice that need to be addressed. The first comes from Canestaro, who argues that 'a lack of common purpose between practitioners and academics on how to conceptualise and define civil war is the product of differences between the two groups in culture, process, and most importantly, purpose' (2016). While the culture and process differences are indisputably very important in explaining the differences between the academic and practitioner concepts,[4] those are not as important as the question of purpose. Canestaro further elaborates on the policy purpose of the civil war definition, stating that 'practitioners want to define the term to serve as a trigger for policy changes' (2016).

---

4   The fact that definitions of hybrid warfare in NATO are necessarily influenced by the differing priorities of various member countries can serve as an example of this.

While it is true that an academic attempting to detect civil wars within quantitative data over long period of time will create a different definition than a policy analyst formulating policy, as nobody would likely argue, for example, that the difference in 999 and 1001 death in a year (Small & Singer 1982) should trigger fundamental shifts in governmental policy, there are also reasons to not see this as a barrier for the applicability of the conceptual quality criteria from social sciences.

First, it is arguably less a question of conceptualisation and more of operationalisation. As literature on concepts in the social sciences recognises, there are different levels of definitions (Sartori 2009b), and as the need to precisely locate the concept in the empirical reality increases, the elements of the definition will shift, not least to reflect the observable aspects of the concept and the availability of data.

Secondly, it is recognised that while it is desirable to have reasonably similar definitions of the same term across the field to enable both communication and cumulation, this does not mean that the definitions have to be the same. It is understood that, for example, when defining democracy as an independent variable, scholars should focus the definition on those shared properties of democracies that they expect to be critical for the presumed causal chain leading to the dependent variable (outcome) (Goertz 2006). If civil war is to be defined as a trigger for policy, it is just as reasonable to focus the definition on those aspects of civil war that are seen as critical for the policy shift.

The other concern about using scholarly criteria for practice in strategic studies was voiced by Lukas Milevski (Milevski 2022, 2023), who focused on 'strategic concepts'. In the two papers, he differentiates between ad hoc concepts (and theories) and systemic or general concepts (fitting within systemic theories). Where systemic theories (and concepts) are general and universal, ad hoc counterparts are to be devised on the basis of those theories to fit the specific context and immediate needs (Milevski 2023: 722–724). He concluded that:

> Strategic concepts are judged by two measures of quality, scholarly and practical. Scholarly expectations are narrowly academic but result in rigorously developed concepts, according to mainstream schools of thought on what to expect from concepts and theory in the social sciences. . . . Yet the degree to which strategic concepts adhere to any particular type of measure, scholarly or practical, depends on where it resides in the transference process from systemic theory to tactical orders. (Milevski 2023: 726)

I would agree with most of Milevski's arguments, which might be unsurprising as he departs from the same starting point of scholarly criteria for conceptual quality. However, this agreement comes with some qualifications, especially with regard to the contrast between systemic and practical dimensions.

Milevski distinguishes between the theoretical utility of concepts as seen by Sartori, Gerring and Goerz and the theoretical utility of 'strategic concept' based

on the distinction between predictive theories in the social sciences and descriptive theories of strategic studies, which allow anticipation but not prediction. Where prediction is seen as a mechanistic output of theory once inputs are known, anticipation is seen as active engagement of the user (Milevski 2023: 723–724). This understanding of prediction, as clear from Milevski's reference to Winton (2011: 856), derives from the physical sciences rather than the social sciences. Social science theories are generally predictive in a probabilistic, not deterministic sense, for precisely the reason Winton himself names – 'action and reaction in the human arena are much less certain, and here we must be content with a less definitive standard' (Winton 2011: 856). There is, therefore, no reason to see this as a reason for academic conceptual criteria referencing theoretical (predictive) utility that does not apply in the realm of strategic studies (and associated practice).

Milevski's second reason for different criteria for ad hoc concepts (closer to practice) and systemic concepts is that the practical considerations of developing ad hoc concepts for devising operational orders tend to overshadow academic considerations (Milevski 2023: 726). First, even orders will refer to basic concepts that are generally established within the field as terminology. This is precisely why doctrinal terms are established in professional dictionaries to make sure that there is a shared understanding and the concepts can then serve their communicative role as a part of the order. While giving orders, no commander is conceptualising suppressive fire anew, as those concepts are established both through agreed professional lexicography and their quality is generally a result of what Sartori would describe as 'survival of the fittest' or 'test of time' (Sartori 1970).

Second, the issue of ad hoc concepts raises an important question of how the word 'concept' is used within military practice. NATO Allied Command Transformation, in its handbook on conceptual development, defines the concept as:

> An agreed notion or idea normally set out in a document that provides guidance for different working domains and which may lead to the development of a policy. With a focus on capability development, a concept is a solution-oriented transformational idea that addresses a capability shortfall or gap. (NATO 2010: 3–4)

In this sense, a military professional's concept of 'concept' is usually different in some nontrivial ways from the social science understanding.[5] Most importantly, it is much broader, especially when, for example, speaking of a NATO Strategic Concept, which contains considerably more than a label and a definition. While it

---

5   It should be noted that, while not common, 'concept' is also used in a military context in the same way as in social science. AAP-77 defines 'concept' as 'a mental representation of something that can be considered a unit of knowledge' (NATO Standardization Office 2018: 3).

might be tempting to brush this away as a different meaning of the word 'concept', this would arguably be incorrect.

Military concepts in the sense outlined above, as well as in parts of Milevski's argument, such as in the case of the 'Airland battle' concept (Milevski 2023: 725), are also concepts within the scientific understanding. They are descriptions of a particular operation or other 'ways' to achieve the goals. However, they have some specific qualities that need to be addressed.

First, they are not necessarily 'empirical concepts' in the sense outlined by Sartori (2009b: 106). At the time they are formulated, there might be no empirical phenomenon that can be described by them. They are to serve as a blueprint for the operation and, if implemented successfully, can be retrospectively applied to that operation as a concept with one empirical case.

Second, they will generally be very detailed. As they do not aim to generalise but to fit the one specific circumstances – which will possibly never be repeated – they can be on the extreme of the spectrum of 'thickness' in the sense of the many properties that the concept's referents (possibly only one) share.

Finally, they are used in a prescriptive rather than a descriptive role, meaning that they are formulated to be followed through in their application. But this does not preclude their descriptive role – indeed, they can be used descriptively in response to a question of how the given commander planned to or did operate. And, significantly, it does not change the importance of the analytical utility as outlined above. Because they are elements of a possibly implicit but nonetheless fundamentally causal theory of victory, they are formulated so that with input of such a concept of operation and other independent variables (disposition of friendly and enemy forces, weather, etc.), they will produce the desired outcome (dependent variable).

For such ad hoc concepts which do not aim to be general and are possibly used to fit only one specific case, some of the scholarly conceptual criteria may indeed become much less important than others. But that does not make them irrelevant, as they were never intended to be mechanistically applied.

To summarise, the analytical application of concepts both in the realm of scholarship and practice boils down to their descriptive and implicit causal utility. In scholarly work, there is often more emphasis on general theory – and consequently general concepts – able to 'travel' across time and space, whereas in the realm of practice, there is more emphasis on specific theory and concepts. Yet in both settings, their role as descriptive building blocks that enable causal theorisation remains the same.

If a new way of waging warfare is identified and conceptualised, its analytical importance stems from the fact that its application *causes* or is presumed to *cause* different outcomes than other previously known options. If it describes the adversary's possible course of action, it implies a need for a different approach to counter it in order to *cause* the desired outcome. If the concept prescribes its

own possible course of action, its value comes from its promise to *cause* different and presumably better outcomes than other alternatives.

Of course, those causal implications of the concepts are treated implicitly in policy-making and war-making, rather than explicitly, as they would be in scholarly work. However, that does not change the fact that there is a greater degree of shared purpose in the concepts between academia and practitioners than is often acknowledged.

Conceptual quality for theory and practice

If the analytical purpose of concepts in scholarly work and practice is fundamentally the same, as was argued above, then scholarly criteria for conceptual quality should also be applicable in practice. Before discussing how they can apply, it should be noted that there is no single definitive approach to conceptual quality in the social sciences. Even if we leave aside the interpretivist approach (see Schaffer 2015), there are still approaches of Sartori (2009b), Goertz (2006) and Gerring and Christenson (Gerring 1999, 2012; Gerring & Christenson 2017) introduced in the previous chapter which build upon each other but nonetheless do have idiosyncrasies. Even if broad concerns over quality are similar, specific formalisation into distinct criteria may differ.[6] While all of the approaches could contribute something to judging conceptual quality for practice, the one selected here for closer introduction and discussion is Gerring and Christenson's approach (2017: 31–35).

This approach was selected mostly because of its pragmatism and approachability, which should be deemed a boon for the approach suggested to practitioners.[7] However, it should nonetheless be noted that it is an approach, not the scholarly approach, to judging conceptual quality. Before introducing Gerring and Christensen's criteria and discussing their relevance for practice, it is important to make a few notes on the application of any criteria of conceptual quality.

First, it has to be stressed that the conceptual criteria cannot be taken for a simple scorecard, facilitating a grading exercise. Concepts with different specific purposes may emphasise different criteria; the evaluation of the criteria is contestable. The criteria can highlight specific concerns and give an organising structure to the contestation of the utility and quality of a concept, offering a shared language to proponents and critics of the particular concept to debate its specific qualities.

The second clarification is that it is crucial to recognise both the importance and difficulty of distinguishing between a concept, its individual use and its collective use. If we come back to the triangle introduced by Sartori (Sartori 2009a,

---

6   Indeed, Gerring authored and coauthored three slightly different sets of criteria for conceptual quality over the years (Gerring 1999, 2012; Gerring & Christenson 2017).

7   As the selected approach is very parsimonious, a more extensive discussion of each criteria can be referenced to Gerring's earlier works (Gerring 1999, 2012).

2009b), with three elements of concept being the term, the definition and the phenomena, it brings out the question of when we can speak about a single concept. When the same term and definition are used to describe a different phenomenon, it would technically change one of the three points of the triangle. More importantly, if the same term is used with different definitions and phenomena, can we talk about it as a variation of the concept even if they just share the term? These are important questions, as we tend to discuss the concepts as they are used in the broader community, even if, upon closer inspection, they are hardly the same concepts based on differences in their definitions and the phenomena they capture. It is not the ambition of this paper to answer this question, but it is mentioned because it stresses the need to judge each (re)conceptualisation of a concept on its own merits, even if the context still plays a role.

With that, we can turn to five criteria formulated by Gerring and Christenson (Gerring & Christenson 2017: 31–35) to aid with the creation of better concepts, which are *resonance*, *consistency*, *internal coherence*, *external differentiation* and *theoretical utility*.

The first of the five criteria for concept formation is its *resonance*, which pertains to the relationship between the concept's definition and the established use or understanding of the term used as a label for the concept (Gerring & Christenson 2017: 32). The question asking about the resonance of the particular concept would be: Does the image evoked by the term among the concept's audience match the definition of the concept? If not, it means that the use of the concept might be prone to confusing the audience, especially when the concept is encountered without the definition provided. This, in turn, would mean that the concept is failing in its communicative utility – that is, functioning as a shorthand for its meaning.

Resonance is arguably the one criterion most tightly linking one conceptualisation to the context of its use. Authors need to take into account the common language understanding of the term used, as well as the already existing concepts using the same or a similar label.

There are a few noteworthy differences between practice and scholarly work when it comes to the question of resonance. Firstly, while there is no binding scholarly authority with the power to force a unified understanding of the term (thereby ensuring its resonance), in the area of practice, official documents and lexicons can, to a degree, force a uniform understanding of the term (NATO Standardisation Office 2021; e.g. Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff 2021). This, however, also implies a greater need for careful attention to resonance while establishing those binding formulations of concepts.

Secondly, while the scholarly audience may well be expected to pay close attention to the provided definition rather than rely on the intuitive understanding of the label, concepts in practice may have diverse audiences, including various distinct communities within the security-provision business, from military and defence

professionals, diplomats, policymakers and politicians all the way to journalists and the public. The latter groups in particular can be expected to suffer the most from the confusion and distorted understandings caused by the poor resonance of a concept. Therefore, the more the concept is to be abstract and strategic and therefore travel beyond a limited homogeneous community where careful attention to definition or respect for the binding established meaning is expected, the more the selected term and definition should be in sync with both existing concepts under a similar term and the common understanding of the used term (word).

The second criterion is consistency (Gerring 2012: 121–124; Gerring & Christenson 2017: 34–35). Once again, closely linked to the use of the concept. Simply put, it captures the consistency of the meaning of the concept across its use, typically within a single work. Importantly, the use of the same term with different meanings and empirical phenomena referred to by different authors or institutions is not a question of consistency, but a previously discussed question of resonance.

An issue with consistency arises if there are different (implicit) definitions of a single term used in one work, or if there are empirical phenomena included under the term which, in fact, do not fit the definition. In that sense, the lack of consistency is an issue of use rather than an inherent quality of a concept, but vague formulation of a concept or its poor operationalisation can go a long way in facilitating a lack of consistency in its use.

In defence and security practice, the most concerning issue of consistency should be expected within an organisation rather than with a single author – though inconsistent use of a concept by an author can be just as problematic as in the scholarly world. As was discussed above, compared to academia, there are formal authorities with the power to establish a shared meaning for a term. This may happen not only through the formal process of adding an entry to an official dictionary, but also through the less formal process of defining a term in official documents. Those institutions should be expected to maintain the established meaning and apply it consistently to cases fitting the established definition. Lack of consistency in use throughout an institution may not only remove any benefits that the existence of an authoritative source of definition might have, but also provide fertile ground for confusion and a variety of new conceptualisations.

The third criterion is internal coherence, which denotes the thickness or richness of a concept (Gerring 2012: 124–126; Gerring & Christenson 2017: 32–33). The question to ask regarding the internal coherence of a concept would be: How much do the phenomena covered by the definition share with one another, and to what extent are those shared attributes logically connected? In this, the question of internal coherence addresses the definition aspect of the concept (and, by implication, the phenomena aspect).

The internal coherence is crucial for the descriptive and causal power of a concept. This, as was argued in the previous section, translates well from the scholarly

environment to the policy sphere. If the stated purpose of a concept is to describe a new threat – one presumably requiring a new measure to counter it – then the more the concept can say about the threat, and the more its definition can identify the critical attributes in their relation to each other that make it distinct, the more useful the concept becomes for both communication and formulation of countermeasures. The internal coherence of the concept is arguably even more crucial if it aims to prescribe a course of action. The attributes of the given concept of operation are specified because of the effects they produce in their combination.

Importantly, the natural preference both in academic and professional communities should be for the concepts whose various defining attributes are in a mutual logical relationship, which, in its coherent combination, produce the specific causal effects. While a concept can be conceivably defined by attributes without a clear mutual relationship, some of its parts might be superfluous, and the unique combination of arbitrary attributes is unlikely to produce specific outcomes that would make such a concept very useful.

The fourth criterion is (external) differentiation, which captures how well a concept is distinguishable from other concepts or simply from everything the concept is not. (Gerring 2012: 127; Gerring & Christenson 2017: 33–34). Differentiation is closely related to internal coherence, where one can expect that an internally coherent concept will also be well differentiated. Like internal coherence, differentiation also relates primarily to the definition element of a concept (and phenomena described by extension).

A well-differentiated concept means that cases falling under the given concept are clearly distinct from the cases which do not fall within its definition and, relatedly, that the concept is distinct from other neighbouring concepts that presumably cover those cases outside the purview of the concept in question. Importantly, this should be true horizontally between concepts at the same level of abstraction, but also vertically for the differentiation of a concept from a more general or more specific concept.

Having concepts which can be solidly differentiated from the contrast space is just as important for practice in defence and security as it is in academia. Firstly, having concepts clearly differentiated from other neighbouring concepts is critical for maintaining navigable conceptual space within the field, without a number of superfluous concepts with major overlaps. Secondly, as was argued above, the practical analytical use of a concept lies in formulating implicit or explicit causal theories for those concepts. When, for example, the concept describes some specific approach of the adversary (threat) which needs to be countered in a specific manner, one needs to be able to discern this threat from the contrast space of other possible approaches to employ the countermeasure. While it has to be recognised that this is not a deterministic process, as discussed in the previous chapter, having clearly differentiated concepts is nonetheless better than not having them.

External differentiation is also linked to the issue of the operationalisation of concepts, as poorly differentiated concepts are also likely to be difficult to operationalise. While in a scholarly environment, especially in quantitative research, operationalisation is a common and inevitable, if possibly challenging, operation; it is, in fact, just as significant in the practical employment of defence and security concepts. Just as the scholar needs to be able to operationalise the concept to be able to reliably identify its cases, the practitioner needs to be able to operationalise the concept to make practical use of it. The specific concept of threat is of little use if it cannot be operationalised so that it can be detected and identified in order to initiate the proper response. When speaking of prescriptive concepts as they are generally understood by military professionals, the operationalisation is seen as an inherent part of the concept – who needs to do what in order to fulfil more general features of the concept?

The fifth criterion is theoretical (causal) utility (Gerring & Christenson 2017: 34). Causal utility judges the value of the concept in a specific proposed role within the causal framework. As such, it is somewhat debatable whether it can be considered a quality in its own right, as it does not address one of the points of the term-definition-phenomenon triangle, but rather fits between the concept as a whole and its intended theoretical role. For that reason, it depends upon the use of the concept rather than its intrinsic qualities.

Concepts in practice need to address the practical needs of a security or military establishment. One might plausibly create concepts that have no problems in resonance, internal coherence, external differentiation and consistency, but nonetheless do not capture any real-world phenomena or solve any existing or incoming problem. Such a concept could hardly be described as 'analytically useful'. Concepts of threat should therefore describe real or at least plausible opponents' courses of action, especially if those courses of action cannot be adequately met by existing capabilities and approaches.

The case of hybrid warfare concepts

The preceding sections argued, firstly, that a concept in policy-making has, analytically, fundamentally the same purposes as in research, and secondly, that a scholarly framework for concept formation can be applied to policy-oriented concepts both for the purpose of their formulation, and also for their evaluation and discussion of their utility. The purpose of this section is to support those claims and illustrate the potential utility of the approach with an illustrative case study.

As the paper is concerned with the question of evaluating concepts, the case concerns the mutually related concepts of hybrid warfare. The choice of the case is based on both methodological and pragmatic grounds. Hybrid warfare is arguably among the most prominent concepts in policy-making debates in security and defence of the last decade (Libiseller 2023). Additionally, its utility was almost

constantly challenged from the moment of its conception (Charap 2015; see, for example, Cox, Bruscino & Ryan 2012; Gray 2012; Kofman 2016; Stoker & Whiteside 2020), providing ample material for reflection on the debate and arguments of both proponents and critics.

Four additional notes regarding the delimitations of the case are in order. Firstly, it is a choice of grouping together various concepts as a single case. Arguably, the most proper approach would be to pick only one iteration of 'hybrid' concept or include multiple as multiple case studies. Such an approach would, however, make discussion of contextual criteria such as resonance more difficult. The case is therefore delimited more broadly as the debate about hybrid warfare and includes a wide variety of proponents and opponents, as well as individual and institutional authors.

Secondly, the scope is delimited on the basis of the label used. As discussed briefly below, the concepts behind the label of hybrid warfare underwent many changes over the two decades of their use, sometimes sharing relatively little in common with each other in terms of their definition. The label nonetheless ties those concepts together, and they are generally seen as iterations of conceptualisation rather than substantially different concepts hidden under a single label. The scope of the case study is, therefore, limited on the basis of the 'hybrid' label rather than on similarity of definitions or phenomena described, both of which could be comparably valid exercises.

The third note concerns various iterations of the hybrid label. It should be noted that various forms of the label exist, including, among others, hybrid warfare (Cox, Bruscino & Ryan 2012; Eberle & Daniel 2022; see, for example, Hoffman 2009a; Murray & Mansoor 2012), hybrid war (Hoffman 2006a, 2007), hybrid threats (Bachmann & Kemp 2012; European Commission 2016a; Freier 2010; Gunneriusson 2012; Lindley-French 2015; NATO 2010; Rühle 2019) and hybrid interference (Kondratov & Johansson-Nogués 2022; Mareš, Kraus & Drmola 2022; Wigell 2019). While some headway was made recently into distinguishing the differences implied by the different labels (Giannopoulos et al. 2021; Monaghan 2019), they were generally all used with the same debate and often interchangeably (Bahenský 2016; Glenn 2009; Monaghan 2019) and are therefore all considered part of the case.

Finally, the last note concerns the selection of sources. Given the limitation of space and the fact that a decade and a half of development and redefinition of hybrid warfare spawned numerous different iterations, definitions and uses, the discussion of conceptual qualities is inevitably incomplete and possibly anecdotal, despite the effort to capture the variety of existing conceptualisations. As there are already more systematic reviews of hybrid warfare literature, and as the purpose of the case study is illustrative and explorative, the sources were selected based on their suitability to illustrate some aspects of the applicability of conceptual criteria.

The story of the rise of hybrid warfare is by now well documented (see, for example, Bahenský 2016; Fridman 2018; Libiseller 2023; Solmaz 2022), but a brief review is still in order so that the reader can situate individual examples discussed below in their broader context. The first uses of the term 'hybrid warfare' came from master's theses on combining special forces with conventional forces (Walker 1998), and later warfare in Chechnya, focusing on hybrid societies combining traditional and modern forms of societal organisation and warfare (Nemeth 2002). The first truly influential iteration of the concept, however, came from the military-intellectual milieu of the Marine Corps in the United States, where it evolved from experiences of war in Iraq and later Israeli intervention in Lebanon. Formulated primarily[8] by Frank Hoffman (2006a, 2007; Mattis & Hoffman 2005), it is arguably an evolution of his earlier concept of complex irregular warfare (2006b) in response to experiences in Iraq at first and then to the perceived failures of Israel during its fighting against Hezbollah in 2006, which became the first poster-child of hybrid warfare.[9] It entered the debate at a time of heated discussion between proponents of focusing US armed forces on COIN scenarios on the one hand and proponents of focusing on the conventional warfare on the other hand, arguably as a kind of compromise (Hoffman 2009b).

At that time, it was framed primarily as a style of warfare combining aspects of conventional and irregular warfare used by weaker parties on the battlefield with the aim of countering US military advantages and expelling US expeditionary forces from their region. The concept was taken up by the US military (Solmaz 2022; US Army 2010), clearly drawing heavily from Hoffman's formulation, albeit with a definition that shifted is closer to compound warfare.[10] It should be noted that 'hybrid' was also found to be used at that time in the US military, but just as an adjective without any specific definition in mind (United States Government Accountability Office 2010).

The concept of hybrid warfare – though more under the label of hybrid threat – then crossed the Atlantic to enter the lexicon of NATO (Fridman 2018), although in very different contexts and meanings. While maintaining focus on the expeditionary context, the tactical notion of battlefield hybrid warfare transformed

---

8   It should be noted that there was vigorous discussion about the concept and its usefulness at the time (e.g. Glenn 2009). While mostly forgotten today, there were at the time other US proponents of 'hybridity' in the security environment, who had very different conceptualisations. Most notably Nathan Freier (Freier 2007, 2009, 2010), as well as McCuen (2008) or Murrey and Mansoor (2012).

9   The 2006 war in Lebanon sparked a debate about the suitability of conventional and irregular categories of warfare. Hybrid warfare in this sense had alternatives (Biddle & Friedman 2008; Gray 2012).

10 Whereas Hoffman's original definition focused more on a combination of tools and tactics employed possibly by a single unit (Hoffman 2007: 14), the TC 7-100 definition focuses more on organisation – that is, a combination of regular and irregular forces and criminal elements (US Army 2010: 1–1).

into a strategic concept of new threats posed to NATO, especially from unstable states in its periphery. The new conceptualisation also stressed the civil-military character of threats requiring civil-military cooperation on the side of NATO to counter them (NATO 2010: 2–3). The use of the concept was at the time noted to be broad, flexible and pragmatic (Brynen 2011; Milante 2011) but elicited limited attention.[11]

The true breakthrough for the 'hybrid' concepts came only after Russia's occupation of Crimea in 2014. The concept rose to unprecedented prominence both in NATO and the EU, as well as in their member states. It was, however, the success of a term rather than any specific existing concept. After the first use of the hybrid label in the context of the Russian operation against Ukraine, which arguably did not conform to the existing definitions at the time, it led to new concepts informed by the phenomenon and label with new definitions derived inductively with little concern for already existing definitions. With the explosion of popularity, the meaning of the concept got shifted decidedly towards the strategic – and even grand-strategic – level as well as towards a focus on non-military, non-kinetic instruments. At the same time, it was applied to numerous other cases, from the Islamic State (ISIS) (Lindley-French 2015) to China and Iran (Monaghan 2019), and became entrenched in official documents and declarations (European Commission 2016a; NATO 2014).

The utility of the concept was challenged by various and often authoritative voices in the area of security and strategic studies (e.g. Gray 2012; Kofman 2016). Arguably, the definitions of the hybrid warfare concept have somewhat settled in recent years. In the words of Antulio Echevarria, 'Most out-of-the-box ideas, however brilliant, need to return to the box at some point in order to become practical solutions' (2006: 19). Hybrid warfare, facing the requirements of practical implementation into policy, was arguably gradually disciplined (for a good example, see Giannopoulos et al. 2021). However, it should also be noted that new concepts overshadowed but did not fully replace the older concepts. When the discussions in NATO moved away from original battlefield-centric concepts, the debate on it in the US continued (Bowers 2012; Cox, Bruscino & Ryan 2012; Hoffman 2014).

With this brief overview of the development of various concepts of hybrid warfare in mind, let us turn to a discussion of how scholarly criteria for conceptual quality can be used to explore various iterations of 'hybrid warfare' with respect to each of the introduced criteria, with the exception of theoretical (causal) utility. Reasons behind the omission are as follows: first, it is to a degree derived from other criteria; second, particularly when discussing the empirical accuracy

---

11 For examples of reflection on the concept in relation to NATO at the time, see Aaronson et al. (2012), Bachmann (2011), Bachmann & Kemp (2012) or Gunneriusson (2012).

of concept application, it is already well intuitively understood within the field, and the formal framework contribution is therefore somewhat limited; and finally, space is limited.

Looking first at the resonance of the hybrid warfare concepts, the early stages of development of the concept could be seen as doing reasonably well in this regard. While a relative neologism, the common language meaning[12] of the word 'hybrid' matched most of the definitions well.[13] Real issues emerge when it comes to the resonance of new concepts with previous concepts under the same label.

With respect to the resonance question, it is notable that the three phases of the development of hybrid warfare concepts above are not purely chronological and successive. Rather, the earlier iterations of the concept continued to exist alongside new ones (Aaronson et al. 2012; cf. Bowers 2012; Gunneriusson 2012; US Army 2010). While it is now received wisdom that the hybrid warfare concept radically transformed after 2014, this was rarely recognised by authors while citing Hoffman (Bahenský 2016). While the general understanding at the time seems to be that existing concepts capturing a phenomenon of hybrid warfare were just being redefined, what better describes the process from a conceptual standpoint is appropriating the existing label for both new phenomena and corresponding new definitions.

Another aforementioned aspect of a resonance problem relates to the word in the label used after the adjective 'hybrid' – usually threat, war or warfare. While the latter two were resonance-wise perfectly appropriate at the times when they denoted a US military battlefield-centric concept, they were often retained even after the substance of the concept had been civilianised and moved to the level of grand strategy. Given the natural presumption that 'hybrid war' is a special case of the more general concept of 'war', the label led the audiences to see the actions described under the concept as a war with all the consequences attached to such a view (Eberle & Daniel 2023; Stoker & Whiteside 2020).

It should be noted that there were valiant attempts to square the circle of coexisting conflicting concepts of hybrid warfare and threats by associating hybrid warfare with the original US concept (mostly represented by Hoffman's version) and hybrid threats with new definitions derived from Russian conduct (Monaghan 2019). From the perspective of resonance, however, this can be seen as a pyrrhic victory at best. Maintaining the terms 'hybrid threat' and 'hybrid warfare' within the context of security and defence terms – terms which may or may not coincide in terms of actor, time and space – is bound to generate some confusion.[14]

---

12 Interestingly, Colin Gray, in his brief and critical treatment of the concept, implicitly touched upon the notion of resonance (2012).

13 In definitions where a combination of tools is not a necessary attribute, the resonance of the label becomes questionable, as in case of Hybrid CoE definition in FAQ where various tools are not combined always, but only 'often' (Center of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats n.d.).

14 The Wales Summit Declaration, for example, explicitly combined the two terms into

Many of the issues of confusion around what hybrid warfare is could have arguably been averted if the authors and institutions recognised the degree to which captured phenomena and definitions shifted and how unsuitable that made the extant term of hybrid warfare.[15] Even if the label won anyway, it would make authors more careful in referencing concepts that, while sharing the same label, captured fundamentally different phenomena.

Problems in resonance bring us to the question of consistency. As discussed in the previous chapter, in practice consistency issues may materialise in relation to institutions rather than authors. A clear example of a blatant lack of consistency in use is the European Union, which managed to publish three (admittedly only slightly) different definitions of hybrid threats in a single day between the agreed Joint Framework on Countering Hybrid Threats (European Commission 2016a: 2), the FAQ section of a webpage on the same subject (European Commission 2016b) and an accompanying press release (European Commission 2016c).

The picture is similar in the case of NATO, where there has been an agreed definition of hybrid threats from 2018 (NATO Standardization Office 2025: 308), but references to hybrid threats and related phenomena in the most recent NATO Strategic Concept range from 'coercive use of political, economic, energy, information and other hybrid tactics' (NATO 2022: 7) to 'hybrid operations' and 'hybrid challenges' (NATO 2022: 7) to 'conventional, cyber and hybrid means' (NATO 2022: 4). The EU Strategic Compass offers an even greater variety in terminology (EU 2022).

Another case of a plausible consistency issue is the NATO conference in 2015. Leaving aside the rather peculiar definition of hybrid warfare,[16] the conference report captures an attempt to use a single concept to capture challenges posed to NATO by a resurgent Russia on the one hand and ISIS in the Middle East on the other hand (Lindley-French 2015). Some recommendations, such as the adaptation of nuclear posture and closing the conventional-nuclear gap, were rather clearly relevant only for one of the two cases of presumed 'hybrid warfare' (Lindley-French 2015: 2).

To give credit to the rapporteur, it should be noted that the differences between the Russian and ISIS challenges were highlighted within the report, and both a very original and very broad definition adopted by the report's author could have

---

     'hybrid warfare threat' (NATO 2014).

15   What could be said in their defence is that the definition was already shifting for some time. While the contrast between original US concepts from 2007 and those from 2014 and later is the most glaring, the NATO episode in around 2010 provided what could be seen as a stepping stone in conceptual travel.

16   The rapporteur in his report defined hybrid warfare as 'the denial of – and defection from – standard norms and principles of international relations in pursuit of narrow interests' (Lindley-French 2015: 1), which is a broad definition even by the standards of hybrid warfare. The definition in question may be a product of a time when the new definitions of hybrid warfare only just started to develop and bears some similarity from a period of exploration of hybrid warfare in NATO around the year 2010.

been an attempt to find a definition which could, in fact, be applied consistently to both ISIS and Russia.

Nonetheless, the dubious subsummation of both threats under the concept of hybrid warfare illustrates both problems in the consistency of the use of hybrid warfare and the implications this has for developing meaningful policies to counter the threat of hybrid warfare as such, rather than its more divergent cases. Importantly, a lack of consistency has downstream effects on resonance. Lack of consistency in definition makes it more difficult to decide whether the new definition, in fact, matches the existing ones reasonably well.

The problem of consistency is compounded by the tendency to describe rather than define. Even arguably the most disciplined and extensive concept of hybrid threat produced denies that it provides a 'universal definition' (Giannopoulos et al. 2021: 6–7). One might describe a phenomenon in many ways without defining it,[17] but without defining it, one does not reach a shared and consistent understanding of the phenomenon. Even more puzzling is the claim that 'definitions of hybrid threats vary and need to remain flexible to respond to their evolving nature' (European Commission 2016a: 2). While one might understand that an overly detailed definition might prove too restrictive, there should still be aspects of a phenomenon that are general and enduring enough to allow for minor changes, much like the differentiation between the nature and the character of war. Without a definition, it is virtually impossible to be consistent in marrying the label to appropriate phenomena.

The question of description and definition brings us to the internal coherence of 'hybrid' concepts. Two issues should have been a reason for a pause before implementing those concepts for practical policy-making. The first of those was the somewhat dubious mutual relationship and coherence of attributes defining hybrid warfare in its formulation by Frank Hoffman: 'Hybrid threats incorporate a full range of different modes of warfare including conventional capabilities, irregular tactics and formations, terrorist acts including indiscriminate violence and coercion, and criminal disorder' (2007: 7). Given the nature of the concept combining varying other conceptual and theoretical inspirations with an inductive attempt to capture the challenge posed by insurgents in Iraq and Hezbollah in Lebanon, it is perhaps understandable that the definition was based on attributes including tactics (irregular), organisation (irregular), equipment (conventional weapons) and specific instruments or activities (terrorism and criminality). The concept, defined as the confluence of attributes in so many dimensions, inevitably runs the risk of

---

17 For describing as fallback option since there is no agreement on definition (see Cullen & Reichborn-Kjennerud 2017: 8). A similar argument was made by Nathan Freier but he viewed 'hybrid' in relation to a single case (environment), where the values of description and definition are arguably more comparable as there is no need to generalise (Freier 2010).

losing logical coherence among its attributes, which is presumed to produce specific causal effects.

The second and rather different problem for policy-making came from definitions conceived after 2014. The implicit strategy of definition shifted from Hoffman's minimal definition, clearly stating what attributes a case of hybrid warfare must have, to something resembling a maximal or ideal type definition. As a result of this implicit rather than explicit shift towards an umbrella concept, there was very little to be deduced from labelling something a hybrid threat since the cases subsumed under the concept could have only very little in common and yet fit the definition to some degree. The best example might be the definition in the EU's Joint Framework on Countering Hybrid Threats, which defines them as:

> the mixture of coercive and subversive activity, conventional and unconventional methods (i.e. diplomatic, military, economic, technological), which can be used in a coordinated manner by state or non-state actors to achieve specific objectives while remaining below the threshold of formally declared warfare. (European Commission 2016a: 2)

The NATO definition of hybrid threats as agreed in 2018 is arguably better in terms of its internal coherence as it postulates hybrid threat as 'a type of threat that combines conventional, irregular and asymmetric activities in time and space' (NATO Standardization Office 2025: 308). Therefore, it clearly outlines attributes at the same level, clearly linking three different activities which when combined in time and space can cause specific outcomes. As was argued in the previous chapter, good internal coherence of the definition should also translate to external differentiation, but this is not always true, as will be discussed below.

External differentiation of hybrid warfare was and is generally problematic, both in the sense of their distinctiveness from other neighbouring concepts and in the sense of clear identification of what the concepts do and do not cover. Many iterations of hybrid warfare can be poorly differentiated from other concepts, such as compound warfare (Hoffman 2009c; Murray & Mansoor 2012), grey-zone warfare (Chivvis 2017; Stoker & Whiteside 2020), political warfare (Caliskan & Liégeois 2021; Hoffman 2014), non-linear warfare (Galeotti 2016; Schnaufer 2017) or (arguably) the whole-of-government approach (Glenn 2009). However, it has to be recognised that attempts at reconciling the terms were made, either by making a clear distinction between them (Hoffman 2009c) or seeing them as synonymous (Murray & Mansoor 2012). Poor differentiation can be partially explained by rapid conceptual development in response to the shock of the occupation of Crimea, but also by a peculiar domain-specificity, which exclusively describes hybrid warfare as the adversary's approach. The differentiation from empirical contrast space was then hampered by a complete lack of explicit definition in some cases, or the, extraordinary broadness and lack of clarity of the definitions and descriptions that did exist.

The problem is not only 'horizontal differentiation' from neighbouring concepts at the same level, but also differentiation from more general, superordinate concepts. As described by Caliskan and Liégeois, who summarised that the majority of the interviewed NATO officials think the following:

> The definition of the concept is so broad that it becomes warfare itself. This causes the concept to lose its value as an analytical tool. According to its definition, hybrid warfare is everything. However, it is extremely difficult to develop a strategy against everything or to agree on a definition about everything. (2021: 30)

Differentiation is also closely tied to the ability to unambiguously locate the phenomena matching the definition in the empirical environment. Part of this problem stems from hazy borders, especially of maximal (ideal type) definitions or 'descriptions' where a hybrid threat stops being hybrid. However, the other reason for this problem is the lack of clarity of subordinate concepts, whose mixing merits the 'hybrid' label. The meanings of these concepts are often contested in their own right. To give an example, the EU's definition features a rather ambiguous attribute of the 'threshold of formally declared war' (European Commission 2016a: 2), whereas Hoffman's original definition included attributes of 'conventional weapons', 'criminal activity' and 'terrorism', none of which was defined in turn. Given the fact that those concepts in general, and terrorism in particular, are contested concepts in their own right, a clear operationalisation of Hoffman's concept is challenging to say the least.[18] Similarly, when the EU, within its definition, attributes to hybrid threats 'mixing . . . conventional and unconventional methods (i.e. diplomatic, military, economic, technological)' (European Commission 2016a: 2), one is hard-pressed to figure out which of those methods could be considered unconventional in any way.

The official NATO definition fares better, as both irregular and asymmetric activities from the definition are defined within the same document; but the same cannot be said for the third element of 'conventional activity' (NATO Standardization Office 2025). This is somewhat ironic, as the conceptual guidelines of NATO very clearly recognise the importance of external differentiation both from horizontal neighbouring concepts and from superordinate concepts (NATO Standardization Office 2018).

In this sense, hybrid warfare concepts generally compounded the existing definitional issues of various concepts within the field of defence and security by combining them into a rather impenetrable definition.

---

18   Problem with elements of terrorism can be seen in Hoffman's attempt to apply his framework on conflict in Eastern Ukraine, where he identified the shooting down of MH17 as an act of catastrophic terrorism, something many would dispute (Hoffman 2014).

Conclusion

The fact that both professional and academic discussions are under severe strain due to the proliferation of numerous concepts vying for limited attention is rather unproblematic (Gray 2012; Milevski 2022; Rauta 2021; Stoker & Whiteside 2020). Both the general mechanisms and specific qualities of particular concepts producing buzzwords that take over the discussion, as well as the repercussions of their rise, are coming under increased scholarly scrutiny in recent years (Biegon et al. 2021b; Libiseller 2023; Wicker 2023).

Milevski is correct that there needs to be more thoughtful engagement with concepts in strategic studies (Milevski 2022, 2023), and I would argue that the same is true for the broader field of security.

To contribute to this endeavour, I offer academic scholarships on conceptual quality as a fruitful source of a more explicit and formal framework for a more conscious approach to concepts in the fields of security and defence practice. The contribution is, of course, limited. This article explored in detail only one of the possible scholarly frameworks, and the empirical illustration of its use remained highly limited and exploratory in nature. The lessons for practice are not that any creative conceptual thinking requires lengthy study of conceptual literature from the social sciences and a scorecard on hand – let alone the one introduced above. Instead, I offer three lessons.

First, conceptual quality literature allows us to think more systematically about what a concept is and what makes it good. This is beneficial, as concepts are such a foundational part of how we think and communicate that conscious thinking about them is often rather unnatural.

Second, conceptual criteria offer shared language and a frame of reference to discuss the relative strengths and weaknesses of proposed concepts and highlight the underappreciated importance of situating new concepts within the existing conceptual and linguistic space.

Third, it reminds institutions such as NATO and the EU of the importance of defining crucial concepts and using them consistently. While it is understandable why agreeing on definitions might be difficult, especially in multilateral organisations, shirking the act of defining invites analytical and communicative confusion and resigns an important role that such institutions can play in stabilising lexicons. Security establishments could arguably learn a thing or two from military efforts to maintain reasonably clear professional lexicons.

Familiarity with and use of such a framework in the course of the contestation of a concept obviously cannot be a panacea. Even with a shared framework, opinions on the quality and utility of concepts will differ. And even concepts of dubious analytical utility will still be tempting on account of their social utility. However, if the empirical case of hybrid warfare and threats should teach us something, it is that it is difficult to maintain two separate sets of concepts, one analytically useful and

one with social utility. And questioning and debating the utility of new and existing concepts is at least as important as proposing new ones to make systems of concepts in the scholarly and practice domain fit for the purpose.

The limitations of this article leave ample space for further fruitful research into the question of the utility of concepts in practice. First, while a simple and straightforward use of one possible scholarly approach to conceptual quality was explored, other approaches might prove just as fruitful, and much can be done to adapt them for use on concepts as used in practice. Second, the various roles that concepts play in practical policy-making, especially in the area of security and defence, should be explored further. Where this paper only touched on the issue superficially, a more systematic and empirically grounded exploration would be warranted. Finally, while this paper opted for the exploration of a broad set of interrelated concepts in order to find the best possible illustration of possible issues, a more systematic investigation of individual concepts would surely prove valuable both in terms of discussing the quality of the concept in question and the usefulness of explicit approaches to conceptual quality.

<p style="text-align:center">჻</p>

Conflict of interest statement
No conflict of interest was reported.

Data availability statement
No supplementary data associated with the article.

Vojtěch Bahenský is a researcher at the Peace Research Center Prague and the Department of North American Studies, Faculty of Social Sciences, Charles University, Prague. He is also affiliated researcher at Institute of International

Relations in Prague and serves as the head of supervisory board of Prague-based think-tank Association for International Affairs. His research focuses on military power, military power projection, foreign interference, and hybrid warfare.

References

Aaronson, M., Diessen, S., De Kermabon, Y., Long, M. B. & Miklaucic, M. (2012): NATO Countering the Hybrid Threat. *Prism*, 2(4), 111–124.

Bachmann, S.-D. (2011): Hybrid Threats, Cyber Warfare and NATO's Comprehensive Approach for Countering 21st Century Threats - Mapping the New Frontier of Global Risk and Security Management. *Amicus Curiae*, (88).

Bachmann, S.-D. & Kemp, G. (2012): Aggression as "Organised Hypocrisy?" – How the War on Terrorism and Hybrid Threats Challenge the Nuremberg Legacy. *Windsor Yearbook of Access to Justice*, 30(1), 233–252.

Bahenský, V. (2016): *Hybrid Warfare, Wars, and Threats: A Conceptual Analysis* (Diploma Thesis). Charles University: Prague.

Biddle, S. & Friedman, J. A. (2008): *The 2006 Lebanon Campaign and the Future of Warfare: Implications for Army and Defense Policy.* Carlisle: Strategic Studies Institute.

Biegon, R., Rauta, V. & Watts, T. F. A. (2021a): Remote Warfare – Buzzword or Buzzkill? *Defence Studies*, 21(4), 427–446.

Biegon, R., Rauta, V. & Watts, T. F. A. (2021b): Remote Warfare – Buzzword or Buzzkill? *Defence Studies*, 21(4), 427–446.

Bowers, C. (2012): Identifying Emerging Hybrid Adversaries. *Parameters*, 42(1), 39–50.

Brynen, R. (2011): Countering Hybrid Threats AAR. *Pax Sims*, 15 May, <accessed online: https://paxsims.wordpress.com/2011/05/15/countering-hybrid-threats-aar/>.

Caliskan, M. & Liégeois, M. (2021): The Concept of 'Hybrid Warfare' Undermines NATO's Strategic Thinking: Insights from Interviews with NATO Officials. *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 32(2), 295–319.

Canestaro, N. (2016): Towards a Practitioner-Centric Definition of Civil War. *Civil Wars*, 18(3), 359–377.

Center of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats (n.d.): Hybrid Threats as a Concept. *Center of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats*, n.d., <accessed online: https://www.hybridcoe.fi/hybrid-threats-as-a-phenomenon/>.

Charap, S. (2015): Survival Global Politics and Strategy: The Ghost of Hybrid War.

Chivvis, C. S. (2017): *Understanding Russian "Hybrid Warfare": And What Can Be Done About It.* Santa Monica: RAND Corporation.

Cox, D. G., Bruscino, T. & Ryan, A. (2012): Why Hybrid Warfare Is Tactics Not Strategy: A Rejoinder to 'Future Threats and Strategic Thinking.' *Infinity Journal*, 2(2), 25–29.

Cullen, P. J. & Reichborn-Kjennerud, E. (2017): *Understanding Hybrid Warfare*, January. MCDC.

Eberle, J. & Daniel, J. (2022): Anxiety Geopolitics: Hybrid Warfare, Civilisational Geopolitics, and the Janus-Faced Politics of Anxiety. *Political Geography*, 92, 102502.

Eberle, J. & Daniel, J. (2023): *Politics of Hybrid Warfare*. Cham: Springer International Publishing.

Echevarria, A. J. I. (2006): *Challenging Transformation's Clichés*. Carlisle: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College.

EU (2022): *EU Strategic Compass*.

European Commission (2016a): Joint Framework on Countering Hybrid Threats: A European Union Response. Brussels.

European Commission (2016b): FAQ: Joint Framework on Countering Hybrid Threats. *European Commission*, 6 April, <accessed online: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/MEMO_16_1250>.

European Commission (2016c): Security: EU Strengthens Response to Hybrid Threats. *Ec.Europa.Eu*, 6 April, <accessed online: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_16_1227>.

Freier, N. (2007): *Strategic Competition and Resistance in the 21st Century: Irregular, Catastrophic, Traditional, and Hybrid Challenges in Context*. Carlisle: Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College.

Freier, N. (2009): The Defense Identity Crisis: It's a Hybrid World. *Parameters*, 39(3), 81–94.

Freier, N. (2010): Hybrid Threats and Challenges: Describe… Don't Define. *Small Wars Journal*, 1 June.

Fridman, O. (2018): *Russian "Hybrid Warfare."* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Galeotti, M. (2016): Hybrid, Ambiguous, and Non-Linear? How New Is Russia's "New Way of War"? *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 27(2), 282–301.

Gerring, J. (1999): What Makes a Concept Good? A Criterial Framework for Understanding Concept Formation in the Social Sciences. *Polity*, 31(3), 357–393.

Gerring, J. (2012): *Social Science Methodology: A Unified Framework* (2nd Edition.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Gerring, J. & Christenson, D. (2017): *Applied Social Science Methodology: An Introductory Guide*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Giannopoulos, G., Smith, H., Theocharidou, M., Juola, C., Karagiannis, G. M., Kivisoo, K., Schmid, J. & Schroefl, J. (2021): *The Landscape of Hybrid Threats: A Conceptual Model*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

Glenn, R. W. (2009): Thoughts on "Hybrid" Conflict. *Small Wars Journal*, 2(1), 1–8.

Goertz, G. (2006): *Social Science Concepts: A User's Guide*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Gray, C. S. (2012): *Categorical Confusion? The Strategic Implications of Recognising Challenges Either as Irregular or Traditional*. Carlisle: Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College.

Gunneriusson, H. (2012): Nothing Is Taken Serious Until It Gets Serious: Countering Hybrid Threats. *Defence Against Terrorism Review*, 4(1), 47–70.

Hoffman, F. G. (2006a): Lessons from Lebanon: Hezbollah and Hybrid Wars. *FPRI,* 2 August, <accessed online: https://www.fpri.org/article/2006/08/lessons-from-lebanon-hezbollah-and-hybrid-wars/>.

Hoffman, F. G. (2006b): Complex Irregular Warfare: The next Revolution in Military Affairs. *Orbis*, 50(3), 395–411.

Hoffman, F. G. (2007): *Conflict in the 21st Century: The Rise of Hybrid Wars*. Arlington.

Hoffman, F. G. (2009a): Hybrid Warfare and Challenges. *Joint Forces Quarterly*, (52), 34–48.

Hoffman, F. G. (2009b): Hybrid Threats: Reconceptualising the Evolving Character of Modern Conflict. *Strategic Forum*, (240), 1–8.

Hoffman, F. G. (2009c): Hybrid vs. Compound War – The Janus Choice of Modern War: Defining Today's Multifaceted Conflict. *Armed Forces Journal*, 1 October.

Hoffman, F. G. (2014): On Not-So-New Warfare? Political Warfare vs. Hybrid Threats. *War on the Rocks*, <accessed online: https://warontherocks.com/2014/07/on-not-so-new-warfare-political-warfare-vs-hybrid-threats/>.

Kofman, M. (2016): Russian Hybrid Warfare and Other Dark Arts. *War on the Rocks*, 11 March, <accessed online: https://warontherocks.com/2016/03/russian-hybrid-warfare-and-other-dark-arts/>.

Kondratov, E. & Johansson-Nogués, E. (2022): Russia's Hybrid Interference Campaigns in France, Germany and the UK: A Challenge against Trust in Liberal Democracies? *Geopolitics,* 28(5), 2169–2199*.*

Libiseller, C. (2023): 'Hybrid Warfare' as an Academic Fashion. *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 1–23.

Libiseller, C. & Milevski, L. (2021): War and Peace: Reaffirming the Distinction. *Survival*, 63(1), 101–112.

Lindley-French, J. (2015): *NATO and New Ways of Warfare: Defeating Hybrid Threats* (No. 3). Conference Report.

Mareš, M., Kraus, J. & Drmola, J. (2022): Conceptualisation of Hybrid Interference in the Czech Republic: How to Make It a Practically Researchable Phenomenon? *Politics in Central Europe*, 18(3), 343–354.

Mattis, J. N. & Hoffman, F. G. (2005): Future Warfare: The Rise of Hybrid Wars. *Proceedings*, 132(11), 18–19.

McCuen, J. J. (2008): Hybrid Wars. *Military Review*, (April-May), 107–113.

Milante, G. (2011): CRHT = Countering Rex' Hybrid Thread. *Pax Sims*, 20 May, <accessed online: https://paxsims.wordpress.com/2011/05/20/crht-countering-rex%e2%80%99-hybrid-thread/>.

Milevski, L. (2022): Conceptual Resilience Versus Social Utility in Strategic Thinking. *The RUSI Journal*, 167(2), 62–70.

Milevski, L. (2023): What Makes a Good Strategic Concept? *Comparative Strategy*, 42(5), 718–728.

Monaghan, S. (2019): Countering Hybrid Warfare: So What for the Future Joint Force? *PRISM*, 8(2), 82–98.

Murray, W. & Mansoor, P. R. (2012): *Hybrid Warfare: Fighting Complex Opponents from the Ancient World to the Present*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

NATO (2010): Bi-SC Input to a New NATO Capstone Concept for The Military Contribution to Countering Hybrid Threats. *Act.nato.int,* <accessed online: http://www.act.nato.int/images/stories/events/2010/20100826_bi-sc_cht. pdf>.

NATO (2014): Wales Summit Declaration. *NATO Website*, 5 September, <accessed online: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_112964. htm>.

NATO (2022): *NATO Strategic Concept 2022*. Madrid, 29 June, <accessed online: https://www.nato.int/content/dam/nato/webready/documents/publications-and-reports/strategic-concepts/2022/290622-strategic-concept.pdf>.

NATO Standardisation Office (2021): *AAP-6 NATO Glossary of Terms and Definitions (English and French)* (Edition 2021), <accessed online: https://standard. di.mod.bg/pls/mstd/MSTD.blob_upload_download_routines.download_ blob?p_id=281&p_table_name=d_ref_documents&p_file_name_column_ name=file_name&p_mime_type_column_name=mime_type&p_blob_column_name=contents&p_app_id=600>.

NATO Standardization Office (2018): *AAP-77 NATO Terminology Manual*. <accessed online: https://natobilc.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/AAP-77-EDA-V1-E.pdf >

NATO Standardization Office (2025): Terminology Extracted from NATOTerm. NATO Standardization Office, 24 April, <accessed online: https://oos-data. army.cz/aap6/AAP-06%20NATOTerm_2025_04_24.pdf>.

Nemeth, W. J. (2002): *Future War and Chechnya: A Case for Hybrid Warfare* (Master Thesis). Naval Postgraduate School: Monterey.

Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (2021): *DOD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*. Washington DC: The Joint Staff.

Rauta, V. (2021): A Conceptual Critique of Remote Warfare. *Defence Studies*, 21(4), 545–572.

Rühle, T. (2019): *Deterring Hybrid Threats: The Need for a More Rational Debate* (No. 19). Policy Brief, July.

Sartori, G. (1970): Concept Misformation in Comparative Politics. *American Political Science Review*, 64(4), 1033–1053.

Sartori, G. (2009a): The Tower of Babel. In: Collier, D. & Gerring, J. (eds.): *Concepts and Method in Social Science: The Tradition of Giovanni Sartori*. New York: Routledge, 61–96.

Sartori, G. (2009b): Guidelines for Concept Analysis. In: Collier, D. & Gerring, J. (eds.): *Concepts and Methods in Social Science: The Tradition of Giovanni Sartori*. New York: Routledge, 97–150.

Schaffer, F. C. (2015): *Elucidating Social Science Concepts*. London: Routledge.

Schnaufer, T. A. I. (2017): Redefining Hybrid Warfare: Russia's Non-Linear War against the West. *Journal of Strategic Security*, 10(1), 17–31.

Small, M. & Singer, D. J. (1982): *Resort to Arms: International and Civil Wars, 1816-1980* (2nd ed.). Beverly Hills, California: Sage Publications.

Solmaz, T. (2022): "Hybrid Warfare": One Term, Many Meanings. *Small Wars Journal*.

Stoker, D. & Whiteside, C. (2020): Blurred Lines: Gray-Zone Conflict and Hybrid War-Two Failures of American Strategic Thinking. *Naval War College Review*, 73.

United States Government Accountability Office (2010): *Hybrid Warfare: Briefing to the Subcommittee on Terrorism, Unconventional Threats and Capabilities, Committee on Armed Services, House of Representatives*. Washington, DC: GAO.

US Army (2010): *Training Circular 7-100: Hybrid Threat*. Washington, DC: Department of the Army.

Villani, C., Orsoni, M., Lugli, L., Benassi, M. & Borghi, A. M. (2022): Abstract and Concrete Concepts in Conversation. *Scientific Reports*, 12(1), 17572.

Walker, R. G. (1998): *SPEC FI: THE UNITED STATES MARINE CORPS AND SPECIAL OPERATIONS* (Master Thesis). Naval Postgraduate School: Monterey.

Wicker, E. (2022): *The Words That Matter: Terminology and Performance in the U.S. Army* (Ph.D. Thesis). Georgetown University: Washington, D.C.

Wicker, E. (2023a): Full-Spectrum Integrated Lethality? On the Promise and Peril of Buzzwords - War on the Rocks. *War on the Rocks*, <accessed online: https://warontherocks.com/2023/05/full-spectrum-integrated-lethality-on-the-promise-and-peril-of-buzzwords/>.

Wicker, E. (2023b): Full-Spectrum Integrated Lethality? On the Promise and Peril of Buzzwords - War on the Rocks. *War on the Rocks*, 17 May, <accessed online: https://warontherocks.com/2023/05/full-spectrum-integrated-lethality-on-the-promise-and-peril-of-buzzwords/>.

Wigell, M. (2019): Hybrid Interference as a Wedge Strategy: A Theory of External Interference in Liberal Democracy. *International Affairs*, 95(2), 255–275.

Winton, H. R. (2011): An Imperfect Jewel: Military Theory and the Military Profession. *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 34(6), 853–877.

Weaponisation of Interdependence: Unpacking European Ontological Anxieties?

Maria Perfetto

Charles University, Prague, Czech Republic, ORCiD: 0009-0005-2740-3509, corresponding address: maria.perfetto@fsv.cuni.cz

Abstract

Traditional scholarship on economic interdependence assumes that economic ties primarily function as stabilising mechanisms or strategic tools for leverage. However, they neglect how identity and ontological concerns can securitise interdependence. This study addresses this critical gap by integrating Ontological Security Theory to move beyond materialist explanations and offer a novel framework for understanding how economic ties are redefined in response to crises. Using an interpretative process-tracing approach, combined with Critical Discourse Studies, the study examines how EU institutional narratives reconstructed interdependence with Russia from a cooperative mechanism into an existential security threat. Unlike conventional sanctions research focused on costs or strategic outcomes, this analysis spotlights the discursive mechanisms that enabled the EU's shift from managed interdependence (pre-2022) to economic coercion (post-2022). The findings identify a three-phase transformation: (1) Managed Interdependence, (2) Ontological Crisis and Reflexive Routinisation and (3) Weaponised Interdependence and Strategic Deterrence. The EU's move from 'smart sanctions' to full-scale economic coercion was driven not solely by material interests, but by the need to reaffirm its normative identity amid ontological insecurity. This perspective offers new insights into economic statecraft, international political economy and EU security policy.

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

Introduction

Economic interdependence has long been hailed as a guarantor of peace. Yet in the wake of Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, the European Union – perhaps the most integrationist project – mobilised interdependence as a weapon. This paradox raises a central question: Why did the EU move from fostering cooperative ties to dismantling them through one of the most comprehensive sanctions regimes in history? The cognitive model of interdependence – embedded in EU policy routines – guided its post–Cold War expansion and integration of Central and Eastern Europe (Shimmelfennig 2001) and its European Neighborhood Policy (ENP), presented as a vehicle for promoting liberal democracy (Noutcheva, Pomorska & Bosse 2013; Noutcheva 2018). Yet this vision was not universally shared. Russia, in particular, interpreted the Eastern Partnership as geopolitical interference rather than a stabilising initiative, framing it as a challenge to sovereignty. The EU's export of capitalism, institutional integration and rule-of-law norms clashed with Russia's emphasis to sovereignty, nationalism and spiritual-cultural autonomy (Macharychev 2018; Cerruti & Lucarelli 2008; Kaunert & de Deus Pereira 2023). Over time, this normative divergence deepened political tensions. Russia' violations of the EU's rule-based order intensified anti-Russian sentiment in Europe (Boman 2023), culminating in the 2023 Eurobarometer finding that 80% of surveyed Europeans supported stronger sanctions. For the first time, all EU member states unanimously adopted comprehensive sanctions against Russia, reflecting a broad consensus that Moscow posed a threat to European Security. This historical trajectory challenges liberal and neoliberal expectations that interdependence inherently promotes peace. While realist perspectives (Mearsheimer 2001; Huntington 1996) attribute conflict outcomes to material power and strategic calculations, they overlook the deeper ideational dimensions of international conflicts. As Guzzini (2012: 7) provocatively asks: Was the resurgence of geopolitical thinking after the Cold War not inevitable? If so, it may be because geopolitical competition is not solely about power accumulation, but about the preservation of collective identities and ontological security. This paper builds on Guzzini's interpretivist framework and socio-cognitive discourse studies to examine how ontological anxiety drives the weaponisation of interdependence, with a focus on EU-Russia relations. The central proposition is that the EU's shift from cooperative economic engagement to coercive economic statecraft after 2022 cannot be explained solely by material asymmetries or strategic leverage.

Instead, the full-scale invasion of Ukraine constituted an identity shock that redefined interdependence as a security liability, legitimising its transformation into an instrument of *ontological coercion* – economic measures intended not just to impose material costs but to destabilise the target's self-conception. The study therefore addresses the following Research Question: How does ontological security drive the weaponisation of interdependence, and in what ways do these mechanisms reshape EU-Russian relations – particularly through the interplay of perceived disorder and recurring identity-based conflicts? To answer this, the paper integrates Ontological Security Theory (Mitzen 2006) as a critical supplement to Complex Interdependence Theory (Keohane & Nye 1977) and Weaponised Interdependence (Farrell & Newman 2010, 2014, 2019), addressing their limitations in explaining how economic interdependence is securitised through identity driven anxieties. Methodologically, it employs interpretative process-tracing, enriched by Critical Discourse Studies (CDS) (Fairclough 2010; van Dijk 2008; Wodak 2001), to reconstruct how EU institutional discourse, policy framings and sanction design evolved through three distinct phases:

1. **Managed Interdependence (Pre-2022)**: Despite tensions, EU-Russia relations remained structured by economic interdependence, where trade, institutional cooperation and regulatory mechanisms sustained stability.
2. **Ontological Crisis & Reflexive Routinisation (2022 Invasion)**: Full-scale invasion of Ukraine disrupted EU identity, triggering discursive reframing and escalations of sanctions.
3. **Weaponised Interdependence & Strategic Deterrence**: Interdependence reframed as an existential threat; sanctions become acts of ontological coercion aimed at identity disruption and strategic deterrence.

By foregrounding identity-based anxieties, this analysis advances a richer understanding of economic statecraft, showing how strategic economic measures can serve as tools of existential and ontological contestation in Global Politics.

The paradox of interdependence: peace without ideological convergence?

The liberal promise of interdependence

Keohane and Nye's (1977) Complex Interdependence Theory (CIT) emerged as an ideal-type model contrasting with realism, portraying how dense networks of economic, institutional and social ties as mechanisms for reducing conflict. It assumes: 1a) multiple, overlapping channels of interaction between states; 2a) strong economic relations inversely correlated with political conflict; 3a) absence of a rigid, hierarchical security agenda. This framework predicts that mutual vulnerability fosters stability, and that asymmetries in dependence will diminish over time. However, it underplays scenarios of deglobalisation and deliberate disruption, where interdependence becomes fragile and exploitable, as in highly

contested environments states may engage in costly signaling, incurring economic damage to demonstrate resolve (Schelling 1966; Gartzke 2010). Or, as Zheng (2021) demonstrates in the EU-Russia case, embedded economic ties can serve as points of weakness in times of geopolitical-ideological tensions. While CIT recognises asymmetries through the concepts of sensitivity and vulnerability, it assumes that such asymmetries will fade over time – an assumption increasingly challenged by contemporary geopolitics.

The structural turn: Weaponised interdependence

Drawing on CIT, Farrell and Newman's (2010, 2014, 2019) Weaponised Interdependence (WI) reframes asymmetric economic and technological networks as sources of coercive leverage. They argue that global economic networks are inherently asymmetrical, granting disproportionate power to states controlling critical nodes in trade, finance and technology. Weaponised Interdependence identifies two mechanisms: the Panopticon Effect, where control over infrastructures (e.g. SWIFT, telecoms) enables surveillance and restriction; and the Chokepoint Effect, where states can sever access to essential flows to coerce adversaries. It shifts the focus from mutual vulnerability to strategic asymmetries, showing how dominant actors can exploit interdependence to coerce others. Rather than producing mutual restraint, globalisation has created a strategic environment in which states exploit economic and technological infrastructures for coercive purposes (Pearlstein 2017). This transformation is reflected in the rise of sanctions regimes, technology restrictions and financial exclusion mechanisms – practices that traditional interdependence theories inadequately theorise. WI de facto captures the structural conditions enabling coercion, as seen in the EU's post-2022 sanctions where financial and technological restrictions were deployed as strategic tools rather than routine regulatory measures. Yet it retains a materialist bias: It privileges control over physical infrastructures and overlooks cognitive and normative logics that make such leverage politically legitimate. It also struggles to explain 'semi-costly' coercion, such as pre-2022 sanctions against the Russian Federation, where states acted despite lacking clear structural advantage.

Conceptual gap and contribution: Ontological coercion

In short, if CIT explains interdependence under ideal-type conditions, and WI explains how asymmetries can be exploited, neither explains why actors sometimes reinterpret interdependence itself as threatening, nor why they pursue coercion even at high material cost. Here, Ontological Security Theory (OST) provides an essential conceptual lens. OST (Mitzen 2006; Huysmans 1998, 2004; Lupovici 2012; Giddens 1991, Kaunert & de Deus Pereira, 2023) argues that states seek not only physical survival but also a stable self-identity. Disruptions to routine relationships – whether from external shocks or perceived threats – can

provoke ontological insecurity. In such cases, coercive strategies (e.g. sanctions) may restore stability by reaffirming identity, even at economic cost. In EU-Russia relations, material disputes over trade, energy and security are underpinned by deeper normative and identity conflicts (Casier 2016, 2018, 2019; Samokhavlov 2018). Both actors promote competing visions of order in Eurasia: the EU emphasising liberal norma and rule-of-law governance, Russia stressing sovereignty and nationalism (Akchurina & Della Sala 2018). Since 2014, these divergences have intensified, with sanctions functioning not only as economic measures but also as instruments of identity assertion and political legitimacy. This study introduces the concept of Ontological Coercion to capture this phenomenon. Ontological coercion refers to the use of economic statecraft not merely to impose material costs, but to destabilise an adversary's self-conception and normative order, while reinforcing the sender's own identity. As Mitzen (2006) notes, states can become locked into self-reinforcing conflicts, even when such confrontations undermine their material well-being. States can be inclined to self-preservation of the status quo, not if a sense of major psychological disruption is perceived (the re-emergence of existential anxiety in purely philosophical terms drawn from existentialist scholarship). When the disruption happens, the 'routine' (in this case the European sanctioning policy) can restore the pre-existing routine or generate new or intensified ones due to cognitive destabilisation and consequent change in perceptions of the Other *par excellence*.

A theoretical framework for analysis: Ontological coercion

This study builds on Guzzini's (2012) interpretivist approach and van Dijk's (1998, 2008, 2014) socio-cognitive discourse theory to conceptualise foreign policy change as rooted in meaning-making, identity and cognitive models. Ontological insecurity is not treated as a measurable variable but as a constitutive condition that reshapes actors' perceptions of interdependence and legitimacy. In this framework, process-tracing is used not to confirm hypotheses in a positivist sense but to reconstruct the phases of discursive transformation through which institutional behaviour changes. Following Wendt's (1998) critique of causal-realist epistemology, the aim is to identify the constitutive mechanisms that turn economic interdependence into an instrument of ontological coercion. Materialist approaches have dominated explanations of the interdependence-conflict nexus: While the frameworks explain the structural possibility of coercion, they do not account for the identity-based and cognitive conditions under which interdependence is reframed as a threat. They remain focused on material infrastructures, overlooking how shared meanings, collective memory and identity narratives condition conceptions of materiality and foreign policy choices. If actors seek a stable self-identity alongside physical survival, routinised relationships – including economic ties/informational ties – help sustain this identity. The current configuration of

global markets is shaped by hierarchical structures and centralised financial and informational nodes that are susceptible to exploitation. As Marx (1859: 5) argues, the conditions under which individuals produce and reproduce their material life fundamentally shape their social and intellectual existence – highlighting a dialectical relationship between materiality and consciousness, perceptions and ideologies. From a cognitive perspective, it follows that many so-called social facts, such as money, institutions or markets, are observer-dependent: They are defined, categorised and sustained through human interpretation and discourse (van Dijk 2008: 39). In this sense, economic interdependence and the belief systems it generates can be understood as components of a shared social mental model which derives from a certain shared knowledge discursively generated via mental processes and mental/context models). Cognitive approaches to knowledge describe mental models as subjective representations shaped by perception, experience, prior models and socio-cultural knowledge which defines our interpretation of events. These models are not stored as isolated propositions but structured representations used to construct our representation of world events, instantiating social knowledge in specific contexts.

In general, the EU shared social mental model on interdependence has shaped policies and relations with other actors on the international arena, as well as with the Russian Federation. In fact, the conflicts before 2022 were not perceived as disruptive cognitively as the shock in 2022 which generated a phenomenon of generalised anxiety. From 2014 to 2021 Sanctions were framed as smart, targeted in the sense that they were aimed at having an impact only at specific areas. The shared knowledge about Russia and the related mental models in relation with 'how to sanction Russia' responded to certain cognitive expectations, justified by an interdependent routine and by the shared perception of the EU as a normative power, together with the narrative on the 'unthinkability of a war', not inside and not at the borders (Mitzen 2016, 2018). Based on a discursively constructed and socially shared mental model, EU-Russia economic interdependence was, prior to 2022, framed as a stabilising and mutually beneficial relationship. This model was underpinned by liberal assumptions about globalisation, institutional integration and the EU's identity as a normative power. Within this framework, conflicts such as the 2014 annexation of Crimea were not perceived as existential threats but as manageable disruptions that did not fundamentally challenge the dominant representation of interdependence. As such, sanctions adopted between 2014 and 2021 were designed and discursively framed as 'smart' and 'targeted' (Giumelli 2013) – measures intended to signal normative disapproval while maintaining the overarching logic of cooperation (semantic conceptual memory of the EU epistemic community). The model rested on a set of shared social facts: that Russia remained an indispensable energy partner, that economic ties could moderate geopolitical tensions and that selective sanctions could compartmentalise political conflict.

These expectations were cognitively stabilised through mental models that encoded prior experience, institutional memory and legitimating discourses. The 2022 invasion, however, ruptured this representational equilibrium, producing widespread ontological insecurity (resurgence existential anxiety) and prompting a discursive reconstitution of interdependence itself – from a logic of engagement to one of strategic vulnerability, where sanctions design completely shifted from what we were used to see. De facto, if knowledge and as a consequence social facts are discursively reinterpreted and re-legitimised within society, what happens in the case of a cognitive shock? Or a discursively represented collective identitarian threat? For these reasons, it is important to respond to the following question:

> *How does ontological insecurity drive the weaponisation of interdependence, and in what ways do these mechanisms reshape EU-Russian relations – particularly through the interplay of perceived disorder and recurring identity-based conflicts?*

When Giddens (1991) introduces the concept of ontological security, he defines it as a 'sense of continuity and order in events', a stable cognitive condition that enables individuals to trust in the constancy of their social and material environment. This conceptualisation has been criticised for its rationalist bias and implicit status quo orientation. Giddens's example of women remaining in violent relationships illustrates a paradox: Individuals may prefer harmful routines over disruptive change because routine provides a sense of existential stability. This cognitive dynamic can be extended to international politics, where in-group/out-group logics shape the behaviour of collective actors.

Agency, as Mitzen (2006: 342) argues, requires a stable cognitive environment. It follows that the primary response to uncertainty is an attempt to reduce psychological stress. Minor disruptions may be tolerated, as actors anticipate that routines will eventually reassert themselves. This dynamic characterised the post–Cold War relationship between the EU and Russia: Despite persistent tensions, both sides maintained routinised interactions that reinforced their roles, and sanctions remained targeted rather than comprehensive. Because the conflict did not generate existential anxiety, drastic policy shifts such as isolating Russia were avoided.

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, however, produced a massive cognitive rupture. Ontological security theory helps explain why the invasion was perceived not only as a military threat but also as a profound challenge to Europe's self-conception as a peaceful, rules-based actor. Previous routines of engagement and partial sanctions no longer offered normative or psychological stability. From a cognitive perspective, this disruption necessitated a reconstruction of interpretive frameworks. The belief that economic interdependence could moderate Russian behaviour became untenable, prompting both discursive reframing and cognitive

restructuring (see Table 1). In other words, the EU's interpretive apparatus – the scripts and schemas through which it understood interdependence – underwent a fundamental shift, giving rise to a new logic of weaponised interdependence.

Table 1: Discursive phases of interdependence in EU-Russian Relations

Discursive Phase	Meaning-Making Mechanism	Observable Expressions	Interpretative Significance
Managed Complex Interdependence	Interdependence framed as stabilising and cooperative; EU identity anchored in regulatory power	Official communications stress dialogue, sectoral integration, and limited, symbolic sanctions	Reinforces the EU's normative self-image and its belief in economic diplomacy as a stabilising force
Ontological Insecurity Crisis	Existential threat perceived as destabilising EU identity; routinised tools reinterpreted as inadequate	Press releases shift from legalistic to moralistic and urgent language; sanctions broaden to symbolic sectors of Great Power	Represents a rupture in the EU's self-conception – from a 'regulatory power' to a 'geopolitical actor' under threat
Weaponisation of Interdepenence	Economic instruments reframed as existential tools for identity preservation; sanctions as ontological reassertion	Sanctions justified as long-term strategic necessity; discourse highlights 'unity', 'defense of European values', and 'existential threat'	Transforms interdependence into a threat structure and legitimises coercion as identity-protecting policy

Source: Author

The EU's sanctions experience prior to 2022 was primarily symbolic and signaling-oriented. A complete disruption of economic ties or an 'informational annihilation' of Russia would have undermined the EU's own self-conception as a normative power. From 2014 to 2021, the threat was discursively constructed as manageable rather than existential. This helps explain why sanctions remained limited and targeted: They signaled disapproval but preserved routinised patterns of interdependence. Once such routines were established, however, escalation became a latent possibility. When a threat is subsequently perceived as existential, intensification of conflict tools appears both natural and unsurprising. In this sense, sanctions evolve from symbolic gestures into instruments of ontological coercion – measures that directly affect the sense of self and stability of the targeted actor. By contrast, the weaponisation of interdependence, though not historically

characteristic of EU sanctions policy, emerged in response to a perceived onto-logical crisis. In line with the reflexivisation hypothesis, the EU's attachment to established routines meant that the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 produced a radical cognitive rupture. What had previously been experienced as 'tensions' now constituted an existential threat, justifying the transformation of interdependence itself into a threat structure. This discursive shift – from 2014's legalistic language and calibrated sanctions to 2022's urgent moral discourse and expansive measures – illustrates how sanctions were redefined as acts of ontological coercion. The EU no longer sought merely to impose costs but to undermine Russia's identity projec-tion and destabilise its normative influence. We conceptualise these measures as ontological sanctions: strategies that disrupt an actor's identity performance and normative authority by severing its integration into global supply chains, symbolic infrastructures and discursive arenas. Ontological sanctions thus function not only economically, but also reputationally and ideologically. They delegitimise the target's role in international society, discredit its narratives and fragment its per-ceived authority within contested communities. This form of coercion is primarily informational and psychological, operating through normative, reputational and material channels. It explains why sanctions escalate and persist despite their high economic costs: They do not merely punish but seek to redefine strategic relation-ships and contest ideological hierarchies by attacking the ontological security of the adversary. The EU's responses to Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and its full-scale invasion in 2022 illustrate this transformation. Through these cases, we trace how discursive and symbolic processes reshaped the meaning of sanctions, shifting from signaling tools to mechanisms of ontological coercion.

Rather than testing hypotheses through causal inference, this study employs in-terpretive process tracing (IPT) (Guzzini 2012, Norman 2015) to reconstruct how the EU's discursive framing of interdependence and sanctions has evolved in response to external shocks. Rooted in Guzzini's (2012) phased approach, this method traces how meaning is constituted, stabilised and transformed across time – particularly in institutional contexts where identities and norms are central to policy behaviour. While the theoretical lens explains why actors are driven by the need for ontological security, IPT provides the analytical tools to examine how such needs are discur-sively articulated, challenged and reconstituted in EU foreign policy discourse. To capture these evolving discursive formations, the study integrates tools from Critical Discourse Studies (CDS), particularly van Dijk's socio-cognitive model. CDS enables close attention to semantic shifts, lexical patterns and ideological framing across institutional texts – thus illuminating the rhetorical mechanisms through which interdependence is re-signified and sanctions are legitimated. The design is particularly suited to capturing: 1a. the sequencing and escalation of meaning shifts; 2b. the role of cognitive disruptions in triggering policy reframing; 3c. the ideational consolidation of sanctions as a tool of ontological coercion.

Before the rift (2014–2021): EU-Russia managed interdependence
Rather than treating sanctions as purely material instruments, this paper argues
that their nature and scope were co-constituted by the EU's ontological security
needs at distinct moments. Material measures correspond to psychological neces-
sities, shaped by and enacted through dominant cognitive frames. In this sense,
sanctions are not only economic tools but also symbolic responses to identity
threats. Despite repeated legal violations by Russia, the EU maintained a policy
of calibrated and reversible sanctions between 2014 and 2021. This restraint was
not merely strategic but discursively enabled: Russia was not yet constructed as
an existential adversary. The conflict remained manageable, allowing the EU to
preserve its self-conception as a normative, rules-based actor committed to diplo-
matic engagement. I argue that controlled interdependence – where economic ties
persist despite political conflict – is sustained when identity-based threats are not
perceived as ontological. In this phase, interdependence functions as a cognitive
stabiliser, maintaining the status quo and preventing escalation. Conflict intensity
remains low as long as there is no perceived need to reimagine the Self in relation
to the Other. Sanctions in this phase are signaling, but not substantial – that is,
they do not aim to 'spiritually isolate' the target or annihilate it materially and
ideologically in the global order. This is something for which I find evidence in
economic data and in the juridical frameworks used before the full-scale invasion.
The discourse in this phase does not frame Russia as a *par excellence* enemy which
clearly has an impact on mainstream media representation of a conflict and, as a
consequence, on public opinion.

Conceptualising managed complex interdependence
Contextually, before 2022 EU-Russia relations are framed differently. Some studies
argue that intensive economic relations promote cooperation (Keohane & Nye
1977; Copeland 1996). If we look at the data considered in Pascariu and Simionov's
model (2017) where key interdependence indicators are FDI, total trade and sec-
toral dependencies, with energy being the most significant area of EU reliance
on Russia, we notice that in 2021 as per official European Commission reports
economic data are as follow:
- In 2021, Russia ranked as the EU's fifth-largest trade partner, accounting for
  5.8% of total EU trade in goods. Conversely, in 2020, the EU was Russia's
  largest trade partner, comprising 37.3% of Russia's total trade (European
  Commission n.d.).
- The total trade in goods between the EU and Russia in 2021 reached €257.5
  billion. EU imports amounted to €158.5 billion, primarily mineral fuels
  (€98.9 billion, 62%), wood (€3.16 billion, 2%), iron and steel (€7.4 billion,
  4.7%), and fertilisers (€1.78 billion, 1.1%). EU exports to Russia totaled €99
  billion, including machinery (€19.5 billion, 19.7%), motor vehicles (€8.95

billion, 9%), pharmaceuticals (€8.1 billion, 8.1%) and electrical equipment (€7.57 billion, 7.6%) (European Commission n.d.).

- Trade in services also played a crucial role, amounting to €29.4 billion in 2020, with the EU exporting €20.5 billion in services to Russia and importing €8.9 billion (European Commission n.d.).
- The EU maintained a strong investment presence in Russia, with FDI outward stock reaching € 270,493.1 Million in 2021, while Russia's inward FDI was estimated at € 159,229.9 Million (Eurostat n.d.).
- Given Russia's $1.83 trillion GDP, EU trade constituted a substantial share of its economic activity, affording the EU considerable leverage (World Bank n.d.).

Drawing on Keohane and Nye's interdependence theory, the EU-Russia economic relationship before 2022 fostered a shared cognitive frame of stability, where mutual benefits were expected to deter conflict. However, the asymmetric structure of the interdependence – Russia's 37.7% trade reliance on the EU vs the EU's 5.8% reliance – shaped different perceptions of risk. While the EU enjoyed strategic flexibility, Russia faced greater structural vulnerability. These dynamics manifested in perceived sensitivity (short-term shocks) and vulnerability (long-term exposure), reinforcing interdependence as both a material condition and a cognitive lens shaping policy restraint. It is crucial to underscore that the EU's normative foreign policy – grounded in rule-based diplomacy and soft power (Manners 2002) – has long contrasted with Russia's civilisational worldview, shaped by Slavic traditionalism and a strong emphasis on spiritual security and sovereign autonomy. As Bettanin (2018) suggests, the roots of EU-Russia tensions lie in conflicting identity-based aspirations: The US perceived itself as the 'indispensable nation', the EU positioned itself as the normative embodiment of Europe and Russia clung to its great power status, rooted in historical tradition and symbolic continuity. In the immediate post-Soviet period, Russia viewed integration into Western-led institutions as a pragmatic path to recovery. Despite political misalignments and NATO's eastward expansion, the 1990s and the early 2000s were marked by cooperation, driven more by necessity than shared values. Russia's foreign policy oscillated between strategic adaptation and wounded resentment – particularly following the NATO intervention in Kosovo and the US-led invasion of Iraq, which undermined trust in the West and challenged the credibility of international norms. Still, integration was pursued, not abandoned.

In the early 2000s, Russia still prioritised cooperation with the Euro-Atlantic alliance for the sake of regional stability. From the European side, the EU consistently framed Russia as a strategic partner. This is evident in key institutional milestones: the 1997 Partnership and cooperation agreement (PCA), the 2003 For Common Spaces Framework and the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) launched in 2004. These initiatives aimed to normalise and socialise Russia

into a European-led normative order, reinforcing the EU's own identity as a post-sovereign power exporting stability through interdependence. The 2003 European Security Strategy formalised this vision, depicting a rules based international system anchored in law, cooperation and shared values. For Russia, this interdependence was not merely a vehicle for modernisation – it also served as a tool to assert strategic relevance and to resist US unipolarity from within the global system. Russia's accession to the WTO in 2012, despite its vocal critiques of Western-led global governance, reveals this dual logic: to contest hegemony while participating in its institutional architecture. In this way, the EU served a dual function for Russia – as both a normative interlocutor and a counterweight to US dominance, enabling Russia to project itself as a global actor on its own terms in the existing multilateral frameworks. However, by the mid-2000s, cracks in this cognitive alignment began to show. In his 2007 Munich Security Conference Speech, President Putin sharply criticised the unipolar word order and demanded recognition of Russia's role in global governance, signaling a clear departure from earlier cooperative rhetoric (Putin 2007), where strategic cooperation with strategic partners should be preserved as evident in the Foreign Policy Concepts of 2008 and 2013 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2008;2013). Putin's (2013) strategy was that of collaborating but calling out for a more democratic international arena where Russia could contribute to the security of the post-Soviet space and beyond. Even amid these ideological divergences, it was maintained as a discourse of cooperation between the parts. As stated in the First Commission Report on the implementation by Russia of the Common Steps for a visa-free regime, High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Catherine Ashton remarked:

> Much effort has been made on both sides in preparing for future visa liberalisation under the EU-Russia Common Steps and I hope we can continue our work on this in the same way. We are looking forward to concluding the visa waiver agreement for short term travel once the identified concerns and recommended actions have been addressed. (European Commission 2013)

Ultimately, this period laid the foundation for what can be termed managed interdependence – a relationship marked by increasing political and normative divergence yet sustained economic and diplomatic engagement. By 2014, when the Crimea crisis erupted, these historical contingencies shaped the EU's sanctioning response: calibrated, symbolic and structured to preserve interdependence while asserting normative boundaries. Sanctions cannot be analysed without considering the socio-historical context and the broader discourse generating tensions as well as the general knowledge about something – for both actors' interdependence was a key factor in their foreign policy behaviour and for their role in the global

order. The preservation of this is cognitively important from this point of view. This is why although some sanctions are imposed, they are not aimed to disrupt Russia – they only have a deterrent and signaling objective, that is they aim at maintaining the relationships with Russia and avoid further deterioration of the interdependence by sending an institutional, normative message to the target and at the domestic, international level. As reported by Valdai Club (Timofeev 2018) starting in 2014, the EU and the United States closely coordinated their sanctions policies in response to Russia's annexation of Crimea and its destabilising role in Eastern Ukraine. The first wave of EU measures came with Council Decision 2014/145/CFSP (17 March 2014) (see Table 2), which imposed targeted sanctions on 21 individuals from Russia and Ukraine, including asset freezes and travel bans. Over time, this list expanded significantly, reaching 161 individuals and 41 entities by September 2018 (Valdai Club 2018). On 23 June 2014, the EU adopted Decision 2014/386/CFSP, introducing a ban on imports from Crimea and Sevastopol, formalising the EU's non-recognition policy of the annexation. This was followed by Decision 2014/933/CFSP (18 December 2014), which extended restrictions to real estate, finance, investment, tourism, and critical goods and technologies linked to Crimea. A major turning point came on 31 July 2014, with Decision 2014/512/CFSP, which launched sectoral sanctions targeting Russia's defence, banking and energy sectors. Till 2021 as is evident by looking at the content on EUR-LEX and comparing all the Council Decisions, these frames constitute the main legal basis for European Sanctions. The approach until December 2021 was targeted; in fact, except for 31 July 2014 with Decision 2014/512/CFSP (see Table 3), all the rest of the decisions list specific individual and entities.

This analysis demonstrates that the EU's sanctioning strategy following the annexation of Crimea in 2014 was not designed to sever ties with Russia, but rather to signal disapproval while preserving the broader framework of managed interdependence. All the measures in this period are legally proportional; they are only limited and do not disrupt the entire supply chain management of a state and/or an entity. They target mostly individuals who exposed a favourable opinion on the illegal annexation of Crimea. Sanctions were deployed incrementally and symbolically, reflecting both institutional restraint and the cognitive framing of Russia as a necessary – albeit difficult – partner in the European order. This approach aligns with the EU's normative identity, rooted in rule-based diplomacy and economic leverage, and reflects a shared belief (until 2022) that the conflict remained non-ontological and therefore manageable. The coexistence of sanctions and continued trade relations illustrates the EU's strategic dilemma: balancing normative responses to violations of international law with the pragmatic need to preserve systemic stability. Ultimately, the EU's sanctions regime from 2014 to 2021 exemplifies a logic of ontological containment rather than rupture, where the goal was to uphold the normative order without fully dismantling the

interdependent structure on which both sides relied. The cognition at work is clearly traceable in the overall discourse on sanctions as part of a foreign policy continuum which for instance includes the legal discourse (the frameworks), the overall mediatic discourse where we include the institutional discourse and the justifications.

Table 2: Sanctions Design and legal basis: Council Decision 2014/145/CFSP (March 17, 2014)

Council Decision 2014/145/CFSP (17 March 2014)	Description	Design
Targeted sanctions	Identifying specific **individuals, entities,** or sectors that are believed to be supporting the targeted behavior	**Asset freezes:** Preventing the target from accessing or controlling their assets, including bank accounts, property, and investments. **Travel bans:** Restricting the target's ability to travel to or through specific countries. **Restrictions on financial transactions:** Prohibiting financial institutions from engaging in transactions with the target. **Trade restrictions:** Limiting the export or import of specific goods or technologies to or from the target. **Denial of access to services:** Blocking access to certain services like banking, insurance, or legal representation.

Source: Author

The March 2014 European Council press release (European Council 2014) follows an extraordinary meeting on 3 March 2014, addressing Russia's military intervention in Crimea. The EU 'urged' Russia to withdraw its forces and warned that failure to de-escalate would lead to suspending bilateral talks on visa matters and the New Agreement. The tone is formal, authoritative and legalistic, avoiding emotionally charged rhetoric while maintaining a strong condemnatory stance.

Table 3: Decision 2014/512/CFSP (31 July 2014)

Decision (31 July 2014)	Description	Design
Ban on dealing in new bonds, equity, and similar instruments >90 days maturity from 5 named Russian banks (Sberbank, VTB Bank, Gazprombank, VEB, Rosselkhozbank)	Applies to banks listed in the Annex, and their >50% owned subsidiaries	Sectoral – not a full asset freeze; first use of 'capital access' tool
Arms Embargo	Total ban on export/import of arms, related materiel, services, financing, and brokering	Classic arms embargo with broad extraterritorial scope
Dual-Use Export Controls	Ban on dual-use items **if for military use or military end-users in Russia**	Civilian dual-use exports still allowed in 2014 if not for military use
Energy Technology Restrictions	Prior authorisation needed for exports related to **deep water, Arctic, or shale oil** projects	No license granted if end-use is in restricted energy project types
Anti-Circumvention Clause	Ban on knowing or intentional efforts to bypass restrictions	Standard clause for enforcement integrity
Liability Shield (Good Faith)	No liability if actor did not know and had no reason to suspect violation	Encourages due diligence; does not waive obligations

Source: Author

The press release frames Russia's actions as unlawful, labeling them a 'clear violation' of international law and the Ukrainian constitution and defining them as 'acts of aggression' – a term consistent with international legal discourse. This legal framing is reinforced by references to the UN Charter, OSCE Helsinki Final Act, Budapest Memorandum (1994), the Bilateral Treaty on Friendship, Cooperation and Partnership (1997), and the Ukrainian Constitution. The structured parallel constructions listing these violations enhance clarity and argumentative strength. At this stage, the EU's response remains diplomatic, serving as a warning rather than an immediate imposition of sanctions. The press release also signals continued openness to engagement with Russia, stating that 'the EU ambitions

and openness to a relationship with Russia' persist despite the crisis. The 2014 EU rhetoric reflects a strategic wait-and-see approach, wherein the EU strongly condemns Russia's actions but avoids immediate, irreversible measures, preserving space for negotiation and economic stability. The EU's decision to delay harsher sanctions at this stage suggests a cautious approach, balancing normative concerns with strategic pragmatism. The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation from 2016 criticises the Western states in general in point 61 for their containment policy against Russia, but at the same time in point 63 states that 'the EU remains an important trade and economic and foreign policy partner for Russia' (Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation, approved 30 November 2016). The tone is still open to cooperation, but critical.

After the rift (2022): Fractured identity and the road to ontological coercion

Ontological security was not merely a parallel development but a primary causal driver shaping the form and scope of the EU's weaponised interdependence. I define security as a mental state where communities and states perceive stability due to attachment to existing routines. In this sense, the meaning we associate with material concepts and social facts is de facto a discursive and ideational phenomenon, since meanings depend on this mental state. When there is a shock, perception of social facts might change and one could cling to conflict intensification to preserve its identity (Giddens 1991; Mitzen 2006). The 2022 discursive shift suggests not merely a pragmatic adaptation to material threats, but a fundamental reconfiguration of how the EU conceived of its relationship with Russia, where sanctions regime does not represent a quantitative escalation from 2014, but a qualitative reorientation of economic statecraft (see Figure 1). Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 was framed in official EU discourse as an existential challenge to the European security order and self-identity. Josep Borrell described the moment as 'particularly dangerous for Europe' (22 February 2022), while Ursula von der Layen characterised the attack as 'not only on Ukraine, but on the European way of life' (European Commission 2022). Material threat indicators, alliance pressures and coercive capacities were already present in 2014, yet they did not produce comparable escalation. What changed was not the EU's capacity for coercion, but the meaning assigned to interdependence and to Russia's actions. This reinterpretation was participated by the identity shock and the perceived need to restore ontological stability.

The EU-Russia relationship illustrates the limits of complex interdependence. While economic integration initially fostered cooperation, normative divergences – particularly in governance models – undermined long-term stability (Stent 2008; Casier 2019). The EU's strategy to integrate Russia into a European-led order failed due to ideological incompatibilities (Bengtsson & Elgström 2021).

While economic interdependence initially encouraged cooperation, the EU's commitment to democracy, human rights and the rule of law contrasted with Russia's political trajectory under Putin (Stent 2008). As a result, the EU viewed Russia as an ambivalent partner rather than a fully integrated actor (Casier 2019;

Figure 1: The road to Ontological Coercion
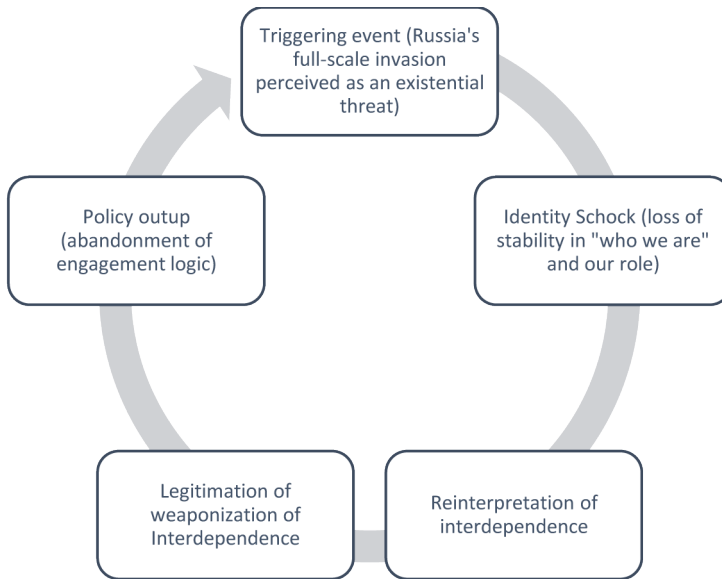
Source: Author

Lynch 2004; Tocci 2020). The European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) exacerbated tensions, culminating in Crimea's annexation, which media narratives framed as a crisis rather than a structural shift in EU-Russia relations. Despite this, Russia remained a strategic partner. The 2022 exposed the limits of diplomacy grounded in role conceptions, showing that identity-driven conflicts may sustain rather than resolve tensions. The identity shock of February 2022 arose from the perceptions that Russia's full-scale invasion was not merely a breach of international law or a challenge to Ukraine sovereignty, but a direct assault on the EU's self-conception as a unified, normative power able to preserve peace and stability in its neighbourhood. In ontological security terms, this meant a rupture in the EU's 'routinised' relationship with Russia – a relationship that, even after Crimea 2014, still rested on managed interdependence in trade, energy and diplomacy, and thus maintained a degree of predictability. The invasion destroyed that predictability in three ways: It revealed that deep economic interdependence did not deter large-scale war; it invalidated the EU's self-image as a successful peace project in Europe; and it publicly exposed the limits of EU diplomacy, undermining its claim

to shape regional order though law and dialogue. This triple rupture – strategic, normative and reputational – transformed Russia from a difficult partner into an existential adversary, triggering the cognitive and emotional recategorisation of interdependence from stabilising asset to structural vulnerability. This identity shock triggered a reframing of legitimised measures via deliberately targeting the rival's capacity to sustain its self-identity via attempting at:

- Eroding symbolic resources of great power identity: e.g. Central Bank sanctions, SWIFT exclusion
- Severing prestige networks: e.g. banning Kremlin-backed medias, suspending visa facilitation, excluding Russia from cultural and sporting events, main trade areas, prohibiting FDI, pushing supply chain management disruptions
- Undermining legitimacy of target – e.g. more aggressive signaling/contesting sanctions (most of the Duma members & major elite figures, 'propagandists')

These three spheres translate in the aim of having an impact on domestic and international symbolism (Lindsay 1986; Nossal 1989; Baldwin 1999; Hufbauer et al. 2007; Drezner 2011; Peksen 2019; Whang 2011; Giumelli 2011; Biersteker, Eckert & Tourinho 2016; Onderco 2016; Baldwin 2020) to target the ontological security of the rival. Russia official discourse confirms this identitarian dimension. In the briefing by Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova (Moscow, 3 June 2022) it is literally mentioned that, in the context of 'anti-Russia' sanctions:

> It looks like this is only being done to destroy everything related to our common culture. It is obvious that the European Commissioners' commitment to support and protect the variety of cultures as expressed in their joint statement is far from EU's actual intentions. I would put it differently. Maybe they want to protect and develop the cancel culture – but that's a different story.

Linking ontological security and EU sanctions policy

While in 2014 Sanctions were framed as regulatory enforcement acts, by 2022 they were justified as an existential security measure (see Table 4). This shift illustrates how the EU discursively reconstructed intense economic coercion as a defensive necessity rather than a diplomatic instrument due to the high identitarian threat. Sanctions tend to be harsher when they are ideological – this is why they require a framework (ontological coercion) that addresses to understand the level of identitarian aspects sanctions are aiming to have on the perception of the target on the world order. The highest the ideological-identitarian conflict, the more sanctions and discourse over sanctions and foreign policy will be designed to have an impact on system-wise globalised nodes which presupposes target integration and fair competition in global markets and to have a psychological impact

on public opinion on the level of domestic and international symbolism. Via the analysis of discourse, we can understand the intensity of the anxiety and of the ideological threat that produce certain type of policies, in this case sanctions.

Table 4: Discursive Themes 2014 versus February 2022

Factors	March 2014 (Crimea annexation)	February 2022 (Full-Scale Invasion)
Sanctions justifications	'encouraging compliance'	'defending European values'
Threat perception	Violation of sovereignty	Existential security threat
Rethorical tone	Legalistic, diplomatic	Moralistic, securitised
Key lexical choices	'dialogue', 'pressure', 'law'	'aggressions', 'barbaric', 'severance'
Policy framing	Sanctions are temporary and conditional	Sanctions are permanent and irreversible

Source: Author

The February 2022 press release (EEAS 2022) marks a fundamental shift in discursive framing, as High Representative Josep Borrell adopts a more confrontational, moralistic and securitised tone (e.g. 'acte d'une extrême gravité', 'républiques fantoches'; 'an act of extreme gravity; puppets republics'). His lexical choices construct a moral dichotomy, presenting Russia as an aggressor with direct personification of an 'Evil' ('Monsieur Poutine a décidé': Mr Putin has decided), eliminating diplomatic ambiguity. The framing of Donetsk and Luhansk Republics as 'fantoches' (puppets) implies Russian manipulation, reinforcing the EU's portrayal of Russia as a revisionist power actively destabilising Europe. The absence of modal verbs strengthens the declarative and authoritative tone, signaling a definitive shift from diplomatic engagement to confrontation. A key rhetorical strategy in Borrell's speech is the invocation of existential threat, framing Russia's actions as an unprecedented crisis ('a particularly dangerous moment for Europe'). The phrase 'for Europe' expands the threat perception beyond Ukraine, framing it as a direct challenge to the European security order, reinforcing collective existential insecurity. The 'Kremlin's playbook' analogy presents Russia as an expansionist actor with a pattern of aggression, linking 2022 to previous conflicts (2014, 2008). The shift from legalistic discourse (2014) to securitised rhetoric (2022) reflects an ontological security crisis, wherein Russia is no longer a strategic partner but an existential adversary. This transformation aligns with securitisation discursive frameworks, as Russia's actions are framed as a direct attack on European

identity and normative order. The phrase 'sanctions will hurt Russia, and it will hurt a lot' underscores a new punitive and deterrent logic, moving beyond previous regulatory sanctions. This discursive shift legitimised the EU's move from symbolic/signaling economic restrictions (2014) to full-scale economic warfare (2022), reinforcing a geopolitical transformation in EU foreign policy. No longer merely an enforcer of international law, the EU now presents itself as an active geopolitical power, engaged in deterrence, strategic coercion and confrontation. The theme of gravity, central to the press statement, is reinforced through parallelism, as seen in the phrase 'alpha and omega' This reference, with its biblical connotations, highlights the contrast between Russia's past commitment to the Minsk Agreements and its current violations. Russia had previously presented these agreements as essential to peace and stability, yet its recent actions render that framing hypocritical and self-defeating. This linguistic choice removes any suggestion of negotiation or flexibility, signaling a clear shift from diplomatic caution to firm condemnation. Additionally, Russia is framed as ‚déchirer' (tearing up), which amplifies the distinction between legitimate agreements and their destruction. This framing, combined with the reference to UN Secretary-General António Guterres's words, strengthens the EU's rhetorical strategy of presenting Russia's actions as an irrevocable breach of international norms. The statement is resolute and definitive, setting the stage for a firm escalation in EU responses. The tone of the EU's February 2022 press release is urgent, alarmist and moralistic, reinforcing the perception that the European Union faces a threat to its self-identity. Russia is no longer framed merely as a violator of international law but as a direct aggressor challenging the foundations of European security. The statement describes this as a 'particularly dangerous moment for Europe', emphasising its unprecedented nature. The metaphor 'this story has not finished' conveys unpredictability and continued escalation, while the term 'aggression' explicitly assigns an expansionist motive to Russia. This is further reinforced by the reference to 'the Kremlin's playbook that we already know from 2014 and 2008', framing Russia as an actor with a historical pattern of territorial revisionism. This historical framing strengthens the EU's justification for a more confrontational stance. The shift in sanctions rhetoric is also significant. The phrase 'this package of sanctions will hurt Russia, and it will hurt a lot' presents sanctions as punitive and impactful rather than symbolic, signaling a departure from regulatory enforcement toward economic coercion. The assertion that 'sanctions are only a part of our response' underscores that the EU is no longer solely relying on economic pressure but is integrating broader foreign policy tools, including military. The phrase 'a major conflict in the heart of Europe' further reinforces existential proximity, framing Russia's actions as not just a violation of sovereignty but as a threat to the European order itself. The metaphor 'we keep ammunition in our toolbox' marks a rhetorical transformation in the EU's self-perception, shifting

from diplomatic mediator (2014) to strategic defender (2022). While this figurative military language does not imply direct intervention, it aligns security with identitarian concepts, such as democracy and territorial sovereignty, legitimising the EU's assertive response.

Borrell's 2022 speech demonstrates a fundamental shift in EU discourse, incorporating collective crisis narratives and coercive language. The reference to 'so-called' Donetsk and Luhansk puppets delegitimises Russian territorial claims, while the emphasis on an existential crisis constructs Russia as an immediate threat not only to Ukraine but to European stability as a whole. By 2022, the discursive stance had shifted from regulatory enforcement to securitisation, with themes of collective crisis, imminent conflict and strategic deterrence/containment dominating the rhetoric. This shift reflects an ontological security crisis, wherein Russia is no longer perceived as a difficult but manageable partner, but as a direct aggressor threatening the EU's foundational values. The transition from legalistic language to securitised discourse allowed the EU to justify harsher, irreversible sanctions and a broader strategic realignment. This discursive transformation underscores a broader evolution in EU foreign policy, transitioning from a norm-enforcing actor to a geopolitical power actively engaged in weaponisation of interdependence. The transition from diplomatic caution to full-scale securitisation not only legitimised harsher sanctions but also reinforced the EU's self-conception as a unified, value-driven entity defending its existential security order against external aggression.

Weaponised interdependence for ontological coercion: The discourse after 2022

Weaponised Interdependence occurs when states leverage their centrality in global networks to turn interdependence into a tool of coercion by denying, restricting or monitoring access to critical economic, financial, technological and informational infrastructures in order to pressure routines adversaries. The European Union, by its very nature, should not logically embrace the weaponisation of interdependence, as it contradicts the foundational principles of the EU's identity and economic model. In this context, I introduce the concept of ontological coercion, which extend beyond identity-contesting or symbolic measures. Whereas symbolic sanctions merely signal disapproval and affirm moral boundaries and identity-contesting challenge legitimacy or recognition, ontological sanctions work at a deeper level. They exploit network chokepoints of interdependence – such as central banking systems, financial infrastructures or consumer markets – to destabilise the very continuity of identity and routines of the sanctioned actor. At the same time, the signaling and contesting spheres become more credible due to the consistency of the measures and the quantity. In this way, the EU's embrace of weaponised interdependence in 2022 was not

simply a shift in *degree* of coercion but in *kind* – i.e. sanctions ceased to function primarily as symbolic or recognition-challenging acts and became instruments of ontological disruption (see Figure 2). This marks both a transformation of the EU into a geopolitical actor and a reconstitution of the global order, where interdependence itself is mobilised to redraw the boundaries of belonging and exclusion. For our analysis, it is important to focus on the first deliberative packages (nine by December 2022) which due to ontological security concerns were shaped in order to isolate the target and not only affect certain sectors of the economy, but to majorly: 1a. exploit chokepoints of interdependence (finance, energy, technology, consumer goods); 2a. target continuity and routines, producing ontological insecurity in the sanctioned society (corporate exodus, SWIFT ban for supply chain management disruption); 3a. disrupt collective self-conceptions, forcing states and societies to renegotiate 'who they are' (Russia as an energy superpower, consumer modernity or scientific hub). In Great Powers logic these nodes represent symbolic legitimation of 'Greatness' and from 2007, Russia had struggled to be recognised as such in IR.

Figure 2: Structured Interdependence and Its Transformation Under Ontological Insecurity

Structured
Interdependence

Heightening of
Ontological
Insecurity

Weaponisation
of
Interdependence
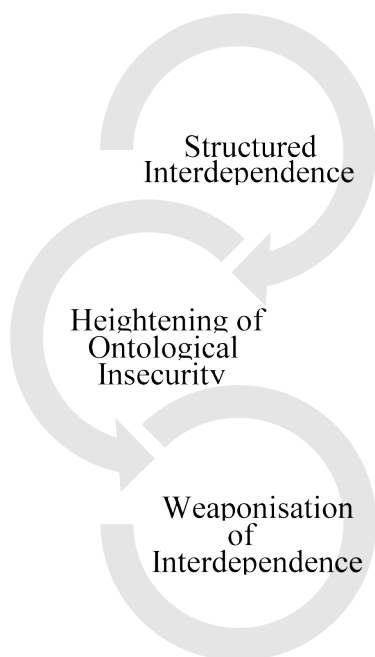
Source: Author

It is important to note that by October 2021, as per EU official data, restrictive measures were applied to a total of 185 persons and 48 entities (Council of the

Table 5: Type of Ontological Sanctions

Type of Sanction	Chokepoint of Interdependence	Ontological Intent	Expected Ontological Consequence
Financial (Central Bank freeze, SWIFT ban)	Global financial infrastructures, cross-border payments, foreign reserves	Destabilise predictability of economic routines; undermine Russia's confidence in financial sovereignty	Erosion of daily financial stability (savings, trade, investments); ontological insecurity of Russia as a reliable financial actor
Energy embargoes (oil, coal, partial gas restrictions)	Resource trade networks; EU-Russia dependency structures	Break Russia's narrative as an indispensable 'energy superpower'	Forcing Russia to reconfigure identity from 'indispensable supplier' to isolated petro-state
FDI restrictions & services prohibition on certain sectoral areas	Consumer infrastructures, global corporate networks, everyday products, FDI restrictions	Undermine Russia's self-image as part of global consumer modernity	Daily life disruption; ontological insecurity in middle-class identity; symbolic loss of 'belonging to the West'
Technological bans (semiconductors, software, aviation parts, Visa/Mastercard suspension)	Tech supply chains, digital infrastructures, scientific/industrial ecosystems	Remove Russia from global knowledge and tech economy; disrupt routines of modern production/consumption	Ontological rupture of Russia's identity as a technologically integrated modern state
Informational sanctions (ban on RT, Sputnik; restrictions on disinformation outlets; platform content moderation)	Global information flows, media legitimacy, reputational networks	Silence Russia's ability to project alternative narratives; delegitimise Russia's identity claims in international society	Ontological insecurity in narrative self-presentation; loss of recognition as a legitimate voice in global discourse
Transport & mobility restrictions (airspace bans, maritime restrictions, luxury goods bans)	Physical mobility infrastructures, symbolic consumption	Restrict symbolic and material integration with Europe	Ontological rupture in elite routines (travel, prestige goods); further isolation from European modernity

Source: Author

European Union n.d.). While by March 2022, as reported on the EU Sanctions Timeline page, the list comprises a total of 862 individuals and 53 organisations. Of course, the quantity of imposed sanctions matter because it creates supply chain management disruptions and compliance chaos: The empirical evidence is the so-called corporations exodus. The first nine packages of Sanctions (February 2022 to December 2022) (see Table 5) amount for more than only nine Council Decisions. These nine packages cumulatively imposed chokepoints across financial, technological, energy and informational infrastructures. The initial Central Bank restrictions (Council Decision 2022/264) and SWIFT exclusion (2022/346) destabilised Russia's claim to financial sovereignty. Export bans on aviation and dual-use goods (2022/328) undermined its image as a technological power. Simultaneously, restrictions on state media outlets delegitimised Russia's informational authority. Crucially, the quantitative escalation from 185 individuals and 48 entities sanctioned in late 2021 to over 862 individuals and 53 organisations by March 2022 translated ontological anxiety into systemic disruption: Sanctions no longer merely targeted elites but penetrated the routines of firms, banks and consumers. This scale ensured that sanctions were experienced not only as material costs but as attacks on Russia's identity as a global, modernised economy. The contrast between the first sanctions imposed in 2014 (see Table 2) and those adopted in early 2022 is striking, not only for the difference in quantities, but for the essence or the design of Sanctions. In 2014, EU measures were limited in scope, primarily targeting Crimean officials, separatist leaders and a narrow circle of Russian elites, alongside a ban on imports from Crimea unless certified by Ukraine. There were also some informational sanctions against propagandists, but the territorial scope was limited as well as the intent. The 2014 sanctions were signaling and contesting. This could not generate a high material impact; this is why 2014–2021 shows low intensity and a mere signaling intent. By contrast, the first wave of sanctions in February 2022 represented a qualitative shift: Restrictions immediately extended to Russian sovereign debt, major financial institutions and trade with the occupied Donetsk and Luhansk regions, coupled with broader technology and sectoral measures also covering for informational nodes in a major way. This marked the EU's transition from symbolic messaging to systemic disruption, where sanctions were designed to weaponise interdependence, destabilise routines and induce ontological insecurity within Russia's political economy which had fought to be recognised as an on-par partner by the western bloc from 2007.

Since 2022, the European Union has escalated its restrictive measures against Russia by targeting state-backed disinformation, political influence operations and diplomatic engagements (see Figure 1). The sanctions aim to curb Russia's ability to manipulate public discourse, interfere with European democratic institutions and maintain diplomatic leverage. These actions reflect the broader strategy of weaponising interdependence to limit Russia's political and informational

influence within Europe. The EU's sanctions framework against Russia is one of the most extensive in modern history, targeting financial infrastructure, energy exports, transport capabilities, military technology, raw material trade and professional services. By leveraging its economic and regulatory influence, the EU aims to debilitate Russia's financial stability, restrict military advancements and weaken industrial production. The inclusion of service sector restrictions further isolates Russia from global corporate networks, making compliance with sanctions more stringent. By disrupting key dependencies, these sanctions exemplify the weaponisation of interdependence, aligning with economic warfare strategies aimed at the long-term structural weakening of Russia's geopolitical power. Since 2022 they have published 18 packages of comprehensive Sanctions against Russia. It is true that the conflict dynamics drastically changed as stated in the first part of the Borrell statement 'we are witnessing a full-fledged war directly on our borders' where the tone is completely different from the tone in 2014, as the feeling that emerges from the first words is panic at our borders or anxiety. Borrell transmits anxiety which is a psychological sentiment that can play a role in disrupting rational decision making, hence lead to a disruption of the status quo. Both the problem and the escalation are described as Putin (personification of the fault which amplifies the sense of enemy), who is trampling Ukrainian identity and its people – international humanitarian law is being violated – the right to have an identity that coincides with the European one', thereby strenghtening the sentiment that the war is not only against Ukraine. The statement clearly opens with two contraposing frames: the violator of humanitarian law and the resistant army people (Ukrainians) who are on the same page as Europe. This sets place to the following justification: 'another taboo has fallen. The taboo that the European Union was not providing arms in a war. Yes, we are doing it. Because this war requires our engagement to support the Ukrainian army'. The nexus between people and army people is created in the first part of the statement: The ideological implication here is evident – the focus on the speech is identitarian – the enemy must be resisted and we need to stand by Ukraine as European identity is at stake. The army of resistant people needs to be defended with the use of weapons, even 'lethal' because the aggressor is murdering our identity and our values. Ukraine is part of our spatial borders and identitarian. It is a physical response, justified by psychological and ideological factors. 'We live [in] unprecedent times . . . we are facing the pest of war, like in the biblical times. This will be the first time in history that the EU will be providing lethal equipment to a third country'. This passage is fundamental in understanding the EU crusade; in these words the parallelism with the bible is strategic in first alluding to some of EU foundational values and to depict this act of supporting a war (or a crusade) as necessary and justified by higher values – those of humanitarian law. It must defend the identity of the good people. Projection of union sentiment is furtherly amplified in the

sanctions package announcement: All the 27 Member States are unanimous on how to proceed also in the sanctions area. They have been swift in taking the decision to punish the enemy system: The SWIFT measures will close access to more than half of the Russian Central Bank reserves. Airspace will be closed to Russia and Russia's information manipulation will have an end.

The weaponisation of informational networks is the most important part of the statement. First, it finds its justification in identitarian anxiety and its roots in the biblical necessity to crusade against the aggressor of our European values. Second, it justifies the isolation of a country in a globalised arena which is not in line with liberalism and neoliberal paradigms, but it is important because of the ontological nature of the conflict. 'Because Putin does not want only to conquer the land, he also wants to conquer the spirits of the people with toxic messages through lies'. The use of a metaphor such as 'we are killing the snake from its neck' vividly illustrate the EU's strategy to cut off the source of disinformation at its root. The snake symbolises the threat posed by Russian propaganda (biblical reference) and the act of killing it from the neck signifies a decisive and effective measure to neutralise this threat. This metaphor aligns with the hypothesis by emphasising the existential danger posed by disinformation.

'Turn off the tab for Russia's information manipulation' will protect the 'spirits' because it implies control of the networks and the ability to stop the spread of harmful narratives, reinforcing the idea of weaponising informational networks. It is a struggle against toxicity: 'toxic' emphasises the harmful nature of the disinformation, suggesting that it is not just false but actively damaging. The weaponisation of informational networks within the European Union is deeply rooted in identitarian anxiety and the historical imperative to defend European values against perceived aggressors. This strategy not only justifies the isolation of noncompliant countries in a globalised world, but also strategises the willingness of the European Union to defend its sovereignty. By blocking Russian Central Bank reserves and banning propaganda outlets like Russia Today and Sputnik, the EU aims to curb the influence of toxic narratives and support Ukraine in its struggle against aggression. These actions underscore the Union's resolve to protect its member states and uphold the principles of truth and democracy in the face of ontological threats. By weaponising, Europe is defending its own ideology and the nature of its power.

Conclusions

This study has examined how ontological insecurity – existential anxiety triggered by threats to identity and represented in discourse – reshaped EU-Russia relations in the wake of the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Sanctions are now the European Union's most frequently deployed foreign policy instrument, yet their identity-driven dimension remains underexplored. Addressing this gap, the study

has shown that ontological insecurity was a decisive factor in the EU's shift from managing interdependence to weaponising it. Before 2022, EU-Russia relations were marked by structured interdependence: Deep economic ties coexisted with institutional competition and the limited, targeted sanctions imposed after 2014. The full-scale invasion disrupted this fragile equilibrium, intensifying ontological insecurity and prompting a fundamental policy transformation. Reflexive routinisation led EU policymakers to default to economic coercion as a mechanism of stability, reframing interdependence from a framework of cooperation into a structure of vulnerability. This shift was not merely strategic but deeply identity-driven. The invasion was discursively constructed as an existential challenge to the EU's normative order, legitimising sanctions not only as punitive tools but as instruments of identity assertion and defense. In this context, the weaponisation of interdependence became both a strategic resource and an ontological necessity, enabling the EU's transition from regulatory enforcement to ontological coercion: measures that destabilise an adversary's routines, self-conceptions and claims to legitimacy. The study advances international relations scholarship in three ways. First, it extends debates on weaponised interdependence, showing that it functions not only in great power rivalry but also as a mechanism of self-preservation for actors confronting existential crises. Second, it refines securitisation theory by demonstrating how ontological insecurity drives not only discursive shifts but concrete policy transformations. Third, it highlights tensions within the EU's identity as a normative power, revealing how existential threats can override commitments to regulatory governance and multilateral diplomacy. This evolution underscores how existential concerns shape material decisions, offering new insights into the role of identity in economic statecraft. Yet it also raises critical questions: Do ontological sanctions foreclose avenues for diplomatic resolution? Can escalating sanctions inadvertently exacerbate crises? And will war remain unthinkable for the European Union, or has its identity as a peace project been permanently unsettled? Future research should explore how ontological insecurity influences economic strategies in other regions, broadening our understanding of identity-driven economic policies in global politics.

∿

Acknowledgements

For the purposes of proofreading, systematizing, enhancing the readability of the text, the author used ChatGPT. All content was reviewed and edited by the author, who takes full responsibility for the publication's contents.

Conflict of interest statement
No conflict of interest was reported.

Data availability statement
No supplementary data associated with the article.

MARIA PERFETTO is a PhD candidate at Charles University specialising in the political and societal dimensions of sanctions regimes and their impact on global governance and public opinion. Her research investigates the intersection of sanctions, corporate compliance, and normative communication models, with particular emphasis on overcompliance and the role of non-state actors in implementing sanctions frameworks. Her current work analyses how ideological alignment shapes corporate responses to EU and U.S. sanctions against the Russian Federation.

Bibliography
Akchurina, V. & Della Sala, V. (2018): Russia, Europe and the Ontological Security Dilemma: Narrating the Emerging Eurasian Space. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 70(10), 1638–1655.
Averre, D. (2009): From Pristina to Tskhinvali: The Legacy of Operation Allied Force in Russia's Relations with the West. *International Affairs*, 85(3), 575–591.
Baldwin, D. A. (1999): The Sanctions Debate and the Logic of Choice. *International Security*, 24(3), 80–107.
Baldwin, D. A. (2016): Power and International Relations: A Conceptual Approach. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
Behr, H. & Stivachtis, Y. A. (eds.) (2016): Revisiting the European Union as Empire. London: Routledge.
Bengtsson, R. & Elgström, O. (2012): Conflicting Role Conceptions? The European Union in Global Politics. *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 8(1), 93–108.
Bettanin, F. (2018): *Putin e il mondo che verrà: Storia e politica della Russia nel nuovo contesto internazionale* [Putin and the world to come: History and politics of Russia in the new international contex]. Rome: Donzelli Editore.

Biersteker, T. J., Eckert, S. E. & Tourinho, M. (2016): *Targeted Sanctions: The Impacts and Effectiveness of United Nations Action*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Boman, B. (2023): The Coexistence of Nationalism, Westernization, Russification, and Russophobia: Facets of Parallelization in the Russian Invasion of Ukraine. *International Politics*, 60, 1315–1331.

Casier, T. (2016): Identities and Images of Competition in the Overlapping Neighborhoods: How EU and Russian Foreign Policies Interact. In: Piet, R. & Simão, L. (eds.): *Security in Shared Neighborhoods*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Casier, T. (2018): The Different Faces of Power in European Union–Russia Relations. *Cooperation and Conflict*, 53(1), 101–117.

Casier, T. (2019): The EU's Two-Track Approach to Democracy Promotion: The Case of Ukraine. *East European Politics*, 35(3), 287–309.

Cerutti, F. & Lucarelli, S. (eds.) (2008): *The Search for a European Identity: Values, Policies and Legitimacy of the European Union*. London: Routledge.

Copeland, D. C. (1996): Economic Interdependence and War: A Theory of Trade Expectations. *International Security*, 20(4), 5–41.

Council of the European Union (2014): Council Decision 2014/145/CFSP concerning restrictive measures in respect of actions undermining or threatening the territorial integrity, sovereignty and independence of Ukraine. *Council of the European Union*, March, <accessed online: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2014:078:0016:0021:EN:PDF\>.

Council of the European Union (2014): Council Decision 2014/512/CFSP concerning restrictive measures in view of Russia's actions destabilising the situation in Ukraine. *Council of the European Union*, July, <accessed online: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/dec/2014/512/oj/eng>.

Council of the European Union (2014): Statement on Ukraine. *Council of the European Union*, March, <accessed online: https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/28852/141294.pdf\>.

Council of the European Union (n.d.): Timeline – Sanctions against Russia. *Council of the European Union*, <accessed online: https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/sanctions-against-russia/timeline-sanctions-against-russia/\>.

Drezner, D. W. (2011): Sanctions Sometimes Smart: Targeted Sanctions in Theory and Practice. *International Studies Review,* 13(1), 96–108.

European Commission (2013): First Commission report on the implementation by Russia of the Common Steps for visa free-regime with the EU. *European Commission*, <accessed online: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_13_1295>

European Commission (2013): First Progress Report on the implementation by Russia of the Common Steps towards visa-free short-term travel of Russian and EU citizens under the EU–Russia Visa Dialogue (COM(2013) 923 final).

European Commission, <accessed online: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=COM:2013:923:FIN>.

European Commission (n.d.): Russia: EU trade relations with Russia. *European Commission*, <accessed online: https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/eu-trade-relationships-country-and-region/countries-and-regions/russia_en>.

European Commission (2022): Further Measures to Respond to the Russian Invasion of Ukraine: Press Statement by High Representative/ Vice-President Josep Borrell. *European Commission*, February 27, <accessed online: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/STATEMENT_22_1463\>.

European Commission (2023): Eurobarometer Survey 2023: Public Opinion in the European Union. *European Commission*, <accessed online: https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3053\>.

European External Action Service (2022): Russia/Ukraine: Press Remarks by High Representative Josep Borrell after the Extraordinary Informal Meeting of EU Foreign Ministers. *European External Action Service*, February, <accessed online: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/russiaukraine-press-remarks-high-representative-josep-borrell-after-extraordinary-informal-meeting-0_en\>.

Eurostat (2025): EU Trade with Russia – Latest Developments. *Eurostat*, <accessed online: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/EU_trade_with_Russia_-_latest_developments\>.

Fairclough, N. (2010): *Critical discourse analysis: The critical study of language,* 2nd ed. New York: Routledge.

Farrell, H. & Newman, A. L. (2010): Making global markets: Historical institutionalism in international political economy. *Review of International Political Economy*, 17(4), 609–638.

Farrell, H. & Newman, A. L. (2014): Domestic institutions beyond the nation-state: Charting the new interdependence approach. *World Politics*, 66(2), 331–363.

Farrell, H. & Newman, A. L. (2019): Weaponized Interdependence: How Global Economic Networks Shape State Coercion. *International Security,* 44(1), 42–79.

Forsberg, T. & Seppo, A. (2009): Power Without Influence? The EU and Trade Disputes with Russia. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 61(10), 1805–1823.

Gartzke, E. (2010): Interdependence Really Is Complex. University of California, San Diego, February, <accessed online: https://pages.ucsd.edu/~egartzke/papers/complexinterdep_02242010.pdf\>.

Giddens, A. (1991): *Modernity and self-identity: Self and society in the late modern age.* Cambridge: Polity Press.

Giumelli, F. (2011): *Coercing, Constraining and Signalling: Explaining UN and EU Sanctions after the Cold War*. Colchester: ECPR Press.

Giumelli, F. (2013): *The success of sanctions: Lessons learned from the EU experience,* 1st ed. New York: Ashgate.

Guzzini, S. (2012): *The return of geopolitics in Europe? Social mechanisms and foreign policy identity crises.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hufbauer, G. C., Schott, J. J., Elliott, K. A. & Oegg, B. (2007): *Economic sanctions reconsidered,* 3rd ed. Washington, DC: Peterson Institute for International Economics.

Huntington, S. P. (1996): *The clash of civilizations and the remaking of world order.* New York: Simon & Schuster.

Huysmans, J. (1998): Security! What do you Mean? From Concept to Thick Signifier, *European Journal of International Relations*, 4, 226–55.

Huysmans, J. (2004): The Question of the Limit: Desecuritisation and the Aesthetics of Horror in Political Realism. *Political Psychology*, 25(5), 741–767.

Kaunert, C. & de Deus Pereira, J. (2023): EU Eastern Partnership, ontological security and EU-Ukraine/Russian warfare. *Journal of Contemporary European Studies,* 31(4), 1135–1146.

Keohane, R. O. & Nye, J. S. (2011): *Power and interdependence,* 4th ed. Boston: Longman.

Lindsay, J. M. (1986): Trade Sanctions as Policy Instruments: A Re-examination. *International Studies Quarterly,* 30(2), 153–173.

Lynch, D. (2004): Russian integration: Russia's strategic partnership with Europe. *The Washington Quarterly,* 27(2), 99–118.

Lupovici, A. (2012): Ontological Dissonance, Clashing Identities, and Israel's Unilateral Steps Towards the Palestinians. *Review of International Studies*, 38(4), 809–833.

Manners, I. (2002): Normative power Europe: A contradiction in terms? *Journal of Common Market Studies,* 40(2), 235–258.

Makarychev, A. (2018): Beyond Geopolitics: Russian Soft Power, Conservatism, and Biopolitics. *Russian Politics* 3(1), 135–150.

Marx, K. (1859): *A contribution to the critique of political economy* (S. W. Ryazanskaya, Trans.). Moscow: Progress Publishers. (Original work published in 1859).

Mearsheimer, J. J. (2001): *The tragedy of great power politics.* New York: W.W. Norton & Company.

Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation (2008): The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation. *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation*, July, <accessed online: https://archive.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptICkB6BZ29/content/id/2542248>.

Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation (2013): The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation. *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation*, February, <accessed online: https://archive.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptICkB6BZ29/content/id/122186>.

Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation (2016): Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation (approved by the President of the Russian Federation on November 30, 2016). *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation*, November, <accessed online: https://www.russiamat-

ters.org/sites/default/files/media/files/Foreign%20Policy%20Concept%20
of%20the%20Russian%20Federation%20(approved%20by%20President%20
of%20the%20Russian%20Federation%20Vladimir%20Putin%20on%20
November%2030,%202016)%20-%20Asset%20Publisher%20-%20The%20
Ministry%20of%20Foreign%20Affairs%20of%20the%20Russian%20Federa-
tion.pdf>.

Mitzen, J. (2006): Ontological security in world politics: State identity and the
security dilemma. *European Journal of International Relations,* 12(3), 341–370.

Mitzen, J. (2016): Security communities and the unthinkabilities of war. *An-
nual Review of Political Science,* 19, 229–248.

Mitzen, J. (2018): Anxious community: EU as (in)security community. *Euro-
pean Security*, 27(3), 393–413.

Norman, L. (2015): Interpretive Process Tracing and Causal Explanations.
Qualitative & Multi-Method Research, Fall 2015.

Nossal, K. R. (1989): International sanctions as international punishment. *In-
ternational Organization*, 43(2), 301–322.

Noutcheva, G., Pomorska, K. & Bosse, G. (Eds.) (2013): *The EU and Its Neigh-
bours: Values versus Security in European Foreign Policy*. Manchester: Man-
chester University Press.

Noutcheva, G. (2018): Whose legitimacy? The EU and Russia in contest for the
Eastern Neighbourhood. *Democratization,* 25(2), 312–330.

Onderco, M. (2016): Public support for coercive diplomacy: Exploring public
opinion data from ten European countries. *European Journal of Political Re-
search,* 56(2), 401–418.

Pearlstein, D. (2017): How everything became war and the military became ev-
erything. *American Journal of International Law,* 111(3), 792–797.

Peksen, D. (2019): When do imposed economic sanctions work? A critical re-
view of the sanctions effectiveness literature. *Defence and Peace Economics*,
30(6), 635–647.

Putin, V. (2007): Speech and the following discussion at the Munich Confer-
ence on Security Policy. *President of Russia,* February, <accessed online:
http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24034>.

Russett, B. & O'Neal, J. (1997): The classical liberals were right: Democracy,
interdependence, and conflict, 1950-1985. *International Studies Quarterly*,
41(2), 267–294.

Valdai Discussion Club (2013): Vladimir Putin Meets with Members of the
Valdai International Discussion Club: Transcript of the Speech. *Valdai
Discussion Club,* September, <accessed online: https://valdaiclub.com/a/
highlights/vladimir_putin_meets_with_members_the_valdai_internation-
al_discussion_club_transcript_of_the_speech_/\>.

Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation (2022): Briefing by For-
eign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova. *Ministry of Foreign Affairs
of the Russian Federation,* June, <accessed online: https://www.mid.ru/en/
press_service/spokesman/briefings/\>.

Samokhvalov, V. (2018): Russia and its shared neighbourhoods: A comparative analysis of Russia–EU and Russia–China relations in the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood and Central Asia. *Contemporary Politics,* 24(1), 30–45.

Schelling, T. C. (1966): *Arms and Influence.* New Haven: Yale University Press.

Schimmelfennig, F. (2001): The community trap: Liberal norms, rhetorical action, and the eastern enlargement of the European Union. *International Organization*, 55(1), 47–80.

Simionov, L. M. & Pascariu, G. C. (2017): The EU and Russia shifting away from the economic logic of interdependence – an explanation through the complex interdependence theory. *European Integration Studies,* 11, 120–137.

Stent, A. (2008): *The limits of partnership: U.S.-Russian relations in the twenty-first century.* Princeton: Princeton University Press.

van Dijk, T. A. (1998): *Ideology: A Multidisciplinary Approach*. London: SAGE Publications.

van Dijk, T. A. (2008): *Discourse and Power*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

van Dijk, T. A. (2014): *Discourse and Knowledge: A Sociocognitive Approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Timofeev, I. (2018): The Decisive Role of Brussels? EU Anti-Russia Sanctions Scenarios. *Valdai Discussion Club*, August, <accessed online: https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/the-decisive-role-of-brussels-eu-anti-russia/\>.

Tocci, N. (2020): Resilience and the Role of the European Union in the World. *Contemporary Security Policy*, 41(2), 176–194.

Wendt, A. (1998): On constitution and causation in International Relations. *Review of International Studies,* 24(5), 101–118.

Whang, T. (2011): Playing to the home crowd? Symbolic use of economic sanctions in the United States. *International Studies Quarterly*, 55(3), 787–801.

Wodak, R. (2001): The Discourse-Historical Approach. In: Wodak, R. & Meyer, M. (eds.): *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis*. London: SAGE Publications, 63–94.

World Bank (n.d.): GDP (Current US$) - Russia. *World Bank*, <accessed online: https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD?locations=RU\>.

World Bank (2021): World Trade Summary: 2021 Trade Profile. *World Bank, World Integrated Trade Solution (WITS),* <accessed online: https://wits.worldbank.org/CountryProfile/en/Country/WLD/Year/2021/SummaryText\>.

Zheng, H. (2021): Fragile interdependence: The case of Russia-EU relations. *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 34(6), 818–836.

Populist (Dis)Engagement with International Parliamentary Institutions: Central Europeans in the European Parliament and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe

Ákos Holányi
Ludovika University of Public Service, Hungary & ELTE Centre for Social Sciences, Hungary, ORCiD: 0000-0002-2267-6306, corresponding author: holanyi.akos@uni-nke.hu

Marko Lovec
University of Ljubljana, Ljubljana, Slovenia, ORCiD: 0000-0002-7479-3598

András Hettyey
Andrássy University, Budapest, Hungary, ORCiD: 0000-0002-9512-2195

Abstract

How do populist politicians behave in international parliamentary institutions (IPIs)? Although there is a rapidly growing literature on the foreign policy of populist executive actors, the manifestation of populism as a thin-centred ideology in an international parliamentary setting is not yet understood. This paper aims to alleviate this knowledge gap by analysing how Central European populist parties engaged with the European Parliament (EP) and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of

Europe (PACE) from 2019 to 2024, focusing on the highly politicised issues of the rule of law and democracy, immigration and the Russia-Ukraine War. Using a mixed-methods approach combining statistical analysis with qualitative case studies, we offer two main findings. First, the salience of IPI strongly indicates populists' tendency to disengage from the institution. Second, compared to other ideological positions, being a member of a far-right party has a significant positive effect on voting against resolutions and abstaining or not voting.

Introduction

This article examines the behaviour of populist parties in international organisations (IOs) and analyses whether the disengagement strategies employed by prominent populist leaders apply more broadly among populist politicians (Pacciardi, Spandler & Söderbaum 2024). While most research on the international politics of populism focuses on the executive branch (Cadier, Chryssogelos & Destradi 2025; Destradi & Plagemann 2019), this paper looks at international parliamentary institutions (IPIs) to determine whether and in what ways the parliamentary environment influences populist actors' (dis)engagement.

The paper samples populist parties from five Central European countries (Czechia, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia) based on The PopuList 3.0 (Rooduijn et al. 2024) and analyses the behaviour of their representatives in 2019–2024 in two IPIs: the European Parliament (EP), which has legislative powers and whose members are directly elected, and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), which is a consultative body whose members are delegated by national assemblies. It uses a combination of statistical analysis and qualitative mini case studies to unpack how and why populists engage with IPIs.

The study finds that populist politicians were quite engaged with the EP, while they barely interacted with PACE. The results also reveal that in the EP, being a member of a party in the national government significantly lowers the likelihood of voting against or not voting on resolutions. At the same time, it substantially increases the chances of abstentions. Being right-wing negatively correlates with abstentions, while being far-right positively correlates with 'nay' votes and non-voting. In the case of PACE, the paper finds no significant correlations due to the very low participation in voting procedures. Finally, our case studies suggest that only representatives of far-right populist parties were engaged in forms of disengagement beyond criticism, removing themselves from the work of the organisation without formally leaving.

The paper develops as follows. The first section begins with a brief overview of existing research on populism and IOs, followed by an elaboration of the stages of disengagement developed by Pacciardi, Spandler and Söderbaum (2024) and a short presentation of existing research on IPIs. The second section introduces the paper's mixed-methods approach, combining statistical analyses with qualitative mini-case studies. The third and fourth sections present the articles' quantitative and qualitative findings, respectively. The final section discusses the results in light of the disengagement strategy and concludes with the main takeaways.

Populism and international organisations

Populism can be understood in different ways: as a political strategy (Weyland 2017), as a style of political communication (Moffitt 2016), as a discourse (Wojczewski 2020) or as an ideology (Mudde 2004). The ideology framework has most commonly been used to distinguish populism as a thin-centred ideology that separates the pure people from corrupt elites, from thick ideologies (Mudde 2004), such as the hard right (Mudde 2019), and to integrate populism studies into foreign policy analysis (Destradi & Plagemann 2019; Verbeek & Zaslove 2015).

While the influence of populists on foreign policy has long been researched, their entry into governing coalitions and the executive branch, as well as the crises of the liberal international order (Colgan & Keohane 2017; Ikenberry 2018), have led to an upsurge in research. At the same time, the literature distinguishes between populism and thick ideologies (Chryssogelos 2017), highlighting that the impact of 'international anti-elitism' has been shaped by thick ideologies (Verbeek & Zaslove 2017), the importance of the international agenda in domestic politics and the systemic conditions that determine opportunity costs (Destradi & Plagemann 2019).

Research on the impact of populism on IOs has emerged more recently. It started from the initial research on the impact of international organisations on state regulatory capacity and legitimacy (Chryssogelos 2020) and moved from policy areas with weak international regimes (such as migration) to those where international organisations play a stronger role (such as trade) (Löfflmann 2022). However, the behaviour of populist governments in relation to international institutions as such is still poorly understood (Pacciardi, Spandler & Söderbaum 2024). Research is strongly influenced by the assumption that populism plays a disruptive role due to the contradiction between the 'sovereignty of the people' and the authority of IOs (Metawe 2024). This is consistent with the view that populism is inherently harmful to the liberal state polity (Müller 2016), as opposed to its potentially positive role for democratic processes (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2012). A notable example is the work of Wajner, Destradi and Zürn (2024), which looks at the impact of 'authoritarian populism' on international institutions. Their focus on 'illiberal executives' and the empirical findings reflect difficulties in the

literature on populist foreign policy, such as the distinction between populism and thick ideologies and a selective approach by populists, demonstrating the importance of national context and systemic constraints. This suggests a need to improve the understanding of the specific role of populism by analysing incentives and constraints for 'international anti-elitism' in different venues and taking into account executive and representative politics.

Pacciardi, Spandler and Söderbaum (2024) further developed the 'disengagement' hypothesis by identifying disengagement practices that show an unwillingness to maintain established forms of cooperation. Their framework, which combines ideational, strategic and stylistic dimensions of populism, comprises four stages, ranging from rhetoric to complete disengagement: (1) criticism (public expression of discontent, demand for reform, etc., as a low-cost and low-risk strategy, but which can also lead to further steps), (2) blackmail (threat of refusal of funding or termination of cooperation – as a sign that one is still interested in cooperation, but under different conditions), (3) obstruction (creating the impression that the institution is no longer functioning, but only targeting certain procedures) and (4) exit (which can sometimes be reversed, depending on the institutional rules).

Their empirical analysis based on the behaviour of Donald Trump and Viktor Orbán has shown that not all disengagement is aimed at weakening international institutions and that disengagement rarely leads to a complete exit. A people-centred view of sovereignty is used as strategy and rhetoric, but unilateralism and outright withdrawal are rare. Moreover, institutions with more authority do not mean more confrontation, as one would expect – rather, this depends on their size, visibility, dependencies, etc. This is because populists navigate between the conflicting imperatives of radicalism and pragmatism – they need to be perceived as different and doing something for the people, but face resource dependency and exit costs, national institutional constraints, public opinion and so on. Hence, the strategy of breaking diplomatic conventions and using bullying to get concessions from international actors (institutional reforms, symbolic recognition or additional funding) might be sufficient from a domestic perspective.

While many of the aforementioned strategies are not new, the difference between populists and non-populists is that the former apply the four-step repertoire less linearly and more flexibly due to specific incentive structures. For example, criticism and blackmail are often used to continue supporting the institutions while obtaining certain concessions. Obstruction has been used in some cases, but not to the point of radical withdrawal. Withdrawal has only been sought when other disengagement strategies did not yield concessions, and even then, only at low cost, such as with existing individual UN agencies (Pacciardi, Spandler & Söderbaum 2024).

In parallel with this work on the populist contestation of IOs, recent scholarship has also shown that populist leadership is not necessarily antithetical to inter-

national cooperation. A long-term analysis of voting patterns at the United Nations General Assembly suggests that populists are not against multilateral institutions *per se*; rather, they are against institutions propagating liberal principles (Destradi & Vüllers 2024). Similarly, case studies from Greece (Syriza) and the UK (Brexit) indicate that populists can justify entering international agreements and making compromises by discursively reframing the deals as popular victories over corrupt domestic elites and/or as omnibus solutions to several problems, as well as by differently communicating to various audiences (Chryssogelos & Meibauer 2025).

Drawing on a variety of examples from Europe and Latin America, Wajner (2025) posits that populists follow one of four main strategic approaches to regional cooperation (e.g. the EU) based on how they (de-)legitimise regionalism and how much effort they devote to it. We can tie the two approaches based on the delegitimisation of regionalism (a-regionalism and anti-regionalism) to the types of populist disengagement identified by Pacciardi et al. (2024): A-regionalism makes a limited effort to undermine regionalism and thus only makes use of criticism, whereas anti-regionalism is a more active approach which employs the tools of extortion, obstruction and exit as well. In contrast, the legitimisation-based approaches (pro-regionalism and para-regionalism) indicate how populists can engage with regional organisations. For Wajner (2025), populist pro-regionalism is identical to the 'traditional regionalist game' (ibid.: 12), where populist leaders are in favour of continued membership and participation, but they do not devote much effort to further the development of the regionalist project. Conversely, populist para-regionalism involves the active creation and promotion of regional networks and organisations as alternatives to existing institutions. These populist-promoted organisations tend to be less formalised and operate on an *ad hoc* basis, giving populist leaders flexibility while also 'presenting a façade of unity and success abroad to bolster their legitimacy at home' (ibid.: 14).

However, this research, as well as virtually all of the populist foreign policy literature, focuses on the behaviour of political leaders from the executive branch while ignoring the behaviour of populist parliamentarians. Although foreign policy is primarily the domain of the executive branch, legislatures play a growing role in shaping the political context in which governments operate due to the continuous internationalisation of previously domestic policy domains (energy, environment, immigration, trade), the growing politicisation of international affairs and the ability of political parties to form transnational networks (Raunio & Wagner 2024). Parliamentary diplomacy is particularly developed in Europe, where several IOs have IPIs to discuss international issues among a more representative sample of their member states' political elite than just the government representatives (see chapters in Stavridis & Jančić 2017).

In fact, we witness a global proliferation of IPIs as IOs seek to increase their democratic legitimacy (Rocabert et al. 2019) and the compliance of member states

with commonly agreed standards (Cofelice 2018), and national lawmakers' involvement with international affairs as globalisation erodes the traditional separation between international and local/national concerns (Šabič 2008). IPIs extend the control function of national lawmakers to the international arena, which incentivises opposition MPs in parliamentary regimes and all MPs from presidential regimes to engage with IPIs to better scrutinise the international activities of their governments (Lipps 2021). The high share of foreigners and location along national borders were also shown to motivate district MPs to engage with IPIs (Malang 2019).

In the meantime, research on how politicians engage with these organisations is still nascent. In the context of PACE, Lipps and Jacob (2024) analysed the voting patterns of illiberal parties, showing that they are willing to contest liberal policies and that being in government in liberal regimes moderates their contestation. This paper aims to follow this line of research with a focus on populist parties. Drawing on the previously discussed insights of the populist foreign policy literature, we pose the following two research questions:

1. How does populists' (dis)engagement with IOs manifest in the case of IPIs?
2. What factors influence populist (dis)engagement with IPIs?

Methodology

This paper adopts a comparative mixed-methods design seeking to analyse the voting behaviour of populist parliamentarians in two institutions: the EP and PACE. These institutions provide different degrees of control over the IOs they belong to, which influences their politicisation. The EP is one of the seven institutions of the European Union (EU), composed of directly elected representatives and exercises legislative and budgetary functions (Art. 14 in EU 2012). PACE is one of the two organs of the Council of Europe (CoE), is composed of representatives of national parliaments and serves as the deliberative organ of the IO (Art. 22 –25 in CoE 2015). Cofelice (2018) analyses IPIs based on their powers across five functions, based on which the EP can be considered as a highly empowered IPI with significant powers across several categories, whereas PACE is only moderately empowered (Table 1). Moreover, the EP not only has more significant powers within the EU than PACE has within the CoE, but the EU itself is a more powerful IO than the CoE. Finally, the EP is a directly elected body with regular elections every five years, whereas PACE is composed of delegations from national parliaments.

The timeframe of the analysis was adjusted to the 9th parliamentary term of the EP (2019–2024). We limit our attention to three issues, which were both highly salient and discussed in both institutions: democracy and the rule of law, immigration and the Russia-Ukraine War. Resolutions corresponding to these topics were selected manually (Appendix A1). We sampled representatives of Central European parties, which were categorised as populist by The PopuList

Table 1: The different functions of the EP and PACE

Functions	EP	PACE
consultative	Must be consulted in over 30 cases	Must be consulted on member state admission and suspension
legislative	Co-legislator status for 95% of EU primary legislation	Informal influence over 1/3 of CoE conventions via standard setting
budgetary	Near parity with the EU Council on EU budget	Consulted on the part of the CoE budget dealing with PACE
oversight	Can force the resignation of the European Commission with a motion of censure	Debates the report and activities of the Committee of Ministers
appointment	Passes votes of confidence in incoming European Commission Presidents and Commissions	Appoints key leaders in administrative and judicial bodies

Source: Adapted from Cofelice (2018)

3.0 for the study period (Rooduijn et al. 2024) and were represented and active in either or both of the institutions. Data include the official voting records of all MEPs elected from a sampled party's list, as well as of all PACE delegates and substitutes.

The first part of the paper provides a quantitative overview of how populist parties from five countries have voted on resolutions. The selection includes parties with different underlying thick ideologies and time in government (Table 2). The analysis includes the presentation of mean voting attitudes and the assessment of the impact of political context (national party on government, belonging to a right-wing party and a far-right party) with two Bayesian multinomial logistic regression models, one for the EP and one for PACE, using the brms R package (Bürkner 2017). The full script and model diagnostics are available in Appendix A2. Parties marked with an asterisk (*) had only substitutes in PACE when voting on a topic's resolutions took place, so their DNV (did not vote) values may indicate a lack of voting opportunity.

Second, we selected three parties for closer analysis in order to better understand the underlying causality through the context and motivation of their voting behaviour: Fidesz (HU), SDS (SI) and SMER-SD (SK). Fidesz has been the most important right-wing party in Hungary since 1998. It self-identifies as an illiberal Christian democratic and national conservative party and has been considered populist since 2002 and far-right since 2010 by The PopuList (Rooduijn et al. 2024). Since 2010, Fidesz has been the dominant party in Hungarian politics, and Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has become a model for populist and illiberal politicians worldwide. The party impaired the rule of law and democracy and has used hostile rhetoric against international organisations for alleged hostile politi-

Table 2: Analysed parties and their attributes of parties in 2019–2024 with categorisation based on PopuList 3.0

country	party name	party acronym	ideology	in government
CZ	ANO 2011	ANO	centrist	2013–2021
	Freedom and Direct Democracy	SPD	far right	–
HU	Fidesz – Hungarian Civic Alliance	Fidesz	far right	2010–onwards
	Christian Democratic People's Party	KDNP	far right	2010–onwards
	Movement for a Better Hungary	Jobbik	centre right	–
	Our Homeland Movement	Mi Hazánk	far right	–
PL	Law and Justice	PiS	far right	2015–2023
	United Poland	SP	far right	2015–2023
SI	Slovenian Democratic Party	SDS	far right	2020–2022
	The Left	Levica	far left	2022–onwards
SK	Slovak National Party	SNS	far right	2023–onwards
	Direction –Social Democracy	SMER-SD	centre left	2016–2020
				2023–onwards
	Ordinary People and Independent Personalities	OĽANO	centre right	2020–2023

Source: Authors

cal interference with domestic affairs and applying double standards (cf. Csehi & Zgut 2021). Fidesz has also been critical of liberal migration policies (Melegh et al. 2021) and kept its support for Ukraine to the bare minimum while maintaining good economic and political ties with Russia (Marton & Szalai 2025). Fidesz was a member of the European People's Party (EPP) until 2021 (suspended from 2019), after which it joined the European Conservatives Group and Democratic Alliance in PACE and remained non-affiliated in the EP.

The Slovenian Democratic Party (SDS) is Slovenia's most important right-wing party, considered populist since 2000 and far right since 2015 by The PopuList (Rooduijn et al. 2024). Originally a social democratic and later a liberal reformist party, SDS adopted a more national conservative programme in the 2010s, when party leader Janez Janša aligned himself with Viktor Orbán and Donald Trump (Lovec & Bojinović 2019; Lovec, Kočan & Mahmutović 2022). Parallel to the growing criticism of the impairment of the rule of law and democracy in Slovenia, SDS began using hostile rhetoric against IOs for 'political bias', 'double standards' and 'undermining national sovereignty' (Mahmutović & Lovec 2024). The party has also been critical of liberal migration policies but strongly supported Ukraine (Lovec 2025). SDS is a member of the EPP in both the EP and PACE.

Direction – Social Democracy (SMER-SD) is a nominally social democratic party with strong conservative and statist elements (Marušiak 2021). It is con-

sidered populist by The PopuList (Rooduijn et al. 2024). The party's ideology and foreign policy are pragmatic and have changed several times based on the domestic and international political context (Marušiak 2021). The party has been anti-immigration since 2015, but does not strongly oppose liberal migration policies at the EU level as long as its sole red line – no mandatory relocation – is respected (Holányi 2025). While in power, SMER-SD became more pro-EU in 2017–2020, expressing its ambition to have Slovakia join the 'core EU' (Mravcová & Havlík 2022), but took a more sovereigntist and critical stance after 2020. This included criticism of anti-Russian sanctions and support for post-war economic relations with Russia (Bundzíková & Janšta 2024). SMER-SD was a member of the Socialists and Democrats (S&D) Group in the EP (suspended in October 2023[1]) and the Socialists, Democrats and Greens Group in PACE.

Quantitative results

The mean votes of populist parliamentarians on the three selected issues show two distinct patterns (Tables 3–5). First, populist MEPs participated in voting procedures more often than PACE delegates. DNV can be considered relatively rare among MEPs, and they also tended to cast decisive votes. The outlier is SMER-SD, for whom DNV was the most frequent voting behaviour on resolutions related to the rule of law or the Russia-Ukraine War. In contrast, the lack of participation in voting procedures is the dominant behaviour for all sampled party delegates in PACE. The exception is Our Homeland Movement, whose delegate, the party leader László Toroczkai, showed up for 2/3 of the votes on migration, marking the only instance in the sample where DNV does not account for the absolute majority of cases. Delegates of ANO were also somewhat engaged with PACE on the Russia-Ukraine War, as they showed up to vote for resolutions in 43% of cases.

Second, the voting patterns of the three chosen topics show important differences, which suggests that there is no overarching populist trend. On the rule of law (Table 3), the split was mainly between pro-government parties opposing these resolutions, criticising developments in their countries (Fidesz, KDNP, PiS, SP) and the rest leaning towards support (ANO, Jobbik, SMER-SD, OĽANO). SPD was the only party in the sample which strongly opposed the rule of law resolutions without being criticised by them. SDS was divided on the issue as their MEPs voted based on individual preferences, with one MEP leaning supportive and two MEPs leaning opposing in the form of against votes and abstentions.

---

1   Interestingly, suspended Fidesz MEPs were registered as EPP members in official voting registers whereas suspended SMER-SD MEPs were registered as non-incrits. Róbert Hajšel, who was elected from the SMER-SD list but was not a member of the party, was not suspended.

Table 3: The mean vote of parliamentarians in the EP and PACE on rule of law resolutions by national party affiliation

country	party	EP				PACE			
		for	against	abst.	DNV	for	against	abst.	DNV
CZ	ANO	51.85%	5.56%	38.89%	3.70%	15.79%	0.00%	0.00%	84.21%
	SPD	0.00%	94.44%	0.00%	5.56%	-	-	-	-
HU	Fidesz	1.85%	89.81%	0.00%	8.33%	4.55%	15.91%	0.00%	79.55%
	KDNP	0.00%	77.78%	22.22%	0.00%	0.00%	13.33%	0.00%	86.67%
	Jobbik	66.67%	11.11%	11.11%	11.11%	25.00%	0.00%	0.00%	75.00%
	Mi Hazánk	-	-	-	-	0.00%	40.00%	0.00%	60.00%
PL	PiS	0.00%	85.98%	9.81%	4.21%	1.82%	9.09%	0.00%	89.09%
	SP	0.00%	83.33%	11.11%	5.56%	-	-	-	-
SI	SDS	25.93%	37.04%	33.33%	3.70%	0.00%	20.00%	0.00%	80.00%
	Levica	-	-	-	-	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	100.00%
SK	SNS	-	-	-	-	0.00%	33.33%	0.00%	66.67%
	SMER-SD	40.74%	11.11%	3.70%	44.44%	0.00%	33.33%	0.00%	66.67%
	OĽANO	66.67%	0.00%	22.22%	11.11%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	100.00%

Source: Authors

Table 4: The mean vote of parliamentarians in the EP and PACE on migration resolutions by national party affiliation

country	party	EP				PACE			
		for	against	abst.	DNV	for	against	abst.	DNV
CZ	ANO	35.19%	50.00%	14.81%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	100.00%
	SPD	0.00%	88.89%	5.56%	5.56%	-	-	-	-
HU	Fidesz	0.00%	83.33%	0.00%	16.67%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	100.00%
	KDNP	11.11%	88.89%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	100.00%
	Jobbik*	0.00%	88.89%	11.11%	0.00%	-	-	-	-
	Mi Hazánk	-	-	-	-	0.00%	66.67%	0.00%	33.33%
PL	PiS	0.00%	83.33%	0.00%	16.67%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	100.00%
	SP	0.00%	100.00%	0.00%	0.00%	-	-	-	-
SI	SDS*	48.15%	51.85%	0.00%	0.00%	-	-	-	-
	Levica	-	-	-	-	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	100.00%
SK	SNS*	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
	SMER-SD*	14.81%	29.63%	51.85%	3.70%	-	-	-	-
	OLANO	77.78%	22.22%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	100.00%

Note: * indicates parties represented only by substitutes without recorded activity in PACE
Source: Authors

This pattern, however, only applies to the EP as PACE delegates rarely voted. When voting, PACE delegates from ANO and Jobbik voted for, while delegates from Fidesz, KDNP, Mi Hazánk, PiS, SDS, SNS and SMER-SD voted against. The representatives of Levica and OĽANO never voted in PACE.

On migration, populist votes were generally against the proposed resolutions, with representatives of most of the analysed parties voting predominantly against (Table 4). The exceptions to this regional trend were OĽANO, which was mainly supportive, SMER-SD, whose members tended to abstain, and SDS, which was once again divided, with one MEP voting for and two MEPs voting against or abstaining. ANO MEPs also displayed some support for migration resolutions; nevertheless, 'against' votes were in the absolute majority. In PACE, only Mi Hazánk's delegate showed up to vote.

In contrast with migration, populist votes in Central Europe were generally in favour of resolutions related to the Russia-Ukraine War (Table 5). Strong opposition was only mounted by SPD politicians. Fidesz and KNDP MEPs tended not to vote, although they supported early resolutions condemning Russia's 2022 invasion. Abstentions were rare. In PACE, almost all of the votes cast were in favour of the resolutions.

The EP model indicates that being a government party member negatively affects MEPs' tendency to cast 'no' votes or not vote, and positively affects their likelihood of abstaining. Being a right-wing party member does not affect negative votes and has an adverse effect on abstentions and participation in voting procedures. Finally, being far right increases the likelihood of voting 'no' or not voting, but does not affect abstentions. All of these relationships, except for the impact of being right-wing on DNV, are significant. In contrast, the PACE model uncovered no statistically significant relationships, likely due to the very high proportion of DNV in the sample. The non-significant results indicate a positive relationship between all predictors and voting behaviour, except for the impact of being a government party member on negative votes, where this relationship is negative. The results of the two models are summarised in Table 6.

Case studies: Fidesz, SDS and SMER-SD
Fidesz
The CoE as an IO has had a low salience for the Fidesz government. Even though the current National Security Strategy emphasises that the CoE is a key forum for pursuing Hungary's interests (Magyarország Kormánya 2020), the behaviour of Fidesz members questions this assertion as we observe various forms of disengagement from the organisation. First, and less importantly, criticism. On the few occasions when Fidesz politicians (or pro-Fidesz journalists) substantially engaged with the policies of the CoE, the tone was very critical, reflected in accusations that the CoE had taken unjustly condemnatory stances on the rule of law in Hungary (Molnár 2023), or of

Table 5: The mean vote of parliamentarians in the EP and PACE on Russia-Ukraine War resolutions by national party affiliation

country	party	EP				PACE			
		for	against	abst.	DNV	for	against	abst.	DNV
CZ	ANO	66.67%	0.00%	14.58%	18.75%	42.86%	0.00%	0.00%	57.14%
	SPD	0.00%	62.50%	6.25%	31.25%	-	-	-	-
HU	Fidesz	39.58%	6.25%	0.00%	54.17%	9.38%	0.00%	0.00%	90.63%
	KDNP	25.00%	0.00%	12.50%	62.50%	18.18%	0.00%	0.00%	81.82%
	Jobbik	75.00%	0.00%	0.00%	25.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	100.00%
	Mi Hazánk	-	-	-	-	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	100.00%
PL	PiS	90.10%	0.00%	0.00%	9.90%	21.62%	0.00%	2.70%	75.68%
	SP	100.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	-	-	-	-
SI	SDS	100.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	100.00%
	Levica	-	-	-	-	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	100.00%
SK	SNS*	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
	SMER-SD*	16.67%	12.50%	16.67%	54.17%	-	-	-	-
	OLANO	75.00%	12.50%	0.00%	12.50%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	100.00%

Note: * indicates parties represented only by substitutes without recorded activity in PACE
Source: Authors

Table 6: The relationship between predictors and voting behaviour in the EP and PACE

Predictor	Vote	EP	PACE
Government	*no*	**negative effect**	negative effect
	abstention	**positive effect**	positive effect
	DNV	**negative effect**	positive effect
Right-wing	*no*	no effect	positive effect
	abstention	**negative effect**	positive effect
	DNV	negative effect	positive effect
Far right	*no*	**positive effect**	positive effect
	abstention	no effect	positive effect
	DNV	**positive effect**	positive effect

Note: Significant relationships are marked with **bold**.
Source: Authors

not working towards peace in Ukraine (Szabó 2024). Nevertheless, the CoE never became a prime target of Fidesz, and its media attacks remained few and far between.

The second, much more significant practice of disengagement was what might be called tacit obstruction, bordering on exit. Obstruction was evidenced by the refusal of Fidesz members to show up for voting. By (1) refusing to vote 80% of the time, and (2) supporting resolutions only 6% of the time, they clearly signaled that, firstly, the PACE was most of the time not important enough as a forum to take part in its decisions, and, secondly, in the seldom cases when it was, they disagreed with the contents of the tabled (and accepted) motions. Fidesz members did not actively block or hinder decision-making, nor did they try to extort concessions from the CoE. They just tacitly gave up on working in it. By effectively ceasing to operate in the PACE, Fidesz came close to what Pacciardi et al. (2024) call 'exit' or 'termination of active participation'. However, this is not accompanied by calls for the termination of the organisation, nor is Budapest considering formally withdrawing. If the PACE is really this inconsequential, why should it?

In contrast, a very different picture emerges concerning the EP, whose activities consistently had a high domestic salience in the analysed period. In fact, the EP has been a constant target of Fidesz's attacks since 2010. Setting the tone early in his second term, Orbán said in his 2013 Tusványos speech that the institutions of the EU, including the Parliament, were 'unable to find answers to the historical challenges Europe is facing today' (Orbán 2013). He also called the extension of EP powers 'a bad decision' (Orbán 2016). Most importantly, in July 2022, the Hungarian Parliament, with the support of Fidesz-KDNP, accepted a resolution to replace the directly elected European Parliament with an assembly composed exclusively of national MPs, arguing that 'European democracy must be led out of the one-way street into which the EP has manoeuvered it' (Országgyűlés 2022: 4575). These indicate the importance of the EP and point towards a 'hard exit'

behaviour, with calls for the termination of the EP as we know it, accompanied by proposals for the creation of a new EP, or counter-institutionalisation.

However, as long as these ideas remained no more than a pipe dream, the 13 MEPs of Fidesz remained active in the EP. In the 24 analysed votes, the 13 Fidesz MEPs had the theoretical opportunity to cast their ballot 312 times. They did so 247 times (79%), a striking difference from their passivity in the PACE. What remains the same is the fact that Fidesz MEPs usually stayed in the opposition. In our sample of votes, Fidesz MEPs went against the majority in 193 individual votes, or 62% of the cases. Conversely, individual Fidesz MEPs voted only 46 times with the majority, or 15% of the cases. Fidesz MEPs consistently opposed votes on rule of law issues (especially as far as Poland was concerned) and on migration. They also mostly opposed votes about political or financial support for Ukraine.

The behaviour of Fidesz politicians towards (and in) the EP can be best described as very strong criticism, manifesting all the elements specified by Pacciardi et al (2024). First, they undermine the legitimacy of the institution by discrediting its members. For instance, Foreign Minister Szijjártó said, 'Is this the same body that had several members arrested for corruption?' when commenting on the EP's condemnation of his trip to Belarus (Vaskor 2023). Second, they voiced discontent over the operations and institutional design, best evidenced by the aforementioned 2022 parliamentary resolution. Third, they criticised the normative orientation of the EP. Apart from the dominance of 'nay' votes by Fidesz MEPs, they also made claims that the various decisions of the EP were leading Europe into war (Exterde 2024), towards a catastrophe (Mandiner 2023), and towards the disintegration of society and the destruction of European norms (hirado.hu 2024).

SDS

Like Fidesz, the CoE and PACE were of limited importance to the SDS due to their low visibility in domestic politics. Nevertheless, SDS members have tried to instrumentalise PACE for domestic political purposes and voted against resolutions condemning their partners. After coming under pressure from the CoE and criticising the institution, they refrained from voting, thus rendering the forum irrelevant.

When SDS member Andrej Šircelj voted for Resolution 4850 on the establishment of an EU mechanism for democracy, the rule of law and fundamental rights in 2019, he pointed to the alleged interference of the then Slovenian centre-left government in independent institutions. In 2020, however, he voted against Resolution 15025 on the functioning of democratic institutions in Poland. In 2021, Dunja Mijatović, CoE Commissioner for Human Rights, condemned the Janša government's interference in the media and civil society, whereupon Janša called Mijatović part of a 'fake news network', while Suzana Lep Šimenko, SDS PACE member in the 2020–2022 period, questioned the transparency of the functioning of the European Court of Human Rights and its integrity in a written question in February 2022. Lep Šimenko

also abstained from voting on several resolutions and recommendations across the board (e.g. on LGBTI 15425, on the implementation of judgments of the European Court of Human Rights 15123 and on the challenge to the unratified mandate of the Parliamentary Delegation of the Russian Federation 15216), in contrast to the active participation and mostly positive votes of SDS representatives in the past.

Although SDS MEPs also instrumentalised the EP for domestic political purposes and to defend their political allies, they reacted with increased critical engagement in line with party ideology rather than disengagement after being pressured by the EU. This contrasts with PACE, which can be explained by the more important and visible role of the EU and the European Parliament within it.

For example, SDS MEPs Milan Zver and Romana Tomc referred to alleged interference in the media and the rule of law by centre-left governments in Slovenia in written questions to the Commission. They asked whether the Commission would also take action against Slovenia (26.11.2018 P-005934/2018 r P-001962-19). During the vote on the resolutions on Poland and Hungary in 2020, Tomc said that the way the EU was dealing with rule of law issues was unacceptable, as in her opinion it was clear, especially in the EP, that the procedures were politically motivated (Janša 2020). In January 2024, Zver and Tomc were among the 104 MEPs and the three EPP MEPs who voted against the EP's call to initiate Article 7 proceedings against Hungary.

In October 2021, a delegation of MEPs led by Sophie in 't Veld visited Slovenia in the run-up to the vote on the resolution on Slovenia. In 't Veld criticised the Janša government's interference in the media and independent institutions. The SDS accused the delegation of being biased and politically motivated, with MEP Tomc calling the visit and the resulting resolution 'a brutal attack on the government' and a 'national attempt, which corresponds to the European left-wing politicians in their goal of weakening centre-right governments, from the aspect that it abuses the power of the European Parliament' (Amiel 2021).

The antagonistic relations with the EU institutions and the majorities also led to a more critical attitude towards other legal acts, especially where this coincided with the party's position on migration and the EU in general. In April 2024, Zver and Tomc voted against parts of the Pact on Migration and Asylum relating to mandatory solidarity between member states. In the run-up to the 2024 European elections, they declared that they would not support another term in office for Ursula von der Leyen and called for a new conservative coalition in the EP (Lovec & Kočan 2025).

SMER–SD
Compared to the two previously discussed cases, SMER-SD delegates barely engaged with PACE, which may be at least partially attributable to the fact that the party was mostly represented by substitutes in the analysed time period. Never-

theless, the fact that the CoE is not mentioned in the government programme of any recent SMER-SD–led governments, in contrast with the EU, the OECD, the OSCE, NATO and the UN, indicates general disinterest towards the institution (Vláda SR 2016, 2018, 2023).

In contrast, a more detailed analysis is needed to understand the context of SMER-SD behaviour in the EP. The party list won three seats in the 2019 EP elections. However, Miroslav Čiž died in office in December 2022 and was replaced by Katarína Roth Neveďalová, and Robert Hajšel was an independent who nonetheless sat in the S&D group. Although the overall engagement of SMER-SD MEPs with the EP was low, as evidenced by the significant share of DNV on the rule of law and the Russia-Ukraine War (Tables 3 and 5), this aggregate value obscures individual circumstances which had an oversized impact on party engagement with the EP.

Namely, Miroslav Čiž never voted on the selected resolutions and made only five contributions to plenary debates, none of which relate to the three topics analysed in this paper. His lack of activity was, however, primarily the result of his failing health. He had long suffered from serious health issues and spent most of 2022 in the hospital before his death (Lacková 2022). If we look at the mean vote statistics of the SMER-SD list without him (Table 7), it is clear that SMER-SD–supported politicians were actually quite active on the rule of law and migration votes. They showed up and supported the majority of resolutions on the rule of law and voted with abstentions on the majority of migration-related resolutions.

Table 7: The mean vote of MEPs from the SMER-SD list without Miroslav Čiž

Topic	For	against	abstention	DNV
rule of law	55.00%	15.00%	5.00%	25.00%
Migration	14.81%	29.63%	51.85%	3.70%
Russia-Ukraine War	20.00%	15.00%	20.00%	45.00%

Source: Authors

The revised mean vote values also show that the SMER-SD–supported MEPs leaned towards different voting strategies in the three salient and politicised topics: support for the rule of law, abstention on migration and DNV on the Russia-Ukraine conflict. This trend can be explained by SMER-SD's pragmatic foreign policy orientation, which oscillates between support for and criticism of mainstream European policies based on the political situation at home and in Europe (Mravcová & Havlík 2022). As a member of the mainstream S&D group, SMER-SD generally toed the party line, although some MEPs disagreed with the rule of law proceedings (Topky.sk 2024). MEPs' preference to abstain on migration resolutions also corresponds to the party leadership's position to vote

against resolutions which respect the Slovak red line (no mandatory relocation), as the European dimension of immigration is no longer a salient topic in Slovak politics (cf. Holányi 2025). Active abstention may have allowed MEPs to show their continued engagement with European affairs while safeguarding their domestic anti-immigration image and aligning with the powerful right-wing parties in neighbouring Hungary and Poland (cf. Marušiak 2021). In contrast, the low share of 'no' votes on resolutions related to the Russia-Ukraine War seems to contradict SMER-SD's strong emphasis on the conflict and its deviant stance from the Euro-Atlantic mainstream (Bundzíková & Jan\u0161ta 2024).

Out of the four disengagement strategies mentioned by Pacciardi et al (2024), the MEPs supported by SMER-SD only manifested weak signs of criticism. For example, MEP Monika Beňová called the years of the 9th parliamentary term 'completely lost for the European Union [because] So many fatal mistakes have been made' (Topky.sk 2024). However, the criticism of MEPs remained focused on the EP's handling of specific issues without general attacks against the institution. For instance, MEP Katarína Roth Neveďalová explicitly argued that the Qatargate corruption scandal 'should be seen as an individual failure, not as a collective guilt' (Zmu\u0161ková 2023), in stark contrast with Fidesz officials.

Discussion and conclusion

This paper sought to understand how populist politicians engage with IPIs from the perspective of the disengagement hypothesis proposed by Pacciardi et al. (2024). Its empirical findings can be summarised as follows.

First, the characteristics of the IPI matter. Populists were much more active in voting in the EP than in PACE. The EP also featured more prominently in the political rhetoric and strategies of Fidesz, SDS and SMER-SD. Foreign policy documents by SMER-SD did not even mention the Council of Europe or its parliamentary assembly. This indicates that the political salience of the institution greatly influences populists' approach towards it. Given the directly elected nature of the EP, the higher levels of populist engagement seem to correspond with populists' focus on the domestic political arena: Engagement with the EP, even if only for criticism and obstructionism, can be used to win votes. This finding seems to support Wajner's (2025) assumption that the degree of political authority vested in regional institutions influences how populists approach them.

Second, there is no single populist voting trend that applies across the three analysed topics. Populists voted differently across national and thick ideological lines, which supports the earlier findings of the populist foreign policy literature (Destradi & Plagemann 2019; Verbeek & Zaslove 2017).

Third, links to the national government matter. Those populists who were members of parties in government at home were less likely to vote against resolutions in both institutions, which echoes the results of Lipps and Jacob (2024)

on illiberal parties. Links to the home government also increased the likelihood of abstention and had the opposite effect on voting participation: Pro-government MEPs participated more often, whereas PACE delegates participated less often. However, these relationships are only significant for the EP. Nevertheless, this finding suggests that the international system and foreign interlocutors may have a moderating effect on the foreign behaviour of populist parties. However, this link needs to be explored further.

Fourth, being right of centre increases opposition towards mainstream positions in the EP. Being right-wing (including far right) seems to increase the likelihood of abstaining, a reserved way of expressing opposition. However, being far right increases the chances of 'nay' votes or refusal to participate in voting procedures. The case studies also suggest that using the disengagement strategies of criticism and obstruction may be linked to far-right ideology. Fidesz and SDS representatives engaged in intense and systematic criticism and obstructionism of the EP and PACE, accusing these organisations of political bias and double standards, and questioning their integrity. However, this behaviour may have also been motivated by criticism from these institutions against governments supported by these parties. In contrast, representatives of the left-wing SMER-SD voiced only moderate criticism of the EP, which was focused on the institution's performance on policy issues, instead of criticising the general functioning of the body.

What do our findings mean for the disengagement hypothesis? We found evidence for the use of three disengagement strategies in IPIs: criticism, obstructionism and exit. Exit was the most prevalent, albeit in a soft form: Populists simply did not engage with IPIs, instead of declaring their intention to leave. This manifested in the large share of 'DNV' votes across both institutions, which was more prevalent for the politically inconsequential PACE. However, when the populist party was in power at home, its MEPs participated more in the EP's work. Criticism and, to a lesser extent, obstructionism were used by far-right parties but not by the left-wing SMER-SD, which might suggest that these forms of disengagement might be linked to the far-right thick ideology, rather than the thin-centred ideology of populism.

Our results also add to the emerging literature on the political importance on IPIs and the drivers of voting behaviour therein. In addition to previous studies highlighting regime characteristics, the share of the foreign population and the geographical position of electoral sectors (Lipps 2021; Malang 2019) as relevant factors influencing the engagement of parliamentarians, our paper also suggests that populism may decrease the likelihood of active participation in politically non-salient IPIs. However, our results do not indicate that populists represent a systemic threat to the existence and functioning of these fora, contrary to results based on government behaviour (Destradi & Plagemann 2019). After all, political venues where one can perform politics, and visibly play out one's (dis)approval of the majority position, are handy tools for any party.

Connecting these findings to Wajner's (2025) typology, its seems that populists generally follow the a-regionalist approach towards IPIs as the degree of political authority vested in these institutions is not enough to prompt politicians to actively undermine them. Hence, they limit their disengagement to criticism and abstention from the IPI's work, which itself varies with the political salience and power of the IPI. Although the examined far-right parties' use of obstruction might indicate a populist far-right proclivity towards anti-regionalism in IPIs, drawing this conclusion is beyond the empirical scope of this study.

Future research could continue this work in two directions. On the one hand, the geographical, temporal and institutional scope of the quantitative analysis can be extended to cover a broader range of national parties, hard ideologies and IPIs over a longer time scale, which would allow for a more precise understanding of how various contextual characteristics shape voting behaviour. On the other hand, future work may also consider focusing more on the individual and party-level considerations shaping engagement with IPIs, going beyond analysing voting behaviour.

<div align="center">∾</div>

Data availability statement
The appendices and the input data for the Bayesian multinomial logistic regression analysis is available here: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17432087.

Mgr Ákos Holányi is an Assistant Lecturer and PhD Candidate at the Department of European Studies at Ludovika University of Public Service as well as a Junior Research Fellow at the Institute for Political Science at the ELTE Centre for Social Sciences. He previously earned an undergraduate degree in Human Geography at Durham University, UK and a postgraduate degree in Balkan, Eurasian and Central European Studies at Charles University, Czechia. He specialises in the

foreign and European policies of Visegrád Group countries. He has published in the *Journal of European Integration*, the *Journal of European Public Policy* and the *On-line Journal Modelling the New Europe*, among others.

Dr Marko Lovec is an Associate Professor of International Relations at the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ljubljana, and a Research Associate at the European Council on Foreign Relations. He is currently serving as an associate editor of the *Journal of International Relations and Development*. Previously, he was an Associate Researcher at Central European University and a Visegrad Fellow at the Institute of International Relations in Prague. His research focuses on the EU's distributive policies and politics in Central and Eastern Europe. He has published in the *Journal of European Integration*, *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, and *Journal of International Relations and Development*, among others.

Dr András Hettyey is an Associate Professor at the Political Theory and European Democracy Studies Department of the Andrássy Gyula German Speaking University from where he received his doctorate in 2011. He previously studied History and German at Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE) and International Relations at Andrássy University. His research focuses on Hungarian foreign policy since 1990, especially German-Hungarian relations, and the role of emotions in international relations. He is part of the 'Changing Orders Research Programme' project at Andrássy University, where he is responsible for the research focus 'Strategic Challenges for Small and Middle-sized States.' He has published, among others, in the *Journal of International Relations and Development*, *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* and *Nationalities Papers*.

Bibliography

Amiel, S. (2021): Rule of Law in the EU: Is Slovenia Following Hungary's Path? *Euronews*, 20 December.

Bundzíková, V. & Janšta, D. (2024): Slovakia's 2023 Elections: Framing of Foreign Policy Preferences by Populists. *Politologický Časopis - Czech Journal of Political Science*, 21(2), 188–217.

Bürkner, P.-C. (2017): Brms: An R Package for Bayesian Multilevel Models Using Stan. *Journal of Statistical Software*, 80, 1–28.

Cadier, D., Chryssogelos, A. & Destradi, S. (2025): *Routledge Handbook of Populism and Foreign Policy* (1st edn.). London: Routledge.

Chryssogelos, A. (2017): Populism in Foreign Policy. *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*. Oxford University Press.

Chryssogelos, A. (2020): State Transformation and Populism: From the Internationalized to the Neo-Sovereign State? *Politics*, 40(1), 22–37.

Chryssogelos, A. & Meibauer, G. (2025): Conflict of Interest: Justifying International Cooperation in Populist Discourse. *Frontiers in Political Science*, 7, 1623155.

CoE (2015): Statute of the Council of Europe.

Cofelice, A. (2018): *Parliamentary Institutions in Regional and International Governance: Functions and Powers*. London: Routledge.

Colgan, J. D. & Keohane, R. O. (2017): The Liberal Order Is Rigged. *Foreign Affairs*, 96(3), 17 April.

Csehi, R. & Zgut, E. (2021): 'We Won't Let Brussels Dictate Us': Eurosceptic Populism in Hungary and Poland. *European Politics and Society*, 22(1), 53–68.

Destradi, S. & Plagemann, J. (2019): Populism and International Relations: (Un)Predictability, Personalisation, and the Reinforcement of Existing Trends in World Politics. *Review of International Studies*, 45(5), 711–730.

Destradi, S. & Vüllers, J. (2024): Populism and the Liberal International Order: An Analysis of UN Voting Patterns. *The Review of International Organizations*.

EU (2012): Consolidated Version of the Treaty on European Union, C326/13.

Exterde, T. (2024): Deutsch Tamás Az EP-Választásról: Most a Háború És Béke Kérdésében Kell Döntenünk [Tamás Deutsch on the EP elections: Now we must decide on the question of war and peace]. *Infostart.Hu*, 3 June.

hirado.hu (2024): Hidvéghi Balázs: A Fidesz elutasítja a migrációs paktumot! [Balázs Hidvéghi: Fidesz rejects the migration pact!]. *hirado.hu*, 10 April.

Holányi, Á. (2025): Unpolitics, Domestic Pressures, or Else? The Opposition of Visegrád Group Countries to the EU's Pact on Migration and Asylum. *Journal of European Integration*, Latest articles.

Ikenberry, G. J. (2018): The End of Liberal International Order? *International Affairs*, 94(1), 7–23.

Janša, P. (2020): Romana Tomc: Evropski parlament z resolucijo izkazal nezaupanje Madžarski in Poljski [Romana Tomc: European Parliament expresses distrust of Hungary and Poland in resolution]. *Demokracija*, 16 January.

Lacková, Ľ. (2022): Europoslanec Číž leží v súkromnej nemocnici špecializujúcej sa na pacientov v bdelej kóme [MEP Číž is in a private hospital specializing in patients in a conscious coma]. *Plus 7 dní*, 14 August.

Lipps, J. (2021): Intertwined Parliamentary Arenas: Why Parliamentarians Attend International Parliamentary Institutions. *European Journal of International Relations*, 27(2), 501–520.

Lipps, J. & Jacob, M. S. (2024): Undermining Liberal International Organizations from within: Evidence from the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. *The Review of International Organizations*.

Löfflmann, G. (2022): Introduction to Special Issue: The Study of Populism in International Relations. *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 24(3), 403–415.

Lovec, M. (2025): Slovenian attitude to the war in Ukraine : political ideologies, public opinion and policy costs. *Teorija in praksa*, 62(1), 147–170.

Lovec, M. & Bojinović, F. (2019): Populism in the Foreign Policy of Central European States. *Teorija in Praksa*, 56(4), 1152–1172.

Lovec, M. & Kočan, F. (2025): Slovenia. In: Lodge, J., Smith, J. & Fotopoulos, S. (eds.): *Palgrave Handbook on the 2024 European Parliament Elections*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 503–517.

Lovec, M., Kočan, F. & Mahmutović, M. (2022): The 'Brussels bubble' : populism in Slovenia in the EU crises context. *Teorija in praksa*, 59(2), 509–528.

Magyarország Kormánya (2020): 1163/2020. (IV. 21.) Korm. Határozat Magyarország Nemzeti Biztonsági Stratégiájáról [Government Decree on Hungary's National Security Strategy]. *Magyar Közlöny*, 81, 2101–2018.

Mahmutović, M. & Lovec, M. (2024): 'The First in the Service of Truth': Construction of Counterknowledge Claims and the Case of Janša's SDS' Media Outlets. In: Newman, S. & Conrad, M. (eds.): *Post-Truth Populism*, Palgrave Studies in European Political Sociology. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 177–216.

Malang, T. (2019): Why National Parliamentarians Join International Organizations. *The Review of International Organizations*, 14(3), 407–430.

Mandiner (2023): EP-képviselő: Háborúpárti kiáltvány az Európai Parlament legújabb határozata [MEP: Pro-war manifesto in the European Parliament's latest resolution]. *Mandiner*, 22 February.

Marton, P. & Szalai, M. (2025): Hungary: A Hedging Strategy of Connectivity—Across the Hedgerow of Sovereigntism. In: Baxter, P. M. (ed.): *Examining Perspectives of Small-to-Medium Powers in Emergent Great Power Competition*, Palgrave Studies in Global Security. Cham: Springer Nature, 143–166.

Marušiak, J. (2021): 'Slovak, Not Brussels Social Democracy'. Europeanization/De-Europeanization and the Ideological Development of Smer-SD Before 2020 Parliamentary Elections in Slovakia. *Politologický Časopis - Czech Journal of Political Science*, 18(1), 37–58.

Melegh, A., Vancsó, A., Mendly, D. & Hunyadi, M. (2021): Positional Insecurity and the Hungarian Migration Policy. In: Ceccorulli, M., Fassi, E. & Lucarelli, S. (eds.): *The EU Migration System of Governance: Justice on the Move*. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 173–197.

Metawe, M. (2024): Populism and Domestic/International Politics: Theory and Practice. *Review of Economics and Political Science*, 9(3), 194–211.

Moffitt, B. (2016): *The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style, and Representation*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Molnár M. (2023): Tárgyi tévedések, hiányzó tények [Factual errors, missing facts]. *Magyar Nemzet*, 8 December.

Mravcová, H. & Havlík, V. (2022): Pragmatism and Support for the EU in Slovakia's Politics. *East European Politics,* 38(1), 123–143.

Mudde, C. (2004): The Populist Zeitgeist. *Government and Opposition*, 39(4), 541–563.

Mudde, C. (2019): *The Far Right Today*. Newark: Polity Press.

Mudde, C. & Rovira Kaltwasser, C. (eds.) (2012): *Populism in Europe and the Americas: Threat or Corrective for Democracy?* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Müller, J.-W. (2016): *What Is Populism?* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Orbán, V. (2013): *Speech at the XXIV. Bálványos Summer Free University and Student Camp*. Presented at the *XXIV. Bálványos Summer Free University and Student Camp*, Băile Tuşnad, 29 July.

Orbán, V. (2016): *Speech at the 27th Bálványos Summer Open University and Student Camp*. Presented at the 27th Bálványos Summer Open University and Student Camp, Băile Tuşnad, 23 July.

Országgyűlés (2022): 32/2022. (VII. 19.) OGY Határozat Az Európai Unió Jövőjével Kapcsolatosan Képviselendő Magyar Álláspontról [National Assembly Resolution on the Hungarian Position to be Represented Regarding the Future of the European Union]. *Magyar Közlöny*, 119, 4575–4576.

Pacciardi, A., Spandler, K. & Söderbaum, F. (2024): Beyond Exit: How Populist Governments Disengage from International Institutions. *International Affairs*, 100(5), 2025–2045.

Raunio, T. & Wagner, W. (2024): Legislatures, Political Parties, and Foreign Policy. In: Kaarbo, J. & Thies, C. G. (eds.): *The Oxford Handbook of Foreign Policy Analysis*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 305–322.

Rocabert, J., Schimmelfennig, F., Crasnic, L. & Winzen, T. (2019): The Rise of International Parliamentary Institutions: Purpose and Legitimation. *The Review of International Organizations*, 14(4), 607–631.

Rooduijn, M., Pirro, A. L. P., Halikiopoulou, D., Froio, C., Kessel, S. V., Lange, S. L. D., Mudde, C. & Taggart, P. (2024): The PopuList: A Database of Populist, Far-Left, and Far-Right Parties Using Expert-Informed Qualitative Comparative Classification (EiQCC). *British Journal of Political Science*, 54(3), 969–978.

Šabič, Z. (2008): Building Democratic and Responsible Global Governance: The Role of International Parliamentary Institutions. *Parliamentary Affairs*, 61(2), 255–271.

Stavridis, S. & Jančić, D. (eds.) (2017): *Parliamentary Diplomacy in European and Global Governance*. Brill Nijhoff.

Szabó I. (2024): Szijjártó Péter: Most 75 éves az Európa Tanács, ez remek platform lehetett volna a béketeremtésre [Péter Szijjártó: The Council of Europe is now 75 years old, which could have been an excellent platform for peacemaking]. *Magyar Nemzet*, 17 May.

Topky.sk (2024): Europoslankyňa Monika Beňová (Smer – SSD): Posledných 5 rokov považujem za stratených pre EÚ. Urobilo sa veľa fatálnych chýb [MEP Monika Beňová (Smer – SSD): I consider the last five years to be lost for the EU. Many fatal mistakes have been made]. *Topky.sk*, 4 June.

Vaskor M. (2023): Szijjártó Péter: Olvasom, hogy az Európai Parlament elítélt, amiért korábban elmentem tárgyalni Minszkbe [Péter Szijjártó: I read that

the European Parliament condemned me for going to Minsk for talks earlier]. *24.hu*, 14 September.

Verbeek, B. & Zaslove, A. (2015): 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), 525–546.

Verbeek, B. & Zaslove, A. (2017): Populism and Foreign Policy. In: Kaltwasser, C. R., Taggart, P., Espejo, P. O. & Ostiguy, P. (eds.): *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*. Oxford University Press, 384–405.

Vláda SR (2016): *Programové Vyhlásenie Vlády Slovenskej Republiky 2016-2020 [Program Statement of the Government of the Slovak Republic 2016-2020]*. Bratislava: Vláda SR.

Vláda SR (2018): *Programové Vyhlásenie Vlády Slovenskej Republiky 2018-2020 [Program Statement of the Government of the Slovak Republic 2018-2020]*. Bratislava: Vláda SR.

Vláda SR (2023): *Programové Vyhlásenie Vlády Slovenskej Republiky 2023-2027 [Program Statement of the Government of the Slovak Republic 2023-2027]*. Bratislava: Vláda SR.

Wajner, D. F. (2025): Populism in Power and Regional (Dis-)Integration: Charting Paths of Populist Regionalism in Europe and Latin America. *Journal of European Integration*, 1–24.

Wajner, D. F., Destradi, S. & Zürn, M. (2024): The Effects of Global Populism: Assessing the Populist Impact on International Affairs. *International Affairs*, 100(5), 1819–1833.

Weyland, K. (2017): Populism: A Political-Strategic Approach. In: Kaltwasser, C. R., Taggart, P., Espejo, P. O. & Ostiguy, P. (eds.): *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*. Oxford University Press, 48–72.

Wojczewski, T. (2020): 'Enemies of the People': Populism and the Politics of (in) Security. *European Journal of International Security*, 5(1), 5–24.

Zmušková, B. (2023): Roth Neveďalová: Vždy sme sa vyhraňovali proti fašizmu, sme proeurópska strana [Roth Neveďalová: We have always opposed fascism; we are a pro-European party]. *euractiv.sk*, 20 February.

Populism, Sanctions and Sovereignty: The Case of Zimbabwe and the Commonwealth

Fatih Tuna

Social Sciences University of Ankara, Turkey, ORCiD: 0000-0001-7140-9207, corresponding address: fatih.tuna@student.asbu.edu.tr

Abstract

This study examines Zimbabwe's 2003 withdrawal from the Commonwealth of Nations under Robert Mugabe as an empirical case of populist engagement with international institutions. Mugabe's rhetoric and actions reveal how populist figures employ anti-imperialist and nationalist narratives to challenge global organizations and reinforce domestic authority. Building on theories of populist strategies toward international institutions, the study argues that Mugabe portrayed the Commonwealth as a neo-colonial entity undermining Zimbabwe's sovereignty, using this framing to justify non-compliance with human rights and democratic norms. Situating Zimbabwe's withdrawal within broader populist agendas, it compares Mugabe's approach to other leaders who resisted external interference to strengthen domestic legitimacy. Using Pacciardi, Spandler, and Söderbaum's framework, which identifies four types of populist disengagement, criticism, extortion, obstruction, and exit, the research locates Zimbabwe's withdrawal within this spectrum. Mugabe's policy evolved from vocal criticism, depicting the Commonwealth as neo-colonial, to exit, the most radical disengagement form. His rhetoric delegitimized sanctions as imperialist interference, consolidating an international populist narrative. By framing global

condemnation as an attack on sovereignty and land reform, Mugabe aligned anti-institutional rhetoric with a rejection of external governance. This episode illustrates how populist leaders escalate from dissent to full disengagement, raising questions about the implications for institutional stability and global governance.

Keywords: *populist disengagement, Commonwealth of Nations exit, Neo-colonialism, sovereignty assertion, international organisations*

Introduction

Within the volatile environment of early 21st-century international relations, President Robert Mugabe's Zimbabwe's abrupt exit from the Commonwealth of Nations in 2003 continues to exemplify a pivotal illustration of confrontation between populist disengagement strategies and international organisational authority within the broader framework of international governance. This incident, defined by a strong renunciation of democratic principles enforced from outside, provides a revealing example of how populist leaderships capitalise on nationalist, anti-imperial and anti-colonial discourses to reshape territorial sovereignty and undermine the legitimacy of international organisations.

On an evening that captured the attention of the international community, President Mugabe announced Zimbabwe's abrupt exit from the Commonwealth of Nations, asserting that 'we are leaving the Commonwealth, it is a club of racists that punishes us' (Truscott 2003; Compagnon 2011). This course of action was taken in response to an escalating diplomatic impasse over prolonged international sanctions imposed due to the Mugabe regime's alleged electoral misconduct and human rights violations. President Mugabe's proclamation, asserting that any concession to the Commonwealth would reinforce Zimbabwe's subjugation, was not merely a rejection of the organisation's legitimacy but also a deliberate discursive strategy. By refusing overtures for compromise from the political leadership of South Africa, Nigeria and Jamaica, Mugabe's political stance underscored a broader narrative that continued membership would render Zimbabwe a lasting target of what he pejoratively labeled the 'Anglo-Saxon unholy alliance' (Henshaw 2007).

The exit should be interpreted within the broader context of global initiatives to safeguard democratic values and fundamental rights, alongside growing scepticism toward international organisational authority. In the aftermath of Zimbabwe's suspension from the Commonwealth in March 2002 – a measure triggered by mounting evidence of electoral malpractice and political repression – the country became the focal point of a heated controversy over the fairness

and impartiality of international sanctions (Duxbury 2004). President Mugabe's subsequent response was not an unresisting concession to foreign oversight but a strategic restructuring of the political narrative. By portraying the Commonwealth as a tool of neo-colonialism that undermined Zimbabwe's national sovereignty, Mugabe advanced a discourse that resonated deeply with domestic audiences and legitimised his confrontational policies (Bush & Szeftel 2002).

This research adopts Pacciardi, Spandler and Söderbaum's analytical framework, which distinguishes four main types of disengagement strategies employed by populist governments against international organisations – criticism, extortion, obstruction and exit – to examine the trajectory of Zimbabwe's withdrawal (Pacciardi, Spandler & Söderbaum 2024). This analytical model draws particularly from Albert Hirschman's concepts of loyalty, voice and exit (Hirschman 1970). At the outset, President Mugabe's outspoken condemnation of the Commonwealth functioned as a vehicle for political criticism, expressing dissatisfaction with the functioning, organisational framework or normative orientation of an international organisation (Spandler & Söderbaum 2023). It could be argued that criticism, as a form of disengagement strategy, was intended to mobilise nationalist fervour in opposition to alleged neocolonial or imperialist intervention. Nevertheless, this criticism rapidly evolved into 'exit', the most extreme form of disengagement, through which Zimbabwe severed its formal ties with the international organisation. By taking this action, President Mugabe not only repudiated foreign supervision but also reaffirmed his administration's independence, thereby strengthening internal authority by advancing a discourse critical of international organisations and their legitimacy.

Media reports from the time comprehensively capture the striking dimensions of this populist disengagement. Accounts highlighted how Mugabe's unwavering rejection of diplomatic concessions reinforced his conviction that even a moderated stance would sustain Zimbabwe's subordinate status within the Commonwealth (Taylor 2005). These assertions, juxtaposed with diplomatic negotiations by foreign dignitaries – including efforts by South African leaders and the diplomatic appeals of Western representatives – underscore the profound discord between international demands for democratic transformation and the populist imperatives shaping Mugabe's policies (Petrica 2021). This bifurcation not only illustrates the power of populist rhetoric in challenging global consensus but also sustains ongoing debate on the effectiveness of international sanctions and collective pressure in influencing populist governance.

Zimbabwe's exit from the Commonwealth provides valuable perspectives on the wider mechanisms of international governance in a period defined by the resurgence of populism. It necessitates a reconsideration of how international organisations can strategically engage with state actors that employ populist approaches to deflect international critique. Furthermore, the development exposes

a paradox intrinsic to modern international relations: the greater the efforts by international organisations to uphold international norms, the greater the risk of antagonising administrations that perceive these actions as infringements on their sovereignty. Hence, this research not only advances our comprehension of populist (dis)engagement with international organisations but also challenges established beliefs regarding the resilience and adaptability of international organisational structures amid the growing trend of populism.

In the subsequent sections, this paper will initially outline the conceptual foundations of populist discourse and its application in international relations, building upon Pacciardi, Spandler and Söderbaum's criticism-extortion-obstruction-exit analytical framework. The following sections will present a comprehensive empirical examination of Zimbabwe's exit from the Commonwealth, placing this event within the context of both historical and current discussions on international legitimacy and sovereignty. Through the integration of media reports and rigorous theoretical scrutiny, the research intends to contribute a refined understanding of how populist governments maneuver and, in some instances, disrupt the principles of international governance. Zimbabwe's abrupt exit from the Commonwealth functions as a powerful reminder of the ongoing struggle between populist sentiments and global institutionalism, a struggle that continues to define the dynamics of international relations in impactful and uncertain ways.

A critical assessment of the theoretical framework

Although definitional accuracy and terminological agreement remain conceptually divergent within scholarly circles, established theoretical perspectives on populism reflect commonality in at least two key aspects: the people and the elite (Canovan 1981). Expressed differently, populism constructs a narrative around the opposition between the people and the elite. This political discourse framework has been synthesised precisely as 'the people against the powerful elite' (Judis & Teixeira 2002). Further extrapolating this divide to the field of international relations would help elucidate the nature of the relationship between populist leaders, who claim to represent the will of the people, and international organisations, which are regarded as the institutionalised establishment predominantly serving the interests of the global elite.

Populism can be defined as a conceptual paradigm that frames society as being divided into two ideologically opposed and internally cohesive factions: the virtuous populace against the immoral elites. It further advances the claim that politics ought to reflect the shared interests and collective identity of the populace (Mudde 2004: 543). According to this conceptualisation, populism is antithetical to two specific perspectives: pluralism and elitism. Elitism posits that political decision-making should be guided by the principles of a morally superior elite, as opposed to the ethically uninformed populace. Pluralism challenges the rigid

dichotomy presented by both elitism and populism, interpreting society as an intricate configuration of collective and individual identities with frequently opposing ideological stances and interests (Mudde 2004: 544).

Populism emphasises ethical dichotomies rather than detailed governance strategies and processes. A defining feature of the populist narrative is the moral-political bifurcation between the people and the elite, rather than a research-based distinction in behavioural tendencies or perspectives. Populist discourse proceeds by means of rhetorical oversimplification, depicting political life as a binary moral struggle that denies multidimensionality and analytical nuance (Patricia 2017). This communicative paradigm reconstructs the plurality of politics into an ethical confrontation between sanctity and corruption, thus positioning compromise and reconciliation as morally tainted acts. According to the populist understanding, public discourse is structured around an antagonistic divide between allies and adversaries. Political adversaries are depicted as more than just individuals with conflicting viewpoints and principles; they are framed as unethical and morally corrupt. As a result, reconciliation remains unattainable, as it undermines the perceived purity (Mudde 2004: 544). Within this research, populism is conceived as a rhetorical and strategic mechanism by which political leaders delineate a moral dichotomy between the righteous, self-determining people and the depraved, alien elite. Drawing upon Mudde's (2004) ideational conception and Roberts-Miller's (2017) rhetorical interpretation, populism is understood here as more than a mere ideology, it functions as a discursive style that legitimises dissent against established institutional orders. In the global context, this tendency manifests as a sovereigntist strategy that resists institutional constraint, framing transnational governance architectures as impediments to the self-determination of the people. This working definition informs the examination of the ways in which Mugabe's discourse reconfigured Zimbabwe's positionality within the Commonwealth via incremental stages of populist estrangement.

The paradoxical disengagement strategies of populist political leaderships stem from the conflicting motivations fostered by this ideological framing and narrative construction with respect to international organisations. Adopting a defiant and status quo-challenging stance in international relations can enhance the legitimacy of the uncompromising and anti-establishment depiction of populists as embodiments of the popular will, in opposition to the deceitful global elite (Oliver & Rahn 2016). Disengagement from globally recognised international organisations can serve as an expression of loyalty to this stance for national constituencies, notably as the influence of these organisations is commonly constructed around a perception of bureaucratic neutrality and depoliticisation, which contributes to populism's portrayal of the establishment as disconnected from the general populace (Hindess & Sawer 2004). According to this populist interpretation, an accommodative posture in global organisations could be criticised as a retreat from the populist agenda.

Diverging from the incentive previously noted, populist political leaderships are strategically offered both concrete and abstract inducements that shape their disengagement process from organisations and frame their decision-making in terms of practical considerations within international organisations. Balancing complete disengagement with strategic participation creates the conditions for continued leverage of international platforms for symbolic recognition and international influence projection. Domestic structural barriers, including widespread public sentiment and the policy inclinations of key institutional gatekeepers, can alleviate the consequences of disengagement. In addition to domestic factors, the relevant international body and its key participants may influence the populist leadership's policy orientation by yielding certain demands, including compensations or organisational restructuring, which expand the populist administration's control over decision-making. As a result of these moderating influences, total withdrawal is anticipated solely in extraordinary cases (Pacciardi, Spandler & Söderbaum 2024: 2028).

To scrutinise how populist political leaderships maneuver through these complexities, Pacciardi, Spandler and Söderbaum have formulated a theoretical model that provides a framework for understanding the methods by which populists engage in varying forms of disengagement. The authors who developed this model conceptualise disengagement as policies enacted by populist political leaderships that manifest a withdrawal from entrenched patterns of cooperative frameworks. These policy measures may deviate from the formal obligations of the relevant state actor arising from its membership. They can also erode the trust underpinning cooperative engagements that form the structural principles of an international organisation. According to this theoretical model, exit is merely one modality within the broader phenomenon of disengagement. A notable shortcoming of this theoretical perspective is that it seeks to clarify the mechanisms underlying these practices through which populist political actors strategically contest global governance structures. It could be argued that this model largely neglects the practice of exit, as it explicitly recognises that populist foreign policy strategies frequently advocate for international cooperation (Pacciardi, Spandler & Söderbaum 2024: 2029).

According to this model, criticism, extortion, obstruction and exit constitute four essential classifications of practices that populist administrations can leverage to disengage from global organisations. Official declarations that express dissatisfaction with the operational processes, organisational blueprint or value-based perspective of an international organisation are regarded as criticism. Spandler and Söderbaum's study, based on analyses of speeches by Viktor Orbán, Hugo Chávez and Rodrigo Duterte, demonstrated how these leaders delegitimised certain international organisations by criticising them on the grounds of representation, authority, interests, institutional structures and their normative

standing in the international arena (Spandler & Söderbaum 2023). The practice of criticism may seek to alter the policy frameworks of organisations, demand structural changes within them or weaken the organisation's credibility as a whole. Although it might be the most viable and safe choice in the short term, it could also serve as a first step in a more radical process that drastically challenges the relevant international organisation in the long term.

Extortion, defined as financial or diplomatic coercion within a global organisation, is conjoined with subtle or formal requirements for policy modifications, governance structure reform or burden-sharing. Through this form of disengagement, populist political leaderships can openly express their dissent against an international organisation while concurrently indicating their willingness to maintain collaboration under revised conditions. If the relevant international organisation accommodates through concessions, the populist leadership can maximise the material returns associated with its participation in the organisation (Pacciardi, Spandler & Söderbaum 2024: 2029).

A key limitation or shortcoming concerning this understanding of extortion is that it is based on the premise of a rational and deliberate logic underlying extortion, without comprehensively considering the possible unforeseen ramifications or far-reaching systemic consequences of these measures. While this analytical framework suggests that extortion functions chiefly as a strategic instrument for extracting concessions while ensuring continued partnership, in practice, extortion can result in sustained reputational harm, erosion of legitimacy or weakening of mutual trust among member nations, complicating prospects for future collaboration. The presumption that international organisations are expected to accommodate demands as a reaction to extortion underestimates the probability that they may oppose coercion, enforce retaliatory measures or restrict the extorting party's influence in organisational decisions. Some international organisations may prioritise maintaining established norms and regulations instead of legitimising coercive strategies. The success of extortion strategies is contingent upon the comparative strength of the populist member within the international organisation. Marginalised or less significant countries may lack the strategic leverage to make a credible threat of discontinuing participation or cutting funds, restricting the effectiveness of this approach across a range of cases. Although this interpretation implies that populist administrations resort to extortion as a method to negotiate more advantageous conditions, it fails to account for cases where populist leaderships could leverage extortion as a strategic tool for internal political advantages, utilising it to strengthen anti-globalist discourse rather than striving for authentic organisational transformation. The notion that extortion makes ongoing cooperation possible overlooks the possibility that the recurrent or disproportionate application of this tactic could undermine organisational stability,

stimulate like-minded behaviour from other nations or foster fragmentation within the organisational framework.

Obstruction is the third type of disengagement behaviour employed by populist leaderships, according to this analytical model, which aims at impairing the functionality of an international organisation at the level of implementation. It may encompass obstruction of decision-making processes, infringement of policies or obligations, and lack of participation in meetings. Through obstruction, populist administrations exhibit overt resistance to an international organisation's policies. Obstruction may focus on specific elements of the cooperative framework. By opting not to withdraw, future re-engagement in full participation is left as an option (Pacciardi, Spandler & Söderbaum 2024: 2029–2030).

This typology downplays the possible long-term effects of obstruction not only on the populist administration's relationship with the international organisation but also on the organisation's overall efficiency. The model indicates that obstruction could serve as a short-term strategy with the prospect of re-engaging in full participation in the long term. That being said, continued obstruction can harm a member state's reputation, deteriorate trust with other nations in the organisation and result in permanent removal from key decision-making procedures, constraining future opportunities for engagement. The idea that obstruction is directed at specific elements of the cooperative framework underestimates the potential for reciprocal measures from the international organisation. Other countries within the organisation may retaliate by curtailing engagement, halting collaboration or imposing international sanctions, which can heighten tensions and complicate future reconciliation. It also conveys that obstruction could be managed by the international organisation and suggests that obstruction does not directly lead to systemic disintegration. However, persistent obstruction from various state parties, particularly in essential decision-making processes, could diminish the international organisation's overall operational effectiveness, potentially sparking organisational disintegration or fragmentation, which could jeopardise the international organisation's fundamental objectives. Additionally, it maintains that obstruction is exclusively an international, tactical maneuver. On the contrary, populist administrations may be motivated by internal political considerations, including mobilising anti-globalist or nationalist sentiments, instead of focusing exclusively on practical benefits from international organisations. In this particular scenario, obstruction might be more concerned with signaling dissent for the sake of political gain rather than focusing on implementing tangible policy adjustments within international organisations. The assertion does not comprehensively address the likelihood that international organisations may evolve in response to obstruction through policy modifications, establishing alternative frameworks or moving toward more adaptable decision-making structures. Under such conditions, the populist administration may suffer from

diminishing returns from obstruction if the international organisation is capable of maintaining operations notwithstanding the disruption.

According to Pacciardi, Spandler and Söderbaum's (2024) analytical model, exit is defined as complete disengagement or cessation of active involvement with an international organisation. While, in particular scenarios, a withdrawal decision may be annulled before it is fully enacted, exit constitutes the most drastic disengagement approach. The exit choice is occasionally associated with the emergence of new international bodies or the development of competing organisations (Pacciardi, Spandler & Söderbaum 2024: 2030).

This conceptualisation points out that exit can be readily undone, conditioned by organisational membership policies, but it does not elaborate on the specific requirements for withdrawal or provide real-world examples. Some international organisations, including the European Union, are governed by sophisticated and legally obligatory exit processes that complicate efforts to regain membership. While the definition above characterises exit as a simple and direct action, it does not take into account the likelihood that exit can occur incrementally, through negotiation or in a limited form, such as gradual disengagement or partial withdrawal. Member states may withdraw from particular organisational frameworks without entirely ceasing organisational engagement. It also omits recognition of the fact that exit may entail significant diplomatic, political and economic repercussions, frequently complicating the possibility of reversal despite being legally permissible. As exemplified by the Brexit process, exit can be significantly more intricate than merely withdrawing and later re-entering. Moreover, it suggests that exit is occasionally followed by the establishment of new international organisations, yet it does not investigate specific cases where exit results in geopolitical isolation and strategic detachment instead of building alternative cooperative frameworks in the international arena. Exiting an international organisation does not always prompt the development of new international governance frameworks; certain states may downsize their role and restrain their approach to international cooperation without an alternative framework. While it defines exit within the scope of procedural mechanisms, it neglects to explore the motivations underlying it. Populist administrations, for example, could use exit as a means of symbolic expression instead of a sincere attempt to establish new international organisations. The absence of analysis on economic, ideological or political catalysts renders the conceptual framework partially underdeveloped.

According to the analytical model developed by Pacciardi, Spandler and Söderbaum (2024), it is feasible to comprehend these separate practices as a cohesive trajectory from discursive to concrete disengagement. Populist political leaderships may progressively escalate their challenges. This analytical model does not consider intensifying disengagement toward complete exit as the most effective approach. This is because, although full exit would amplify the perceived

legitimacy of the populist administration's radical stance, it would also entail relinquishing both symbolic and tangible advantages of sustained association with international organisations. Due to these considerations, their analytical model largely assumes that populist leaderships frequently integrate various strategies from the strategic arsenal of disengagement or transition among them to appease domestic constituencies who expect affirmation of the populist leadership's extremist anti-elite stance. At the same time, the same populist government strategically capitalises on the advantages of international partnerships due to its membership in international organisations. From this analytical model's perspective, a discernible distinction exists between populist and liberal leaderships. While populist leaderships are inclined to employ the entire spectrum of disengagement strategies in a more publicly visible manner, for liberal leaderships, rigorous adherence to international cooperation holds strategic significance (Pacciardi, Spandler & Söderbaum 2024: 2030).

Conceivably, the presented analytical framework offers a nuanced understanding of how populist leaderships adjust their strategic alignment with international organisations. Its analytical robustness stems from conceptualising disengagement as an evolving continuum instead of a dichotomous decision. This spectrum extends from solely discursive confrontations to concrete and measurable withdrawal. By putting forward the idea that populist governments tend to implement a blended yet inconsistent strategy, swinging between an anti-organisational narrative and realistic partnership, the model emphasises the intricacy of populist foreign policy strategies.

The concept of a continuum, ranging from discursive criticism to complete exit, reflects the evolving nature of administrative approaches. This framework allows for a more sophisticated evaluation than a rigid dualistic classification of engaged versus disengaged. The analytical model successfully illustrates the competing considerations that populist regimes confront. By avoiding complete withdrawal, these governments retain the integrity of their anti-establishment image while continuing to leverage the financial and symbolic advantages of their membership in international organisations. This dichotomy is fundamental to grasping the adaptability of populist approaches toward international organisations. It establishes a clear differentiation between populist and non-populist administrations. The framework posits that while both have the capacity to apply similar strategies, the driving forces underpinning populist movements encourage a more transparent and adaptable application of these strategies. This comparative aspect offers a constructive methodological foundation for future research grounded in empirical data.

While the analytical framework offers a valuable perspective for assessing populist disengagement strategies, its effectiveness is tempered by inherent constraints. The deficiency in definitional precision might undermine the clarity of

the evaluation or the application of empirical methodologies to assess the framework. For instance, the analytical distinction between symbolic advantages and material benefits may exhibit considerable divergence in different circumstances. The assertion that populist leaderships utilise the entire spectrum of strategies in a more transparent and versatile manner risks oversimplification. This pattern may not apply universally to all populist regimes, and the multifaceted nature of populist movements may indicate that the framework fails to account for significant variations. Although the framework proposes that the motivational frameworks of populism contribute to the implementation of this dual approach, it does not comprehensively analyse the particular processes or circumstances in which administrations opt to transition between practices. Further explanation of the causal reasoning would support the argument more effectively and present more straightforward avenues for empirical corroboration. Additionally, the limited number of studies concerning this phenomenon might limit the extent to which the findings can be generalised. The fluctuating dynamics of international relations and internal pressures across various regions could give rise to exceptions that are inadequately addressed by a one-dimensional continuum approach. It is also important to note that the analysis is essentially static in that it delivers a momentary depiction of strategic actions without fully considering the progression of these practices or their reaction to foreign upheavals. A more nuanced analysis could contemplate the way long-term patterns and abrupt international changes determine the relationship between cooperation and disengagement.

Case study: Zimbabwe's exit from the Commonwealth

Zimbabwe's exit from the Commonwealth in 2003 symbolises a complex, phased strategy through which populist political leadership can reformulate or terminate its (dis)engagement with international organisations. The Zimbabwean episode, unfolding within the context of a broader international controversy concerning democratic governance, civil liberties and the legitimacy of international norms, illustrates how a populist leader can reframe external critiques into a compelling discourse on national independence and resistance to alleged neo-colonial intervention. This case is anchored around President Robert Mugabe, whose deliberate articulation of an anti-imperialist and nationalist narrative not only reshaped Zimbabwe's engagement with the Commonwealth but also bolstered his international political authority (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2009). As expressed in official documents, notably the Charter of the Commonwealth, the institution defines itself as a voluntary association of autonomous and equal polities unified by shared normative principles of democracy, developmental cooperation and human rights (Commonwealth 2012). However, this institutional self-portrayal obscures the latent contradictions between the Commonwealth's decolonial aspirations and its historical entanglement with imperial hierarchies. The Commonwealth's norma-

tive ethos, anchored in discourses of good governance and virtuous leadership, has been widely interpreted as reproducing paternalistic hierarchies under the guise of cooperative equality (Murphy 2018). Yet, Mugabe's framing of the Commonwealth as a perpetuation of imperial authority, a neo-colonial mechanism sustaining external normative control and limiting Zimbabwean autonomy, echoed long-established criticisms within scholarly and political arenas. Earlier analyses had framed the institution as reproducing systemic inequalities traceable to its colonial lineage (Power 2009). Through the adoption and intensification of this discourse, Mugabe rearticulated inherited postcolonial tropes of dependency, transforming the Commonwealth's professed image of consensual cooperation into a symbol of imperial excess and moral inconsistency.

Informed by Pacciardi, Spandler and Söderbaum's conceptual model, this section traces the chronological unfolding of Zimbabwe's withdrawal from the Commonwealth, from early verbal contestation to final departure, revealing how populist agency can convert discursive resistance into organisational exit (Pacciardi, Spandler & Söderbaum 2024). In the early stages, President Mugabe expressed criticism, employing public condemnations that challenged the foundational norms and governance structures of the Commonwealth (Phimister & Raftopoulos 2004). Mugabe's discursive strategy sought to undermine the organisation's credibility by framing its international sanctions and democratic principles as mechanisms of foreign domination, thereby paving the way for further disengagement. The subsequent stage – extortion – though less explicitly documented in empirical evidence, was implicitly woven into the leadership's request for a fundamental reconceptualisation of Zimbabwe's ties with the Commonwealth. By employing covert pressure, wherein any form of agreement was perceived as perpetuating external domination, Mugabe asserted that alignment with Commonwealth principles was unfeasible, thereby pressuring the organisation to either comply with his conditions or face full disengagement (Amnesty International 2003).

In the next phase, the strategy evolved into obstruction. Instead of abruptly terminating relations, Zimbabwe's leadership pursued strategies that deliberately hindered the functional effectiveness of the Commonwealth. This encompassed a refusal to adhere to policy prescriptions, intentional obstruction of decision-making procedures during key deliberations, including the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM), and a broader rejection of meaningful engagement with the organisation (International Crisis Group 2004). This stage emphasised a dual-purpose strategy: to manifest open resistance to external intervention while concurrently maintaining the possibility of future engagement under conditions more aligned with Zimbabwe's sovereign interests. These stages eventually resulted in the exit phase: the categorical and permanent disengagement from the Commonwealth. In December 2003, after a prolonged diplomatic

stalemate and escalating domestic pressures, Zimbabwe officially withdrew from membership (Adelmann 2004). This concluding action was more than a procedural formality; it was a symbolic repudiation of foreign oversight over its domestic affairs, bolstering President Mugabe's discourse on national autonomy and resistance to imperial domination.

Empirical data from the Zimbabwean case emphasises this phased approach. The preliminary suspension of Zimbabwe after the 2002 presidential election, characterised by widespread accusations of electoral malpractice and human rights violations, triggered a sequence of contentious engagements across regional and global domains (Howard-Hassmann 2010). The Commonwealth's commitment to maintaining its human rights and democracy standards, articulated in the Harare Declaration, which reaffirms members' 'commitment to democracy, democratic processes and institutions which reflect national circumstances', and to 'fundamental human rights and the rule of law' (The Commonwealth 1991), provided the organisational justification for intervention. President Mugabe reframed these normative commitments as tools of neo-imperial encroachment, claiming that the Commonwealth's appeal to democracy and human rights functioned as a discursive strategy for 'Anglo-Saxon' domination over Zimbabwe's sovereignty.

Diplomatic negotiations, particularly during the CHOGM and as part of the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG), clearly demonstrate how Zimbabwe's populist leadership maneuvered through these contentious issues by transitioning from rhetorical condemnation to tangible disengagement. Mugabe's exit from the Commonwealth provides a quintessential example of how populist administrations may implement a calculated, multi-stage approach, progressing from criticism to extortion and obstruction, ultimately leading to exit, in order to contest and reshape their relationship with international organisations. This case enhances scholarly comprehension of the dynamics of populist disengagement and provokes critical inquiries into the resilience of international governance structures in light of such profound shifts in internationally accepted norms, rules, values, principles and sovereignty.

The preliminary stage of Zimbabwe's disengagement from the Commonwealth is best interpreted through the lens of criticism, a stage characterised by the explicit and public denunciation of the organisation's authority and functional frameworks (Pacciardi, Spandler & Söderbaum 2024: 2029). During this stage, President Mugabe advanced a compelling discourse that reconceptualised the Commonwealth not as an autonomous union of independent nations committed to democratic governance and socio-economic progress but as a vestige of post-colonial control (Phimister & Raftopoulos 2004). In his public statements, Mugabe declared that 'the Commonwealth is being used by a few countries, the Anglo-Saxon bloc, as a weapon to oppress and punish those of us who have refused to be their colonies again' (White 2003). By conceptualising the organisation as

a post-colonial apparatus, Mugabe argued that the international sanctions and mandated policy directives imposed on his country were not primarily intended to uphold common democratic principles but were instead designed to maintain external dominance over the nation's internal governance.

In his State of the Nation Address (President Mugabe's State of the Nation address 2002), Mugabe denounced 'Britain's relentless diplomatic campaign of vilifying and isolating our country', asserting that Zimbabwe remained 'guided by principles of mutual respect and unbending regard for the sovereign will of independent nations'. Likewise, at the World Summit on Sustainable Development (Mugabe 2002), he rejected 'manipulative and intimidatory attempts by some countries and regional bloc bent on subordinating our sovereignty to their hegemonic ambitions and imperial interests, falsely presented as matters of rule of law, democracy and good governance'. These declarations clearly illustrate the manner in which Mugabe transformed the Commonwealth's normative appeal to democracy and human rights into a rhetorical indictment of neo-imperial domination. His discourse subverted the moral ordering embedded within global governance structures. Instead of portraying Zimbabwe as the violator of democratic principles, Mugabe's rhetoric recast it as the aggrieved party suffering from 'Anglo-Saxon' hypocrisy. By declaring that 'we have fought for our land, we have fought for our sovereignty, small as we are' (Mugabe 2002), Mugabe cast defiance itself as patriotic virtue and resistance to external pressure as moral necessity. This discursive construction simultaneously delegitimised the Commonwealth's authority and mobilised nationalist sentiment by recasting Zimbabwe's global marginalisation as part of an enduring struggle against colonial domination.

President Mugabe's discourse throughout this phase was characterised by fervent public declarations that framed international criticism as an attack on sovereign dignity and independence (CNN 2003). Mugabe's criticisms were deliberately symbolic and largely declarative; they did not necessitate urgent organisational reforms or governance restructuring. Nevertheless, they proved tactically impactful in strengthening internal backing (Simmons 2017). This strategy enabled his government to channel popular discontent and patriotic fervour without the need for abrupt, sweeping policy changes. President Mugabe's initial criticisms functioned as a catalyst for mobilisation, serving as a means to rally mass support by portraying the Commonwealth's requirements as neo-colonial encroachments rather than genuine demands for reform.

This enduring discourse of anti-colonialism gained significant traction among a population disenchanted by longstanding grievances and ongoing political conflicts. By highlighting the idea that his country's independence was being undermined by an organisation rooted in colonial histories, President Mugabe succeeded in redefining international sanctions as an act of foreign hostility (Minillo 2020). His discourse not only discredited the Commonwealth's involvement,

including its emphasis on compliance with democratic norms embedded in the Harare Declaration (Srinivasan 2009), but also framed Zimbabwe's leadership as the ultimate authority over national affairs, resolutely resisting what he criticised as a discriminatory and neo-imperialist structure.

The criticism stage paved the way for progressive phases of disengagement. It created a distinction between foreign, supposedly imperial powers and a unified, structured conception of sovereign independence. This discursive approach was essential: It set the stage for subsequent phases of extortion, obstruction and eventual exit. The explicit criticism of the Commonwealth's policies was not a singular eruption of dissent but an intentional, strategic effort to erode the organisation's legitimacy and prepare the domestic populace for the inevitability of complete withdrawal. By reinterpreting the Commonwealth's measures as a violation of Zimbabwe's sovereignty and national dignity, Mugabe's leadership effectively formulated a persuasive argument for withdrawal – one that resonated beyond the local public and with ideologically aligned populist movements internationally.

After the preliminary stage of public criticism, the extortion stage emerges as a pivotal turning point in the disengagement process, where a nation capitalises on its strategic standing to extract compromises or redefine the parameters of engagement with an international organisation. Regarding Zimbabwe's engagement with the Commonwealth, although there is minimal evidence of explicit monetary or resource-driven extortion, the process is clearly exemplified through high-stakes diplomacy and the enforcement of rigid demands.

President Mugabe's government, building on the initial phase of criticism, redefined the Commonwealth's mandates as both unfair and an unacceptable violation of Zimbabwe's national sovereignty. His articulation of sovereignty embodied a distinctly anti-colonial interpretation, one grounded less in formal statehood than in the ongoing pursuit of self-determination and liberation from imperial hierarchies (Grovogui 1996; Anghie 2007). Within this interpretive frame, sovereignty was construed as the moral authority of decolonised states to oppose external interventions legitimised through the discourse of universal democratic and governance standards. By refusing to negotiate in any capacity that could enable Zimbabwe to retain its membership, his administration leveraged the possibility of withdrawal from all avenues of meaningful dialogue (Bush & Szeftel 2002). This stance was not primarily driven by the pursuit of material gains but was more focused on employing the threat of total disengagement as a bargaining tool. By taking this approach, Zimbabwe subtly indicated that ongoing participation in the organisation, even with adjusted terms, would perpetuate its subjugation by an organisation it considered fundamentally biased and neo-colonial.

This tactical stance was especially apparent throughout the diplomatic negotiations within the Troika, an entity consisting of prominent Commonwealth countries, including South Africa, Australia and Nigeria, and at the Commonwealth

Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) (Namusoke 2015). In these meetings, Zimbabwean officials asserted that any effort to enforce limited measures, or to pursue a settlement that did not achieve complete reinstatement, would merely prolong Zimbabwe's subjugation (Namusoke 2015). By maintaining that only the absolute lifting of international sanctions and a clear, definitive reinstatement could reestablish genuine sovereign equality, President Mugabe's government reclaimed authority over the discourse surrounding Zimbabwe's international relations.

Zimbabwe's strategy in these diplomatic talks can be viewed as a form of diplomatic extortion, where the prospect of withdrawal served as a powerful negotiation tool. The government's implicit expectations were designed to pressure the Commonwealth into reevaluating its approach by laying down an absolute requirement: Either accept Zimbabwe's conditions or risk an unprecedented rupture with a member country. This rigid position not only disrupted standard diplomatic procedures but also exposed cracks in the Commonwealth's diplomatic framework. The fractures among key actors, evidenced by divergent stances within the Troika and the heated discussions at CHOGM, underscore the extent to which Zimbabwe's coercive strategies strained the organisation's capacity for consensus-based international governance (Taylor 2005).

Findings from this era further highlight the effectiveness of Zimbabwe's approach. Senior diplomatic exchanges demonstrated that political figures from countries such as Nigeria and South Africa, who expressed political and regional alignment with Zimbabwe's concerns, became entangled in a multifaceted situation in which Zimbabwe's ultimatum of full withdrawal compelled them to reevaluate their stances within the organisational framework (Lee, Taylor & Williams 2006). These diplomatic negotiations, although not characterised by explicit economic pressure, ultimately served as a strategic maneuver: By rejecting any settlement that suggested continued subordination, Zimbabwe used the prospect of withdrawal to challenge the Commonwealth's authority and legitimacy (Myburgh 2008).

President Mugabe's extortion stage demonstrates how a populist government can instrumentalise the threat of withdrawal, not merely as rhetorical posturing but as a deliberate strategy to recalibrate international political dynamics. At the December 2003 Abuja CHOGM, Zimbabwe's delegation, under the leadership of Foreign Minister Stan Mudenga, cautioned that the nation 'would not accept conditionalities for readmission', emphasising its stance as 'an equal member or not there at all' (Mudenga 2003). In the aftermath of the summit, Mugabe reaffirmed his position, characterising the Commonwealth as an instrument of racial oppression and neo-colonial domination declaring that Zimbabwe would not re-enter an organisation that treated it as a subordinate colony (Dowden & Burleigh 2003). These statements functioned as an unspoken ultimatum, demand-

ing comprehensive reinstatement grounded in sovereign equality, failing which, complete withdrawal would ensue. The confrontation exposed the structural tension between the Commonwealth's rhetorical adherence to democratic governance and its inability to operationalise these principles when challenged by defiance. The episode unmasked the tenuous foundation of the Commonwealth's moral authority, exposing the contradiction between its liberal-democratic ethos and the sovereignty claims of postcolonial nations (Duxbury 2004). In Pacciardi, Spandler and Söderbaum's (2024) analytical schema, this stage represents a critical threshold between discursive opposition and institutional rupture, illustrating the populist capacity to instrumentalise systemic inconsistencies as justification for withdrawal.

Within the framework proposed by Pacciardi, Spandler and Söderbaum (2024), Zimbabwe's behaviour during this phase can be interpreted as aligning with an extortionary strategy. From this perspective, the administration's resource to diplomatic ultimatums and uncompromising positions served as a mechanism to utilise the prospect of withdrawal as bargaining power in redefining its relationship with the Commonwealth. This reading not only illuminates the ways in which Mugabe's government reaffirmed its sovereignty-centred rhetoric but also demonstrates how these maneuvers may exacerbate global scepticism toward the perceived neutrality and credibility of international institutions in addressing populist actors. The calculated deployment of diplomatic ultimatums highlights the wider consequences for international governance, in which the threat of withdrawal directly questions the core principles that form the foundation of international standards.

Following the failure of Zimbabwe's extortionary tactics to secure favourable concessions from the Commonwealth, the government's approach evolved into the next phase of disengagement – obstruction. The tertiary stage of obstruction encompasses measures that hinder the normal operations and governance processes of an international organisation without formally severing membership ties (Pacciardi, Spandler, & Söderbaum 2024: 2029–2030). In the context of Zimbabwe under Mugabe's leadership, obstruction became a pivotal strategic move that enabled his government to disrupt the Commonwealth's organisational structure while retaining the formal option for potential re-engagement.

In the aftermath of its suspension, Zimbabwe's tactics were exemplified by a deliberate abstention from meaningful engagement in essential organisational functions. While still nominally a member of the Commonwealth, Mugabe's government deliberately obstructed the institution's initiatives to reestablish standard operational and diplomatic relations (Winchester 2023). This was distinctly observable during the CHOGM as well as in engagements with specialised entities such as the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG). Zimbabwe's sustained defiance, evidenced by its unwillingness to attend meetings, engage in

substantive negotiations and implement suggested measures, severely obstructed the Commonwealth's efforts to facilitate a settlement to the crisis.

Zimbabwe's fracturing ties with the Commonwealth unfolded within a broader context of deepening domestic turmoil, disputed sovereignty and increasing global condemnation of Mugabe's leadership. In the aftermath of the 2000 parliamentary vote and the contentious 2002 presidential election, denounced by Commonwealth monitors for systemic manipulation and voted intimidation, Zimbabwe was suspended from the organisation's councils in accordance with the Harare Declaration. The suspension decision, initiated by the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG) and subsequently endorsed at the 2002 Coolum CHOGM, exposed entrenched divisions within the Commonwealth membership. Whereas Australia favoured a punitive approach centred on firm sanctions, South Africa and Nigeria advanced a conciliatory strategy emphasising negotiation and dialogue (Taylor 2005).

Amid these tensions, President Mugabe depicted the Commonwealth's intervention as a manifestation of British neo-imperialism, alleging that the organisation sought to penalise Zimbabwe for its land reform initiative while affirming the nation's sovereign right to self-determination (Mugabe 2002). In his public addresses of the time, notably at the World Summit on Sustainable Development, Mugabe invoked the rhetoric of anti-colonial struggle and sovereign parity, denouncing 'manipulative and intimidatory attempts by some countries and regional blocs' to impose control over Zimbabwe's domestic affairs. Through the elevation of sovereignty as both a moral principle and a political shield against external pressure, Mugabe rearticulated the diplomatic impasse as a symbolic struggle between the endurance of colonial hierarchies and the assertion of postcolonial autonomy. When the 2003 Abuja CHOGM ended without consensus regarding Zimbabwe's readmission, Mugabe's government interpreted the persistence of its suspension as empirical proof of systemic bias within the institution. Zimbabwe's formal withdrawal from the Commonwealth on 7 December 2003 marked the apex of a diplomatic process shaped by negotiation breakdowns, ideological polarisation and populist invocations of sovereignty and patriotic defiance (Chigora 2007).

Throughout the CHOGM discussions, Zimbabwe's sustained disengagement from diplomatic talks and non-compliance with essential recommendations issued by CMAG not only hindered advancement but also deepened fractures within the Commonwealth (South African Institute of International Affairs 2004). The core architecture of the organisation, which is dependent on collective agreement and engaged involvement, was weakened due to Zimbabwe's strategic disengagement from functional operations. This conduct interfered with the consensus-building process, rendering futile any efforts to achieve a consensual resolution on Zimbabwe's status. The obstruction extended beyond mere procedural non-compliance; it functioned as a deliberate strategy to erode the organisation's legitimacy in en-

forcing its own regulations, thus strengthening the claim that the Commonwealth was inherently prejudiced and unable to provide equitable governance.

From a more comprehensive strategic standpoint, the decision to obstruct instead of opting for immediate withdrawal or concession enabled President Mugabe of Zimbabwe to leverage both national and international political spheres (United Nations 2010). On the national front, the refusal to cooperate resonated with nationalist ideologies and strengthened Mugabe's image as a leader determined not to be controlled by outside forces. On the international stage, it conveyed a clear signal that while Zimbabwe was ready to confront and undermine existing norms, it was not completely ruling out the possibility of future diplomatic engagement, provided that such engagement took place under conditions that honoured its sovereignty and ideological position. This twofold strategy – resisting external control while preserving the option for realignment – was a defining feature of the populist strategy, framing Zimbabwe as a state capable of rejoining the fold when conditions became more favourable.

Zimbabwe's deployment of obstruction within the Commonwealth structure demonstrates a deliberate strategy of operational stagnation. By engaging in practices that disrupted organisational processes without fully disengaging, Mugabe's regime effectively diminished the Commonwealth's authority to uphold its standards and facilitate a resolution to the international crisis. This phase of obstruction amplified the anti-imperialist message central to Zimbabwe's populist narrative and also offered a strategic fallback, maintaining the potential for future diplomatic re-engagement. This approach emphasises the larger consequences for international organisations when confronted with populist governments: the difficulty of preserving operational unity in response to intentional, obstructive disruption that discredits normative oversight and makes reconciliation more challenging.

The exit stage marks the ultimate and most profound phase in the process of disengagement, where longstanding discontent and strategic maneuvering reach their peak, culminating in a conclusive disengagement from an international organisation (Pacciardi, Spandler, & Söderbaum 2024: 2030). In the context of Mugabe's Zimbabwe, this stage took shape in December 2003, during a period of rising domestic political divisions and ongoing external constraints, when the administration led by President Robert Mugabe officially withdrew from the Commonwealth.

This critical decision was not a sudden response but the result of a gradual strategic approach that had developed through preceding phases of criticism, extortion and obstruction. Through his fervent public criticisms, Mugabe repositioned the Commonwealth as a neo-colonial structure, eroding Zimbabwe's sovereign independence. Thereafter, the government's strategic diplomatic maneuvering, in which any concession was perceived as submission, exerted covert pressure on

the organisation through extortion tactics. Ultimately, by consistently resisting cooperation and intentionally obstructing organisational functions, Zimbabwe significantly undermined the effectiveness of the Commonwealth's operations. The cumulative impact of these stages paved the way for the final phase of disengagement: exit.

The decision to withdraw emerged amid intensifying tensions at the 2003 CHOGM in Abuja, which exposed profound divisions among member states concerning Zimbabwe's suspension. The debates laid bare profound internal divisions that underscored the fragility of consensus within the Commonwealth. Australia advocated the maintenance of Zimbabwe's suspension in response to documented electoral irregularities, while South Africa and Nigeria called for its readmission and renewed dialogue. These contentious interactions, coupled with the Troika's incapacity to formulate a cohesive position, underscored the disintegration of collective agreement and institutional confidence (Myburgh 2008). The internal dissonance within the organisation, where Australia's rigid stance collided with African leaders' conciliatory overtures, eroded the Commonwealth's legitimacy in the perception of Zimbabwe's leadership. Amid this escalating crisis, Mugabe's government construed withdrawal as the only defensible course through which to preserve national sovereignty against a prejudiced and externally influenced Commonwealth.

President Mugabe's decision to withdraw transcended a mere administrative procedure; it was a significant symbolic gesture that reverberated across both national and global spheres (Al Jazeera 2003). By opting for withdrawal, his government firmly dismissed the Commonwealth's legitimacy in setting norms, decisively eliminating any prospect of future reintegration within its current structure. This unilaterally executed action exemplified a broader populist approach – one that progressed from outspoken criticism to a calculated departure – aiming to reshape the contours of international legitimacy to prioritise national sovereignty. By outrightly rejecting the Commonwealth's stipulations, Zimbabwe sought to redefine its global stance, emphasising that its future should be determined internally rather than dictated by external arbitration.

The complete withdrawal highlighted the structural constraints of international organisations in influencing populist administrations. The Commonwealth, devoid of binding enforcement powers and weakened by internal divisions, failed to bridge the gap between its democratic values and the governance dynamics of a populist regime that strategically utilised each phase – from criticism to exit – to advance its own objectives (Dowden & Burleigh 2003). Zimbabwe's exit from the Commonwealth not only solidified its anti-colonialist and nationalist rhetoric but also underscored the fragility of international governance structures when challenged by governments prepared to forsake organisational norms and principles in defence of national sovereignty.

Zimbabwe's withdrawal from the Commonwealth in December 2003 represents the final phase of a carefully orchestrated, multi-tiered approach that evolved from declaratory criticism and covert extortion to direct obstruction and, ultimately, complete disengagement. This withdrawal represented both a renunciation of an organisation viewed as an instrument of neo-colonial dominance and a reaffirmation of sovereign independence – a decision that recalibrated Zimbabwe's position on the international stage and emphasised the structural limitations of international governance amid the rise of populism.

Conclusion

Zimbabwe's withdrawal from the Commonwealth showcases how populist leaderships can orchestrate a gradual and calculated disengagement strategy, encompassing criticism, extortion, obstruction and exit, to recalibrate their engagement with international organisations. This trajectory, as illustrated by the Zimbabwean experience under President Mugabe, follows a deliberate pattern; it signifies a strategic escalation that begins with minimal-risk rhetorical opposition and culminates in the irrevocable break from organisational engagement.

In the initial phase, populist figures use criticism as a tool to undermine the legitimacy of an organisation's functions and norms by portraying it as a remnant of colonial-era dominance. In the case of Zimbabwe, President Mugabe's outspoken criticism repositioned the Commonwealth as a tool of external influence rather than a multilateral space dedicated to fostering democracy and economic progress. This preliminary stage laid the ideological groundwork for subsequent actions by galvanising domestic support through a discourse centred on national sovereignty and opposition to imperial expansion.

Leveraging this discourse, the leadership escalated to extortion, employing the threat of total disengagement as a tool to extract concessions. While not explicitly financial, this approach was evident in the form of diplomatic demands, where any minimal concessions were deemed equivalent to sustained subordination. These strategies were notably apparent during critical diplomatic talks within the internal structures of the Commonwealth, where Zimbabwe's demand for an unconditional lifting of international sanctions underscored its commitment to revisiting the conditions of its engagement.

The subsequent phase, obstruction, involved purposeful disengagement from organisational procedures. While still officially part of the Commonwealth framework, Zimbabwe's unwillingness to engage constructively – such as its absence from CHOGM proceedings and disregard for CMAG recommendations – severely impaired policy formulation and highlighted its reluctance to comply with foreign-imposed principles. This obstruction was not a definitive rupture but a calculated interlude, preserving the potential for future realignment if circumstances ever converge with its nationalist priorities.

Ultimately, the strategy resulted in exit, the most extreme stage of disengagement. Confronted with escalating domestic challenges and a steadfast external context, Zimbabwe's official exit in December 2003 was not simply a procedural decision but a symbolic renunciation of an international organisation that was increasingly seen as prejudiced and unlawful. This pivotal action facilitated the consolidation of Zimbabwe's redefined international profile, as a country resolute in upholding its sovereignty, independent of the limitations of externally enforced norms.

The Zimbabwean withdrawal episode unveils several key insights into the fragilities and hurdles confronting international organisations in a period characterised by the rise of populism in international relations. The step-by-step strategy of disengagement highlights the underlying logic of populist administrations, which frequently perceive external criticism as an insult to national pride rather than productive engagement. This viewpoint can significantly weaken the normative structures that form the foundation of international organisations such as the Commonwealth, consequently reducing their effectiveness in promoting democratic governance and human rights standards.

The Zimbabwean instance of populist disengagement illustrates the shortcomings of international organisations that lack binding enforcement powers. When dealing with countries inclined to move from rhetorical criticism to practical obstruction and eventual disengagement, these organisations have limited options but to adapt to or endure non-adherence. This phenomenon not only questions the viability of collective efforts but also raises doubts about the enduring stability of international governance frameworks in managing politically motivated populist movements.

Zimbabwe's disengagement experience underscores that immediate national priorities, including the imperative to reinforce nationalist legitimacy, can influence decision-making that entails significant and long-lasting repercussions for global politics. The policy shift toward disengagement, while strengthening national sovereignty, concurrently undermines the credibility of the organisational structure and establishes a model for other governments considering analogous approaches. These cases might reinforce a growing tendency toward disengagement from international organisations, consequently weakening the foundational principles of international governance.

Zimbabwe's path from criticism to exit generates insights that aid in crafting more comprehensive engagement strategies. International organisations need to analyse structural solutions that go beyond merely responding to immediate non-adherence while simultaneously minimising the danger of deepening disengagement. This might necessitate the creation of more dynamic and context-driven strategies that provide room for revision rather than complete disengagement, guaranteeing that countries experiencing populist pressures are not constrained to a dichotomous choice between compliance and total disengagement.

The integration of Zimbabwe's case into the analytical model of criticism, extortion, obstruction and exit yields a refined perspective on the challenges populist leaderships pose to international organisations. It underscores the necessity of flexible and robust international governance frameworks equipped to manage the intricacies of nationalist discourse and defiant conduct in international relations. As global dynamics are increasingly influenced by populist movements, the implications extracted from the Zimbabwean withdrawal will significantly contribute to the design of adaptive engagement strategies, diplomatic dialogue and, when required, reconciliation.

~

Fatih Tuna is a PhD candidate in International Relations at the Institute of Social Sciences, Social Sciences University of Ankara. He completed his master's degree in International Security at the Institute of Security Sciences of the Turkish National Police Academy and received his bachelor's degree in International Relations from Bilkent University. His research interests include international sanctions, economic statecraft, and great power and middle power dynamics in international politics.

References
Adelmann, M. (2004): Quiet Diplomacy: The Reasons behind Mbeki's Zimbabwe Policy. *Africa Spectrum*, 39(2), 249–276.
Anghie, A. (2007): *Imperialism, Sovereignty and the Making of International Law*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Al Jazeera (2003): Zimbabwe Quits Commonwealth. *Al Jazeera*, 7 December, <accessed online: https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2003/12/7/zimbabwe-quits-commonwealth>.
Amnesty International (2003): Zimbabwe: Commonwealth Leaders Must

Adhere to the Harare Declaration in Its Entirety. *Amnesty International*, 8 October, <accessed online: https://www.amnesty.org/fr/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/afr460312003en.pdf>.

Bush, R. & Szeftel, M. (2002): Sovereignty, Democracy & Zimbabwe's Tragedy. *Review of African Political Economy*, 29(91), 5–20.

Canovan, M. (1981): *Populism*. London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

Chigora, P. (2007): On Crossroads: Zimbabwe's Foreign Policy and the West. *Journal of Sustainable Development in Africa*, 9(1), 170–184.

CNN (2003): Zimbabwe Quits Commonwealth. *CNN*, 8 December, <accessed online: https://edition.cnn.com/2003/WORLD/africa/12/07/zimbabwe.reut/>.

Commonwealth (2012): Commonwealth Charter. *The Commonwealth*, 14 December, <accessed online: https://thecommonwealth.org/charter>.

Compagnon, D. (2011): *A Predictable Tragedy: Robert Mugabe and the Collapse of Zimbabwe*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Dowden, R. & Burleigh, J. (2003): Mugabe Quits Commonwealth over 'Racist' Plot against Zimbabwe. *The Independent*, 8 December, <accessed online: https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/africa/mugabe-quits-commonwealth-over-racist-plot-against-zimbabwe-81622.html>.

Duxbury, A. (2004): A Fracture in the Family: Zimbabwe and the Commonwealth. *Oxford University Commonwealth Law Journal*, 4(1), 103–119.

Grovogui, S. N. (1996): *Sovereigns, Quasi-Sovereigns, and Africans: Race and Self-Determination in International Law*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Henshaw, P. J. (2007): Zimbabwe and Canada: Historical Struggle Meets Historical Vacuum. *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, 41(3), 507–526.

Hindess, B. & Sawer, M. (2004): *Us and Them: Anti-Elitism in Australia*. Perth: Australia Research Institute, Curtin University of Technology.

Hirschman, A. O. (1970): *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations, and States*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Howard-Hassmann, R. E. (2010): Mugabe's Zimbabwe, 2000–2009: Massive Human Rights Violations and the Failure to Protect. *Human Rights Quarterly*, 32(4), 898–920.

International Crisis Group (2004): Zimbabwe: In Search of a New Strategy. *International Crisis Group*, 19 April, <accessed online: https://www.crisisgroup.org/sites/default/files/78-zimbabwe-in-search-of-a-new-strategy.pdf>.

Judis, J. B. & Teixeira, R. (2002): *The Emerging Democratic Majority*. New York: Scribner.

Lee, D., Taylor, I. & Williams, P. D. (2006): *The New Multilateralism in South African Diplomacy*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Minillo, X. (2020): The Power of Robert Mugabe's Discourses in International Relations. In: Chitando, E. (ed.): *Politics and Religion in Zimbabwe*. London: Routledge, 49–62.

Mudde, C. (2004): The Populist Zeitgeist. *Government and Opposition*, 39(4),

541–563.

Mudenga, S. (2003): Zimbabwe Ministers Attack Howard. *Zimbabwe Situation*, 11 December, <accessed online: https://www.zimbabwesituation.com/old/dec12_2003.html>.

Mugabe, R. (2002): Address to the World Summit on Sustainable Development. 3 September, <accessed online: https://sarpn.org/documents/d0000039/Mugabe_WSSD.pdf>.

Murphy, P. (2018): *The Empire's New Clothes: The Myth of the Commonwealth*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Myburgh, J. (2008): Timeline of the ANC's Approach to the Crisis in Zimbabwe, 2000–2003. *Politicsweb*, 10 July, <accessed online: https://www.politicsweb.co.za/politicsweb/action/media/downloadFile?media_fileid=1036>.

Namusoke, E. (2015): 7 December 2003: Zimbabwe Exits the Commonwealth. *Institute of Commonwealth Studies*, 6 December, <accessed online: https://commonwealthoralhistories.org/2015/7th-december-2003-zimbabwe-exits-the-commonwealth/>.

Ndlovu-Gatsheni, S. J. (2009): Making Sense of Mugabeism in Local and Global Politics: 'So Blair, Keep Your England and Let Me Keep My Zimbabwe'. *Third World Quarterly*, 30(6), 1139–1158.

Oliver, J. E. & Rahn, W. M. (2016): Rise of the Trumpenvolk: Populism in the 2016 Election. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 667(1), 189–206.

Pacciardi, A., Spandler, K. & Söderbaum, F. (2024): Beyond Exit: How Populist Governments Disengage from International Institutions. *International Affairs*, 100(5), 2025–2045.

Patricia, R.-M. (2017): *Demagoguery and Democracy*. New York: The Experiment.

Petrica, D. (2021): South Africa's Involvement in Zimbabwe's Suspension from the Commonwealth of Nations. *Comentario Internacional*, 21, 113–130.

Phimister, I. & Raftopoulos, B. (2004): Mugabe, Mbeki & the Politics of Anti-Imperialism. *Review of African Political Economy*, 31(101), 385–400.

Power, M. (2009): The Commonwealth, 'Development' and Post-Colonial Responsibility. *Geoforum*, 40(1), 14–24.

President Mugabe (2002): State of the Nation Address. 20 December, <accessed online: http://raceandhistory.com/selfnews/printnews.cgi?newsid1040399874,93788,.shtml>.

Simmons, A. M. (2017): The Rise and Fall of Zimbabwe's Longtime Leader: Robert Mugabe. *Los Angeles Times*, 21 November, <accessed online: https://www.latimes.com/world/africa/la-fg-robert-mugabe-timeline-20171121-story.html>.

South African Institute of International Affairs (2004): *SADC Barometer*. January, <accessed online: https://www.sarpn.org/documents/d0000715/P796-SADC_Barometer_Issue_4_Jan2004.pdf>.

Spandler, K. & Söderbaum, F. (2023): Populist (De)Legitimation of International Organizations. *International Affairs*, 99(3), 1023–1041.

Srinivasan, K. (2009): Principles and Practice: Human Rights, the Harare Decla-

ration and the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG). In: Mayall, J. (ed.): *The Contemporary Commonwealth*. London: Routledge, 62–80.

Taylor, I. (2005): 'The Devilish Thing': The Commonwealth and Zimbabwe's Dénouement. *The Round Table*, 94(380), 367–380.

The Commonwealth (1991): Harare Declaration. 21 October, <accessed online: https://thecommonwealth.org/harare-declaration-1991>.

Truscott, R. (2003): 'Zim Is Ready to Say Goodbye to Commonwealth'. *IOL*, 28 November, <accessed online: https://iol.co.za/news/africa/2003-11-28-zim-is-ready-to-say-goodbye-to-commonwealth/>.

United Nations (2010): Zimbabwe Hits Out against International Sanctions during Address to UN Debate. *UN News*, 24 September, <accessed online: https://news.un.org/en/story/2010/09/352972>.

White, M. (2003): Mugabe Quits Commonwealth. *The Guardian*, 8 December, <accessed online: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2003/dec/08/zimbabwe.politics>.

Winchester, N. (2023): The Commonwealth: Zimbabwe's Return? *House of Lords Library*, 9 January, <accessed online: https://lordslibrary.parliament.uk/the-commonwealth-zimbabwes-return/>.

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

Jaroslav Bílek
Charles University, Prague, Czech Republic; ORCiD: 0000-0001-9997-6430,
corresponding address: jaroslav.bilek@fsv.cuni.cz

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*

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. Löfflmann 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 expectations[1] 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 populist 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-

titioners. 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.

<div align="center">∿</div>

JAROSLAV BÍLEK is a Research Fellow at the Faculty of Social Sciences, Charles University in Prague. Bílek's research interests cover authoritarian politics, international linkages, electoral manipulation and civil-military relations.

References
AP News (2024): Argentina asks to join NATO as President Milei seeks a more prominent role for his nation. AP News, 12 April, <https://apnews.com/article/president-milei-argentina-nato-f16s-military-bf56ef4b18646438500c-921250c66e93>.
Buenos Aires Herald (2024a): Milei accuses UN of imposing 'socialist' and 'collectivist' agenda. *Buenos Aires Herald*, 24 September, <https://buenos-

airesherald.com/world/international-relations/milei-accuses-un-of-imposing-
socialist-and-collectivist-agenda>.

Buenos Aires Herald (2024b): Argentina alone votes against UN resolution pro-
tecting women and girls. *Buenos Aires Herald,* 14 November, <https://buenos-
airesherald.com/world/international-relations/argentina-alone-votes-against-
un-resolution-protecting-women-and-girls>.

Buenos Aires Herald (2024c): Argentina refuses to endorse UN Pact for the Fu-
ture at New York summit. *Buenos Aires Herald,* 23 September, <https://bueno-
sairesherald.com/world/international-relations/argentina-refuses-to-sign-un-
pact-for-the-future-at-new-york-summit>.

Buenos Aires Times (2025): Milei urges Mercosur to pursue greater trade open-
ness at summit. *Buenos Aires Times*, 6 July, <https://www.batimes.com.ar/
news/economy/milei-urges-mercosur-to-pursue-greater-trade-openness-at-
summit.phtml>.

Centera, M. (2023): Javier Milei, a mixture of a messianic preacher and a rock star.
El País, 19 November, <https://english.elpais.com/international/2023-11-19/
javier-milei-a-mixture-of-a-messianic-preacher-and-a-rock-star.html>.

Choi, J. (2025): US, Argentina launching new 'alternative' to WHO. *The Hill*,
27 May, <https://thehill.com/homenews/5320168-us-argentina-launch-alt-
health-system/>.

Destradi, S. & Vüllers, J. (2024): Populism and the liberal international order: An
analysis of UN voting patterns. *The Review of International Organizations* (on-
line first).

Ferre, J. C. (2025): The Rise of Javier Milei and the Emergence of Authoritarian
Liberalism in Argentina. *Latin American Research Review* (online first).

Heinisch, R., Gracia, O. & Laguna-Tapia, A. & Muriel, C. (2024): Libertarian Popu-
lism? Making Sense of Javier Milei's Political Discourse. *Socia Sciences,* 13(11),
1–27.

González, J. L. (2023): El loco: La vida desconocida de Javier Milei y su irrupcion
en la política argentina [The Madman: The Unknown Life of Javier Milei and
His Emergence into Argentine Politics]. Buenos Aires: Planeta Argentina.

Grinspan, L. (2023): How young Argentines helped put a far-right libertar-
ian into power. *Vox*, 20 November, <https://www.vox.com/world-poli-
tics/2023/10/21/23925549/argentina-election-javier-milei-right-youth>.

Jackon, S. (2023): Argentina's new president is former tantric sex coach who talks
to his dead dog. *Metro*, 20 November, <https://metro.co.uk/2023/11/20/javier-
milei-argentinas-new-president-former-tantric-sex-coach-19849280/>.

Kestler, T. (2022): Radical, Nativist, Authoritarian—Or All of These? Assessing
Recent Cases of Right-Wing Populism in Latin America. *Journal of Politics in
Latin America*, 14(3), 289–310.

La Derecha Diario (2025a): The government rejected the inclusion of a pro-abor-
tion group for an OAS assembly. *La Derecha Diario*, 7 July, <https://derechad-
iario.com.ar/us/argentina/government-rejected-inclusion-of-pro-abortion-
group-for-oas-assembly>.

La Derecha Diario (2025b): The OAS made an initial change after the strong warning from the United States. *La Derecha Diario,* 28 June, <https://derechadiario.com.ar/us/argentina/oas-made-a-change-after-a-stern-warning-from-the-united-states>.

Latin American Post (2024): El Salvador's Bukele Announces Dismissal of 300 Public Employees to Save Funds. *Latin American Post*, 28 June, <https://latinamericanpost.com/economy-en/el-salvadors-bukele-announces-dismissal-of-300-public-employees-to-save-funds/>.

Levitsky, S. & Loxton, J. (2013): Populism and competitive authoritarianism in the Andes. *Democratization*, 20(1), 107–136.

Levitsky, S. & Ziblatt, D. (2018): *How Democracies Die.* New York: Crown.

Löfflmann, G. (2022): Introduction to Special Issue: The Study of Populism in International Relations. *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 24(3), 403–415.

Maldonado, C. (2024): The populist threat: How Bukele and Milei undermine democratic progress in Latin America. *El País*, 7 March, <https://english.elpais.com/international/2024-03-07/the-populist-threat-how-bukele-and-milei-undermine-democratic-progress-in-latin-america.html>.

Malamud, A. & Schenoni, L. (2025): *Geopolitical aspects of the EU-Mercosur agreement.* Study Requested by the AFET committee.

Meléndez-Sánchez, M. (2024): Latin America Erupts: Millennial Authoritarianism in El Salvador. *Journal of Democracy*, 32 (3), 19–32.

Merke, F. & Doval, P. G. (2024): Javier Milei and the Global Far-Right: Reshaping Argentina's Foreign Policy. *CEBRI,* 3(14), 88–100.

Messari, N. (2024): The Elections of Javier Milei in Argentina: Context, Ambition, and Impact. Policy Center for the New South.

Pacciardi, A., Spandler, K. & Söderbaum, F. (2024): Beyond Exit: How Populist Governments Disengage from International Institutions. International Affairs, 100(5), 2025–2045.

Parthenay, K. (2024): Digital diplomacy against international stigmatization: the Bukele case. International Affairs 100(1), 301–321.

Papadovassilakis, A. & Robbins, S. (2021): Coup de Grâce for El Salvador's Anti-Corruption Commission. *InSight Crime*, 7 June, <https://insightcrime.org/news/coup-de-grace-el-salvador-anti-corruption-commission/>.

Peltz, J. (2019): With selfie, El Salvador's leader urges UN to embrace tech. *News 10*, 26 September, <accessed online: https://www.news10.com/news/technology/with-selfie-el-salvadors-leader-urges-un-to-embrace-tech/>.

Thiers, C. & Wehner, L. E. (2023): Latin American Populist Leaders and the International Stage: Analysing Their Belief Systems. *Political Communication and Performative Leadership* (online first).

The Guardian (2025): Argentina ratifies decision to withdraw from WHO as RFK Jr visits Buenos Aires. *The Guardian*, <accessed online: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/may/27/argentina-who-rfk-jr>.

The Tico Time (2022): El Salvador President Bukele says OAS has no reason to exist. *The Tico Time*, June 10, <accessed online: https://ticotimes. net/2022/06/10/el-salvador-president-bukele-says-oas-has-no-reason-to-exsist/>.

UN (2015): Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. *United Nations,* < accessed online: https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda/>.

UN (2024): Pact for the Future. *United Nations,* < accessed online: <https://www.un.org/pact-for-the-future/en>.

Vega, L. M. (2023): Bukele critica a Naciones Unidas: "hay que reformar la Asamblea General y la ONU" [Bukele criticizes the United Nations: "The General Assembly and the UN must be reformed"]. *WRadio,* 20 September, <https://www.wradio.com.co/2023/09/20/bukele-critica-a-naciones-unidas-hay-que-reformar-la-asamblea-general-y-la-onu/>.

Wajner, D. F., Destradi, S. & Zürn, M. (2024): The Effects of Global Populism: Assessing the Populist Impact on International Affairs. *International Affairs*, 100(5), 1819–1833.

Wolf, S. (2024): El Salvador under Nayib Bukele: the turn to electoral authoritarianism. *Revista de Ciencia Politica,* 44(2), 295–321.