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# Populism and Euro-Mediterranean cooperation: The Barcelona Process 25 years after

Eckart Woertz <sup>a</sup> and Eduard Soler i Lecha<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>History Department, German Institute for Global and Area Studies (GIGA), Institute for Middle East Studies (IMES), University of Hamburg, Hamburg, Germany; <sup>b</sup>CIDOB (Barcelona Centre for International Affairs), Barcelona, Spain

## ABSTRACT

A populist surge in Europe is affecting Euro-Mediterranean cooperation 25 years after the Barcelona Process was launched, reinforcing existing trends of de-Europeanization and renationalization of foreign policies. This article analyses the landscape of political contestation of Mediterranean cooperation in Europe in a new age of populism, focusing on France, Italy and Spain as well as the Visegrad 4 states that have turned from bystanders to veto players in Mediterranean affairs. We find that the ‘thick’ ideologies from which populists are borrowing condition the thrust of their influence. The impact of right-wing populism trumps that of its left-wing counterpart in quantity and quality, while market-liberal populism is in decline and regional populism is mainly an issue only in Spain. Populism has personalized decision-making and shaped political agendas directly and indirectly, most notably on migration. It has whitewashed authoritarian leaders in the southern Mediterranean and fragmented the European Union’s position on key issues such as the Arab–Israeli conflict. National interests and the weight of institutions have, however, formed a counterbalance to the focus on migration emanating from domestic politics. Populism alone cannot be blamed for renationalization trends that have existed before, but it does build on and reinforce them.

**KEYWORDS** Populism; Mediterranean cooperation; Barcelona Process; Union for the Mediterranean; European Union; European neighbourhood; Middle East and North Africa

## Introduction

A spectre is haunting Europe – the spectre of populism, to paraphrase the Communist Manifesto. One-quarter of all Europeans now vote for populist parties, following their continuous rise over the course of the last two decades (Lewis et al. 2018; Rooduijn et al., 2019). They have entered parliaments, influenced the agenda of centrist parties indirectly and in some countries even governed. The populist drift is most pronounced in Eastern Europe and Italy, where absolute majorities support populist parties (e.g., in

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**CONTACT** Eckart Woertz  [eckart.woertz@giga-hamburg.de](mailto:eckart.woertz@giga-hamburg.de)

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Bulgaria, Hungary and Poland). In France, they come close with well over one-third of the vote (Boros et al., 2018). Quantitatively and qualitatively, exclusionary right-wing populism dominates compared to inclusionary left-wing forms, which have been on the decline more recently (Balfour et al., 2019; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013).

Casting our eyes south, what is the impact of populism on Euro-Mediterranean cooperation 25 years after the Barcelona Process was first launched and how can we approach it theoretically? The populist surge affects the foreign policy of the European Union in its southern neighbourhood as well as that of member states such as France, Germany, Italy and Spain crucial in supporting past Euro-Mediterranean initiatives (Bicchi, 2007). How exactly depends on the 'thick' ideologies the various populisms are borrowing from (nationalist, socialist, neoliberal) and on how pre-existing national interests, institutional traditions, personalization and memberships in international organizations mediate populism (Destradi & Plagemann, 2019; Verbeek & Zaslove, 2017). Populist narratives on migration, security and identity permeate those of mainstream political forces and divert their attention towards domestic politics. Euroscepticism is a common feature of populists on both the right and the left, with the former focusing on border issues and Eurozone bailouts and the latter on economic liberalization and austerity measures. Populism has whitewashed authoritarian and populist leaders from the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean (SEM) and further fragmented positions within the EU on key issues such as the Arab–Israeli conflict. Populism has also modified the approach of Eastern European countries, who have moved from bystanders to veto players in EU policies on the Mediterranean.

The impact of European populism on Mediterranean cooperation is by no means a one-way street given it interacts with populist phenomena in the SEM – most notably in Israel and Turkey, who have their own preferences for selective bilateralism in dealing with the proliferation of regional conflict and fragmentation. In Israel, Netanyahu and other populist right-wing politicians have portrayed the country as a frontline state against Islam and Arabs while also seeking alliances with European populists to prevent norms-based EU positions emerging that go against their interests (Filc, 2018; Pardo & Gordon, 2018). Similarly, Turkey has framed foreign policy in civilizational terms, but in the reverse direction – depicting the country as a leading Islamic power, and victim of sinister Western conspiracies (Taş, 2020).

The study of populism can provide a more nuanced approach to ongoing metamorphoses in Mediterranean affairs. The study of the latter, in turn, can add to our understanding of populism, as theoretical debates have focussed on domestic enabling factors for the phenomenon while simultaneously neglecting its impact on foreign policy. Populism has not come out of nowhere, and will not disappear overnight. It is important to go beyond ahistorical taxonomic categorizations and understand populism as

a process with its own pre-history (Matthews-Ferrero, 2018). The end of the Cold War, globalization and the accompanying socio-economic dislocations and regional integration under the umbrella of the European Union created opportunity structures for populists and contributed to the rise of identity politics (Verbeek & Zaslove, 2017). We argue that the de-Europeanization and renationalization of EU foreign policies and regional conflicts in the SEM that preceded the populist upsurge are of crucial significance. Both condition a growing preference for bilateralism within a process that started out as a multilateral project. Both reinforce populism, as they themselves are reinforced by it. They provide a relational narrative and background for the impact of populism on Mediterranean cooperation at a time when nation states struggle with the trilemma between national sovereignty, economic integration and democratic legitimacy: two of which can be combined, but not all three at the same time (Rodrik, 2011).

Against this backdrop, this article begins by discussing how the impact of populism on Euro-Mediterranean cooperation can be approached conceptually, taking into account prior trends towards renationalization and prevalent theories on populism. It then illustrates the impact of populism on Euro-Mediterranean cooperation through four case studies: First, we discuss French inclinations 'to go it alone', as manifested for example, in that country's initial attempts to establish the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) outside of the EU framework. Second, we analyse the impact of the rise of populist forces in Italy, and how they translated into the migration agenda and the temporary alignment of the country with Eurosceptic forces from Eastern Europe. Third, we discuss the weakening of Spain in the wake of the Great Recession and a populist upsurge in the country. Fourth and finally, we analyse how populism has affected the stance towards Mediterranean affairs in the Visegrad 4 states, Hungary in particular. In contrast to earlier periods, these four have taken an active interest in Mediterranean affairs and developed into veto players on issues such as the status of Jerusalem, migration and the European stance vis-à-vis authoritarian regimes in the region. We conclude by categorizing the impact of populism on foreign policy making in the Mediterranean and pointing to possible areas of future research.

### **Renationalization and populism: Conceptualizing their impact on Euro-Mediterranean cooperation**

The populist surge comes at a time when multilateralism within the EU as well as in its foreign affairs has been weakened by renationalization trends. European issues have been increasingly politicized (De Wilde, 2015). European integration attempts beyond trade have been thwarted by referendums and legal initiatives in several EU countries, such as Denmark, France, Germany and the Netherlands. We understand de-Europeanization as

a renationalization of policies and norms through a series of formal decisions and informal practices reverting to a prior process of Europeanization. The latter reached its apogee in the Mediterranean in the 1990s and early 2000s when hopes for multilateral region-building were high in the wake of the Oslo Accords and the EU's clear willingness to increase its international actorness. Member states were increasingly disposed to channelling their Mediterranean policies via EU institutions, and some partner countries in the SEM were ready to harmonize their legislation with that of the supranational body even if they had no perspective of becoming part of the EU club (Schimmelfennig, 2015).

De-Europeanization occurs when EU member states 'fall back on their own resources and individual strategies during political crises, or after changes in government if domestic actors who oppose EU-inspired changes are empowered' (De Flers & Müller, 2012, pp. 23–24). Earlier examples include Sarkozy's initial attempt to build a Mediterranean Union under French leadership in 2007, bypassing European institutions, as well as the stalemate in the EU–Turkey accession process and the latter's waning appetite to engage with the former's reform agenda (Yilmaz, 2016).

Research on Mediterranean cooperation has described a historic arc in which the initial multilateral thrust of the Barcelona Process to build a shared region gave way to the more bilateral approach of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), with its pronounced north-south asymmetry of power and influence (Costalli, 2009; Del Sarto, 2016).<sup>1</sup> The EU's 'differentiated bilateralism' (Fernández-Molina, 2019, p. 10) rewarded 'good students' such as Morocco and Tunisia who were inclined to follow recommendations on economic reform with preferential funding, trade access and mobility partnerships. 'Bad students' like Algeria were not offered such privileges, not to mention Libya – regarded as a rogue state until 2003, and having turned into a failed one since 2011. This EU bilateralism has, in turn, been challenged by national bilateralisms from within, with individual member states prioritizing national foreign policy approaches over joint stances.

The EU's foreign policy in its southern neighbourhood is increasingly dominated by a 'security–stability nexus' and concerns over migration and terrorism, which subsume and supersede other agendas such as democratization and development (Colombo & Soler I Lecha, 2019; Roccu & Voltolini, 2018; Youngs, 2014). This is also reflected in the EU Global Strategy, whose emphasis on pragmatic 'resilience' signals a shift away from soft-power outreach and democracy promotion (Barbé & Morillas, 2019). The securitized approach has permeated the multilateral track of the Barcelona Process – now channelled through the UfM – but even more so the web of EU bilateral relations with countries of the SEM. Hence, it is important to go beyond a narrow definition of the Barcelona Process and analyse Mediterranean cooperation as part of a broader context that includes the heritage of the

Euro-Mediterranean agenda, its interplay with the Middle East peace process that has been a major stumbling block for Mediterranean cooperation (Del Sarto, 2011; Gillespie, 2003), the emergence of new conflicts in an increasingly fragmented SEM (e.g., Libya) and the central role of migration and anti-terrorism cooperation in national and European policies vis-à-vis the Mediterranean region. This also includes the ambiguous and politically charged relations with Turkey; these are not governed by the ENP, but by the EU-candidate status of the country and by fraught negotiations over its potential accession.

The reluctant multilateralism and renationalization efforts that have been present in European affairs and Mediterranean cooperation over the past three decades have been given dramatic impetus with the latest surge of populism. The latter can be traced back to political, demographic and economic factors in the making throughout the same time period, such as a growing distrust of politicians, alignment away from traditional party affiliations, widespread feelings of relative socio-economic deprivation and the perceived destruction of formerly dominant social and cultural milieus (Eatwell & Goodwin, 2018). This implies a challenge: the difficulty of cleanly isolating and disentangling populism from prior trends of renationalization, which in turn points to the controversial debate on what exactly populism is and who qualifies as its protagonists.

The term has been widely used and applied to different contexts: nineteenth-century Russia and the United States, twentieth-century Latin America and twenty-first century Europe. The narrow use of it by economists to describe politically expedient but ultimately unsustainable spending by inclusionary left-wing populists is insufficient; doing so ignores its exclusionary right-wing variant (Kaltwasser et al., 2017). Political science approaches are more inclusive meanwhile, and advocate for different foci in empirical analyses. The ideational approach highlights the populist mindset and how it trickles down into politics, meaning the Manichaean division of society into pure people and corrupt elites, the appeal to an imaginary general will and the rejection of pluralism (Mudde, 2017). The political-strategy approach stresses the importance of unmediated leadership that appeals directly to followers, with the simultaneous co-occurrence of personalistic, often charismatic leadership and weak formal organizations (Weyland, 2017). The socio-cultural approach sees populism as a relational communication and political style that creates identity by antagonistically flaunting mannerisms and attitudes that are perceived as folksy, personalist and coarse (Ostiguy, 2017). Thus the ideational approach focuses on what populists *say*, the political-strategy one on what they *do* to acquire and sustain power, and the sociocultural perspective on what they *feel* – that is, what cultural preferences they express during an identity-creating process of two-way communication between leaders and followers.

All three approaches attend to the whole spectrum of populisms, but they occasionally disagree over whether to include right-wing groups on the fringes. The unreformed National Front of Jean Marie Le Pen before his daughter Marine took over, Fini's neo-fascists in Italy, the Vlaams Belang in Belgium and other similar far-right groups do not qualify as populist according to the political-strategy approach because of their insistence on ideological purity and the extent of their organizational depth. These traits run counter to the hallmarks of populist movements: namely, the unmediated, opportunistic appeal of a personalistic leader to a large number of mostly unorganized followers (Weyland, 2017). Similarly, the Greek Golden Dawn and Hungarian Jobbik have been classified as fascist rather than populist (Finchelstein, 2017).

For the purpose of this article we follow the ideational approach, while occasionally borrowing from the political-strategy one too. Both encompass left-wing and right-wing populism; the cited cases above where they disagree are not our concern here. Right-wing populism is particularly important as it is more prevalent, and furthermore pushes the migration theme with a xenophobic undertone that affects Mediterranean cooperation. There is a growing tendency towards dualism, anti-pluralism and anti-institutionalism in both European and global politics. Liberal democracy and capitalism are unable to address the grievances and aspirations of a growing segment of the population. Even mainstream forces have to 'run against the establishment' to win. Macron's *En Marche* (EM), for example, relied on a leader figure, had limited organizational depth and upended institutionalized party democracy in France, sharing some traits with populist forces. A former advisor to Obama has argued, meanwhile, that if one stripped away the misogyny and racism, the anti-elitist thrust and the message of change of Trump's campaign resembled Obama's own one against Hillary Clinton eight years earlier (Rhodes, 2018).

The crisis of representative democracy has also tempted leaders to take recourse to emotional referendum campaigns in the hope of finding a way out of the impasse, only to fail (Renzi in Italy) or to create new problems (Cameron in the United Kingdom). While there is a populist contagion effect on the mainstream in terms of style, this does not necessarily trickle down to mainstream party programmes. In contrast, populist parties tend to water down the message of their party programmes once they actually achieve electoral success (Matthijs Rooduijn et al., 2014). Populism is a broad-based phenomenon with various shades of grey, rather than an isolated fringe phenomenon. This also applies to its impact on foreign policy and how thick ideologies, pre-existing national interests, institutional traditions and personalization mediate it. It is this impact that we now seek to demonstrate with the help of four case studies from the Mediterranean policy space.

## French populism, and France's tendency to go it alone

With Marine Le Pen's National Rally (NR) and its predecessor organization the Front National, France has seen one of the most conspicuous ascents of a populist party in Europe. It mounted a serious challenge to Macron during the presidential elections in 2017, and became the country's strongest party during the European elections of 2019. This has left an imprint on Europe's arguably most important country in Mediterranean politics. France was a driving force in major initiatives such as the first trade agreements with Morocco and Tunisia in the 1960s, the launch of the Global Mediterranean Policies and the Euro-Arab Dialogue in the early 1970s, the inception of the Barcelona Process in 1995 and the inclusion of the Mediterranean as part of the ENP.

Agitation against migration, that by Muslims in particular, has been a mainstay of the NR. Its opposition to the EU accession of Turkey is informed by its portrayal of Islam as a religion that is incompatible with what it perceives as French and Christian values. The party's isolationist and protectionist stance makes Europe-wide cooperation on Mediterranean issues difficult. It has called for rolling back European integration and argued against foreign interventions, such as the one in Libya in 2011. Such opposition to interventions has been mixed, however. The NR contrariwise called for cooperation with Russia on Syria and endorsed its annexation of Crimea, adding another shade to its general inclination towards aligning Russia – including being financed by a Russian bank close to the Kremlin (Chryssogelos, 2017). Le Pen has departed from the overt anti-Semitism of her father and sought to build bridges with Israel, which she has identified as a possible ally against perceived Muslim incursions (Stockemer & Barisione, 2017).

In contrast, France's brand of left-wing inclusionary populism, France Insoumise ('France Untamed') has adopted a pro-Palestinian stance and called for sanctions against Israel for its occupation policies. It has also held opposite views to the NR on migration, but shared common ground with it against the mainstream parties when it came to support of the Assad regime and advocacy for détente with Russia (Marlière, 2019). France Untamed, the NR and the protests of the yellow vests eat away at the legitimacy of the Macron government, limit its freedom to manoeuvre and give rise to a propensity to use international affairs to compensate for domestic problems.

Macron, meanwhile, has run on a pro-European ticket, while also opening the door to Algeria by acknowledging the devastations of its war of independence. His policy stances differ from the NR's populism, although some of his initiatives entail a nod to right-wing sentiments like the announcement of a 'Republican reconquest' of French neighbourhoods that are deemed under the influence of 'Islamist separatism'.<sup>2</sup> From a political strategy and



organizational point of view his movement-like party EM also shares some similarities with populist phenomena: strong reliance on a charismatic leader figure, limited organizational depth and a direct appeal to the people with the criticism of institutionalized party democracy. France's resistance to populism has thus itself adopted some measures out of the populist playbook.

It also interacts with a pre-existing tendency to renationalize Mediterranean foreign policy that was on full display during the creation of what would later become the UfM. The first time that Sarkozy referred to the idea of a 'Mediterranean Union' was in 2007 at a political rally in Toulon, a city that has long been one of the strongholds of the far right. Sarkozy's speech was part of his presidential-election campaign, wherein he presented the idea of creating such a union as a foreign policy flagship project. The main thrust of the idea was the creation of a new framework for dialogue and cooperation to which only riparian countries were to be invited (Mohsen-Finan, 2008; Soler I Lecha, 2008). Thus Sarkozy was sending three messages: (a) France was to recuperate a leading role in the Mediterranean; (b) previous efforts led by EU institutions had failed, and France knew better how to get things done; and, (c) the Mediterranean Union was the ideal framework to deal with Turkey, with Sarkozy an advocate of that country never becoming a member of the EU. The three elements embraced populist connotations in building on people's fears (Turkey), emotions (France's *grandeur*) and on anti-elitist sentiments (putting the blame on bureaucrats in Brussels). This was consistent with Sarkozy's overall political strategy of federating all of the right-wing elements around him, which ultimately resulted in the consecration of right-wing populist politics in France (Mondon, 2013).

Opposition by Germany and the European Commission, but also Italy and Spain, cut Sarkozy's national initiative down to size and Europeanized it (Balfour, 2009; Barbé, 2009; Gillespie, 2011). The French proposal was endorsed with a change of name ('Union for the Mediterranean' instead of 'Mediterranean Union'), scope (it would also include the European institutions and all EU countries, not only the coastal states) and nature. Although it included a new project-driven institutional setting, it was presented as a new phase of the Barcelona Process instead of as an alternative to it.

However, France's inclination to go it alone in Mediterranean affairs has continued to manifest itself: Sarkozy's leadership in the air strikes against Libya, Hollande's frustrated initiative to launch a military operation against Assad or, more recently, Macron's uncoordinated initiatives are cases in point. They include the support of Haftar in Libya – which goes against the EU's support for United Nations-led mediation efforts, and puts France in direct conflict with Italy – and the launch of the 'Summit of the Two Shores' (Sommet des deux Rives) in Marseilles in June 2019. This summit was neither a vehicle to criticize EU institutions nor was it used for electoral purposes, yet

it echoed some of Sarkozy's ideas – such as reclaiming France's centrality and the conviction that EU Mediterranean countries should have a greater say on this issue than other member states.

French populism has not gained power thus far, but its agenda-setting indirect influence has nevertheless been substantial. Depending on which thick ideologies inform them, populists on the right and left have developed sharply divided foreign policy stances (e.g., on Israel and migration). Macron faces a twin paradox. He stands as a forceful opponent to populist forces, both in France and in Europe, while partially relying on populist organizational principles himself. He portrays himself as a leader committed to European integration, while clinging to the idea of French *grandeur* and putting more effort into developing a strong national policy than into a common European one. The Mediterranean is one of the policy spaces where these contradictions visibly manifest themselves.

### Italy: Populists' paradise

Italy has been described as a 'paradise' and laboratory for populist politics in Europe (Tarchi, 2015). Long before populism appeared elsewhere on the continent it was already well established in Italy. The share of populist parties hovered around 30 per cent from the mid-1990s to the middle of the first decade of the new century, and jumped above 50 per cent in the elections of 2013 (Verbeek & Zaslove, 2016). With over 30 different prime ministers taking office between 1945 and the 1990s, traditional Italian party democracy was not exactly stable before it eventually imploded in the wake of the Tangentopoli scandal of the 1990s. Former prime minister Craxi even had to flee to Tunisia to avoid corruption charges. The stage was set for Berlusconi's first act in 1994–95. After a temporary setback, he returned in 2001 to govern Italy for much of the next decade in coalition with the right-wing populists of the Lega Nord among others.

Focused on his personality and showmanship, under him Forza Italia demonstrated the hallmarks of a populist movement: honest, hard-working people as the imagined 'pure people' who had to fight against an elitist state that was after their taxes, with Berlusconi as the aggrieved-in-chief. Driven by his commercial interests and legal troubles, Berlusconi's market-liberal populism focused on cutting taxes and deregulation while leaving central social programmes intact. He was open to multilateralism, while migration did not loom large as a monothematic focus as compared to how it does under the current right-wing populism of Lega chairman Salvini.

The combination of corruption and inertia under Berlusconi prompted *The Economist* to lead with a cover in 2011 entitled 'The man who screwed an entire country', predicting that his legacy would haunt Italy for a long time to come. However, his foreign policy was largely conventional in content even if

not in style. Compared to Germany and France he was supportive of US foreign policy, including that country's invasion of Iraq. He shifted Italy's traditional pro-Arab stance towards greater friendship with Israel, but also fostered close relations with Turkey – whose possible EU accession he supported. Due to his personalistic style he felt more at ease with strongmen than with politicians in Brussels, where he became a laughing stock. During jovial encounters with Libya's Gaddafi he sought to cement close economic and political ties with Italy's former colony, especially in the strategically important oil and gas business and the containment of migration. In no uncertain terms Berlusconi explained that his deal with Gaddafi was about 'fewer immigrants and more oil' (Tassinari, 2016, p. 128).

Italian populism can be credited with a central role in bringing about an end to the First Republic and the political domination of the Christian Democrats in the post-Second World War decades. Learning effects between populists as well as the adaption of the populist style by mainstream politicians changed Italy's political culture (Verbeek & Zaslove, 2016). Populist rule without a populist movement was the result of such mainstreaming, and somewhat defied theoretical expectations (Tarchi, 2015).

While the political and economic crises of the 1980s brought Forza Italia and the separatist Lega Nord to prominence, the financial crisis beginning in 2008 caused the ascent of the left-leaning (albeit ideologically hard to classify) Five Star Movement (M5S) (Bobba & McDonnell, 2015). It entered an uneasy coalition with a reformed Lega that shed its secessionist position of the 1990s and the 'Nord' in its name under its new chairman Salvini. Now it adopted a pan-Italian agenda that identified migrants rather than southern Italians as the 'other' and opposing pole of the 'people'. Additionally, Salvini directed his ire against Brussels, multinationals and international banks instead of against Rome. A separatist party had become ultranationalist. Salvini even declared that he would be rooting for the Italian national football team in 2014, a first for a Lega leader. Agitation against corrupt elites and playing the one-string banjo of anti-migration rhetoric with singular dedication worked in gradually turning the tide of public opinion: support for Lega surged from below 15 per cent to 30 per cent in 2018 (Boros et al., 2018); in the European elections of 2019 it won 34 per cent of the vote, meanwhile.

Lack of organizational depth and limited charisma on the part of its leadership played against M5S. The xenophobic agitation of Salvini dominated the policies towards the Mediterranean of the short-lived coalition between right-wing and left-leaning populists. His framing of the migration issue in 'clash of civilizations' terms informed much of his politics towards the region, and his (ultimately futile) attempt to form a pan-European populist alliance with Hungary's Orbán among others. His fawning admiration of Putin included an endorsement of Russia's Syria campaign and soliciting of Russian funds. He further aligned Italy with Israel, and argued

for the recognition of Jerusalem as its capital – as he saw the country as an ally against perceived Islamic expansionism.<sup>3</sup> For the same reasons he made an about-turn from the Berlusconi era, arguing against Turkey's accession to the EU.<sup>4</sup> The opposing views of his coalition partner M5S, which in the past has supported the recognition of Palestine as a state and called for an arms embargo against Israel, were barely heard over Salvini's own barrages.

Yet when it comes to Mediterranean affairs, Italy's number one priority is Libya – where its interests diverge from those of France. Rome was reluctant to support Sarkozy's lobbying for intervention in Libya to depose Gaddafi, but ultimately could not stop it. Italy also lamented the French closing of the border in Menton to stop the arrival of irregular migrants in 2011, some of whom had first departed from western Libya.<sup>5</sup> After the fall of Gaddafi, Rome tried to preserve its national interests in the Libyan energy sector. French and Italian companies compete for oil concessions to the extent that the fighting among Libyan militias to control terminals has been described as 'a direct outcome of the French-Italian tensions' (Ilardo, 2018, p. 2). After the collapse of the Libyan transition in 2014 and the formation of separate governments in Tripoli and Benghazi, the French and the Italians found themselves supporting rival Libyan parties and promoting conflicting mediation efforts. This has been an obstacle for the EU when trying to build a more coherent policy in Libya – and, indeed, in the region as a whole.<sup>6</sup> The nadir of French-Italian relations came when the former recalled its ambassador in February 2019 after M5S leader Di Maio had expressed support for the yellow-vest movement and Salvini had accused France of 'stealing wealth' from Africa, singling out Libyan oil resources.<sup>7</sup>

The collapse of the Lega-M5S coalition in September 2019 and the subsequent formation of a new government in partnership with the Italian social democrats might change the tone of Italy's European policy, weaken the links that were previously established with Orbán's Hungary and Putin's Russia, and appease relations with France. The breathless news cycle of the Covid-19 crisis has drowned out the noise of populist rhetoric, its demand for closed borders has become a temporary reality and Salvini's bumbling opposition to early lockdown measures has not appeared indicative of competence. Yet, the economic fallout from the pandemic will provide new opportunities for the Lega to set the agenda from among the ranks of the opposition. As in France, populism can count on powerful trends towards renationalization. The articulation of a coherent Libya policy by the EU appears a distant prospect unless Paris and Rome are able to reach a compromise. Italy is an example of how populists when in power do not necessarily change constants that are rooted in long-standing national interests (e.g., Libya). Their strong personalization of foreign policy making can, however, exacerbate tensions. On the other hand, ideological change from market-liberal to

nationalist populism happening from Berlusconi to Salvini can inform foreign policy shifts (e.g., on Turkey).

### The populist weakening of Spain after the Great Recession

The Great Recession post-2008 affected Spain's role in Mediterranean cooperation twofold: it weakened one of its most vocal advocates and created fertile ground for populist forces, some of which openly questioned Euro-Mediterranean cooperation. Spain has undergone a three-pronged crisis since 2010: economic, political and territorial. Economically, the housing bubble burst in the wake of the global financial crisis while the ensuing debt crisis prompted austerity measures. Politically, corruption scandals and a nationwide protest movement against austerity – the so-called *indignados* – shook the country in 2011. These events led to the fragmentation of a quasi-two-party system and new electoral successes: first for the centre-right Ciudadanos and the left-wing Podemos, and since 2018 also for the right-wing populists of VOX, who represent a political strand against which Spain had previously long proven immune (Alonso & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2015; Simón, 2016). Territorially, the rise of the pro-independence movement in Catalonia since 2012 and the failed attempt to secede with the help of an unconstitutional referendum in 2017 has caused one of the deepest political crises since Spain's transition to democracy in the 1970s.

Governmental instability, economic travails and the territorial conflict have caused inward-looking paralysis in an erstwhile champion of Euro-Mediterranean cooperation. Spain has embraced a 'Europeanized' foreign policy transferring national priorities to the EU level and incorporated EU strategies and instruments in the design and implementation of its national foreign policy (Torreblanca, 2001). Spain was the host of the Barcelona Conference in 1995, and one of the main drivers of the process that led to it (Barbé, 1996; Morillas & Soler I Lecha, 2017). Enthusiasm for Mediterranean cooperation and the Barcelona-based UfM encompassed national, regional and local levels of government alike, beside civil society and business organizations too.

The consolidation of VOX has led to the rise of an agenda-setting anti-migration rhetoric. The Catalan conflict has dominated the agenda of the party even more than migration, and its centralist and populist rhetoric have seeped into the discourse of mainstream parties like PP and Ciudadanos. They have veered to the right while also not putting – as other centrist parties in Western Europe have done with far-right groups – a cordon sanitaire between them and VOX, even cooperating with the latter on the regional and local levels in Andalusia and Madrid. Such collaboration has led to fewer concrete policy measures than VOX would have us believe; the Andalusian regional government even felt compelled to reach out to Morocco out of fear

of a negative economic backlash. Nevertheless, VOX's impact on the public discourse has been substantial.<sup>8</sup> Its leaders have borrowed from Trump's rhetoric on walls, migration and sovereignty, and have thrown in Spain-specific allusions to the medieval Reconquista for good measure. In one of its first – albeit ultimately inconsequential – legislative initiatives, VOX advocated for building a higher wall at Ceuta and Melilla on the border with Morocco, and warned of a 'migratory invasion'.<sup>9</sup> VOX managed to win the only seat for Ceuta in the national elections of 2019. As a response to the Covid-19 health crisis, the party proposed that irregular migrants should not be given access to the public health system and its Ceuta member of parliament questioned Spanish support offered to Morocco and other SEM countries in dealing with the effects of the pandemic.<sup>10</sup> VOX frames Muslims as a culturally incompatible 'other', and contrasts them unfavourably with migrants from Latin America who are presented as descendants of fraternal nations.<sup>11</sup>

Like other right-wing populist movements, VOX sees Israel as an ally in the fight against terrorism, Islamism and instability in the Middle East.<sup>12</sup> The mastermind of VOX's international outreach programme, Bardají, is the director of the Friends of Israel Initiative and has aligned his party with former Trump advisor Bannon's efforts to create a pan-European right-wing populist platform. VOX is challenging the long-standing Spanish consensus on European integration, now mocking the Brussels bureaucracy and its allegedly soft stance on migration instead. VOX has argued that multilateralism is dysfunctional, and that Spain should reinforce bilateral relations with specific member states such as Orbán's Hungary and the Poland of Kaczyński's Law and Justice Party.<sup>13</sup> VOX has thus echoed the discourse of a 'Europe of fatherlands' that can be found circulating among other right-wing populists on the continent.

Podemos has been classified as inclusionary populist due to its anti-elitist discourse and the personalistic nature of its leadership (Font et al., 2019). After successful coalition negotiations with the Socialists (PSOE), it became a governing party in 2020. Its criticism of the EU has been mild and constructive in comparison to VOX, focusing on the socio-economic impact of stabilization policies rather than questioning European integration and multilateralism per se. It has castigated the EU for a perceived neoliberal agenda and the imposition of austerity policies that are only in the interest of economically powerful member states such as Germany. Podemos has put forward a European agenda based on democratic reform and transparency, open-border regimes and pacifistic initiatives, such as its seven-point plan to fight ISIS by undermining its sources of finance and by supporting democracy and civil society in the Arab world.<sup>14</sup>

However, neither the Mediterranean nor the Middle East stand out as priorities for Podemos. EU integration, Latin America and the criticism of

the US's hegemonic role are far more prominent issues (Balfour et al., 2019, pp. 44–45). The exception is migration. Podemos and its sister parties in Andalusia and Catalonia have been vocal in criticizing European migration policies such as the EU–Turkey deal or national-level decisions by Italy and Spain to hamper non-governmental organizations rescuing migrants and refugees at sea. The anti-capitalist current within the party has shown sympathy for Russia and its intervention in Syria, but is arguably less unanimous in that regard than France Untamed.<sup>15</sup> In contrast to VOX, the party has been highly critical of Israel, has supported the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement and has called for the recognition of Palestine as a state. The number of municipalities that have passed BDS-supporting resolutions in Spain is the highest in the Western world – among them Valencia, the third-largest city. On the initiative of Podemos, subsidiary València en Comú declared itself ‘an Israeli apartheid-free zone’, with Podemos leader Iglesias calling Israel a ‘criminal regime’.<sup>16</sup>

Finally, the territorial crisis in Catalonia has been fertile ground for populist politics affecting Spain's ability to revive Euro-Mediterranean cooperation. Parts of the Catalan independence movement framed the territorial conflict in typical populist fashion. This included the evocation of ‘the people’ against corrupt elites in Madrid, the construction of a nationalist us versus them logic, messages based on misleading statistics and an anti-institutional and anti-pluralist drive during a plebiscitary referendum campaign (Ruiz Casado 2019; Casals, 2015; Heinisch et al., 2018). Others have criticized this interpretation, arguing that the Catalan independence movement resembles a hybrid form of democratic bottom-up populism in the tradition of Laclau, one that lacks the leader-centric top-down focus of other populist movements (Gamper Sachse, 2018).

Setting aside discussions over the nature of this movement, the Catalan conflict was a major enabler of VOX's ascent. Catalan independence parties and VOX have been in a mutually reinforcing relationship. VOX took over the role of *acusación popular* during the trial of Catalan independence leaders, while Catalan nationalists referenced the party to underscore their claim of continuities between Franco fascism and the Spanish state in mobilizing their constituencies. As political coordination and trust between the federal and regional levels of government are thoroughly disturbed in Catalonia, the ability to put forward Mediterranean initiatives out of the very city that gave the Barcelona Process its name is compromised. The national government stopped inviting the regional one and its president to UfM meetings as it feared they would use the summit for political agitation, while the ‘Mediterranean Strategy’ of the Catalan government has little chance to gain traction without cooperation and endorsement from Madrid. Similarly, the attempt by the mayor of Barcelona, Colau, to seize the 25th anniversary of the Barcelona Process as an opportunity to revive Euro-Mediterranean

relations could also fall hostage to these political rivalries.<sup>17</sup> The Spanish case illustrates how two mutually exclusive populisms can affect the interplay of various levels of government, thus compromising the ability to shape multi-lateral Mediterranean policymaking as proactively as in the past.

### **New players: Hungary and the other Visegrad 4 states**

Populism has also affected stances towards Mediterranean affairs in a number of non-Mediterranean EU countries. With Germany, the emergence of the phenomenon weakened an old champion of Mediterranean multilateralism with the right-wing Alternative for Germany (AfD) increasingly influencing the political agenda in the wake of the refugee crisis of 2015. The UK's Mediterranean role has been left in limbo in the wake of the Brexit campaign whose anti-elitist, anti-migration and nationalistic rhetoric was reminiscent of populist movements elsewhere. In this context, Hungary and other Visegrad 4 states seem to be a counterintuitive choice of case. They are far away from the Mediterranean. Unlike Germany, they have not played a prominent role in the Barcelona Process and the Europeanization of the UfM. Unlike the UK meanwhile, they do not have sovereign interests in the Mediterranean – such as Gibraltar and the British military bases on Cyprus.

However, populists actually govern in Hungary and other Visegrad 4 states and influence foreign policy directly. They are likely more durable than populists elsewhere as well, because the reliance of populism on the direct appeal to unorganized followers means that its longevity depends on winning and keeping power; otherwise, it tends to fizzle out. The role of Eastern European countries in Mediterranean affairs has changed substantially as a result of populism. They used to be bystanders (Schumacher, 2011); now they have turned into veto players, taking active positions in Mediterranean affairs.

The migration issue and related civilizational tropes overshadow much of the Eastern European populists' engagement with the region, with real-world consequences for Euro-Mediterranean politics. Implementing common European policies has become increasingly difficult. Hungary and Poland opposed the idea of compulsory quotas for resettled refugees as well as multilateral agendas such as the UN's Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration. The most visible example of discord was the inability to adopt joint conclusions in the Euro-Arab ministerial meeting that took place on 4 February 2019. Hungary opposed its adoption because of the way it dealt with migration as a shared challenge and responsibility. The migration issue also affects relations with specific countries in the SEM region, most notably Israel and Turkey. Several Eastern European governments have come out strongly in favour of Israel in intra-EU discussions or in the UN General Assembly. Countries such as Hungary and Romania have pondered moving



their embassies from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, while Budapest blocked an EU statement condemning the US shift on Israeli settlements in occupied Palestinian territories.<sup>18</sup>

Populist politicians from Eastern Europe – where, even more than in Italy, personalization plays into foreign policy making – see themselves as caught up in an epic clash of civilizations with the Muslim world. In this they view Israel as a natural ally, even though some of them – most notably Hungary – engage in virulent anti-Semitic propaganda at home for domestic audiences. For Israel, this unsavoury cooperation is a deliberate strategy to break EU consensus on issues that the former regards as anathema, such as rapprochement with Iran, opposition to the expansion of settlements and insistence on the status of Palestinian lands as occupied territories under international law (Molnár, 2019; Pardo & Gordon, 2018). Israel is facing what Navon has termed a ‘European dilemma’, in which it has to choose between embracing pro-Israel nationalist forces in the EU despite their anti-Semitic past and rhetoric or faithfully sticking with the advocates of the liberal order even if they are becoming increasingly critical of Israel’s policies (Navon, 2018).

The migration issue has also prompted populist politicians in Eastern Europe to take moderate views on Erdogan, who they see as an important cooperation partner to block flows of people. This marks a major difference to far-right populists in Western Europe. Once more Orbán has taken the lead here. He has openly expressed sympathy for Erdogan, while Hungary was instrumental in toning down the EU Council’s statement criticizing Turkey’s incursion into Syria.<sup>19</sup> Hungary also called on the EU in the Foreign Affairs Council meeting of October 2018 to stop funding NGOs that it said undermine the sovereignty of SEM countries such as Egypt and Israel.<sup>20</sup> Right-wing exclusionary populism in Eastern Europe thus undercuts multilateralism, as well as the EU’s soft-power appeal and indeed credibility when criticizing the shrinking space for civil society in the SEM.

## Conclusion

A quarter of a century after the launch of the Barcelona Process, multilateral cooperation in the Mediterranean is facing a number of significant challenges. It has been undermined by a preference for bilateralism and pre-existing renationalization trends that have been amplified by the rise of populism, especially right-wing populism. The latter’s capacity to win power and its indirect influence on mainstream parties, as well as its monothematic focus on migration and ‘clash of civilizations’ narratives, have far-reaching implications for relations across the Mediterranean divide. In comparison, the three other kinds of populism are less consequential. Market-liberal populism of the Berlusconi kind is on the decline. Left-wing populism carries less votes, while its rhetoric on Mediterranean affairs is less divisive and agenda-setting –

focussing instead on relative openness to migration, the fighting of corruption and on arms control. Regional populism only plays a role in Spain nowadays, after the nationalist turn of the Lega under Salvini in Italy.

Three avenues of influence-making can be observed: (a) direct involvement in government (e.g., Hungary, Italy); (b) agenda-setting among mainstream parties (all four of the cases studied in this article); and, (c) disturbed cooperation between national and regional levels of government that leads to inward-looking paralysis, as the case of the Catalanian independence issue in Spain has demonstrated.

Our analysis confirms some of the findings of the emerging literature on the impact of populism on foreign policy making. First, the thick ideologies from which populists borrow matter. On Israel and Palestine there is a sharp divide between left-wing and right-wing populists, with the former taking up Palestinian causes and the latter supporting Israel. While the Arab–Israeli conflict has lost its centrality in the regional politics of the Middle East, it still maintains it in the related populist discourses in Europe. Within their ‘clash of civilizations’ narrative, right-wing populists see Israel as an ally in stemming perceived Islamic expansionism. This even applies to populists who have extensively engaged in anti-Semitic propaganda at home, such as Orbán. The other side of this particular coin is demonstrable reticence and animosity towards Muslim countries. Turkey in particular is singled out (with the partial exception of by Hungary). Geographic proximity and joint membership in international organizations offer avenues for politicization. Turkey’s NATO membership is questioned, and its EU accession process opposed. In Italy, the anti-Turkish focus emerged with the shift from market-liberal populism under Berlusconi to nationalist populism under Salvini. The populist Erdogan administration in turn feeds on these resentments, and repays them in kind by fostering a confrontational civilizational discourse on the West that has influenced Turkish foreign policy.

Second, established national interests and the weight of institutions mediate the impact of populism and can form a counterbalance to the focus on migration emanating originally from domestic politics. Aggressive rhetoric and agenda-setting discourses aside, populists have not changed the constants of foreign policy that pertain to long-standing national interests in the fields of energy and economic cooperation when in power (e.g., in Italy). The thrust of populists is also mostly anti-interventionist; in principle on the left, more selectively on the right. However, the Russian intervention in Syria has met with considerable sympathy among some parties (e.g., NR in France, Italy’s Lega, Orbán in Hungary and even the left-wing populist France Untamed), underscoring the close political and sometimes financial relations between right-wing populists and Russia. Third, when in power the personalization of foreign policy making under populist governments can, however, lead to a relative emasculation of the diplomacy-making bureaucracy, and

inflammatory announcements can exacerbate existing tensions (e.g., between France and Italy). Such personalization of executive power in the hands of a leader at the expense of allies has been on the rise across various regime types, and correlates with negative policy results (Kendall-Taylor et al., 2017).

Beside these three thematic lines of inquiry, future research could also shed further light on the role of non-Mediterranean countries in Mediterranean affairs and the possible proliferation of populist phenomena in SEM countries that are not authoritarian (e.g., Tunisia). It is unclear whether the UK will remain a member of the UfM after Brexit, and whether its search for alternative trade partners might prompt it to adopt a more lenient stance towards authoritarian governments in the region. As populism in Eastern Europe is firmly entrenched, greater electoral success among populist parties in Western Europe could further weaken multilateralism in the Mediterranean and throw a spanner into the works in joint EU foreign policy making vis-à-vis areas such as migration and Israel's possible annexation of West Bank territory. It could lead to increased conflict between populists' diverging national objectives. However, the opposite might be just as likely: a transnational diffusion of ideas and strategies among populist forces. It could lead to a horizontal Europeanization of populists, providing firmer roots to narratives that question the idea of multilateral cooperation in the Mediterranean in principle – including the use of Euroscepticism as a foreign policy tool by non-EU countries such as Israel, Russia, Turkey and the UK.

## Notes

1. Bilateralism and north-south asymmetry in the Mediterranean appear, of course, less of an aberration if one goes further back in time to the Italian and French Mediterraneanism of the 1920s and 1930s interwar period that took such asymmetry as a given in its ideational construct of the Mediterranean – a re-established Roman Lake in the vein of the Pirenne thesis (Frank, 1993; Gillette, 2002; Harris, 2005; Silverstein, 2004).
2. Majed Nehme, 'On eve of elections, Macron seeks "Republican Reconquest" to counter "Islamist separatism"', *The Arab Weekly*, 23 February 2020, <https://theArabweekly.com/eve-elections-macron-seeks-republican-reconquest-counter-islamist-separatism>.
3. 'Netanyahu: Matteo Salvini is "great friend of Israel"', *The Jerusalem Post*, 12 December 2018, <https://www.jpost.com/Breaking-News/Netanyahu-Stopping-Hezbollah-is-responsibility-of-international-community-574129>.
4. 'Cancel process for Turkey's EU accession – Salvini', *ANSA*, 8 April 2019, [http://www.ansa.it/english/news/2019/04/08/cancel-process-for-turkeys-eu-accession-salvini\\_6eedbd43-c1b7-42c0-90ee-eefea0048720.html](http://www.ansa.it/english/news/2019/04/08/cancel-process-for-turkeys-eu-accession-salvini_6eedbd43-c1b7-42c0-90ee-eefea0048720.html).
5. 'Italy angry as France blocks migrant trains', *Al Jazeera*, 17 April 2011, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/europe/2011/04/201141716404424207.html>.

6. Interview with a senior member of the European External Action Service (EEAS), Brussels, 26 July 2019.
7. 'Accusant l'Italie d'«ingérences», la France rappelle son ambassadeur', *Libération*, 7 February 2019, [https://www.liberation.fr/france/2019/02/07/accusant-l-italie-d-ingerences-la-france-rappelle-son-ambassadeur\\_1707950](https://www.liberation.fr/france/2019/02/07/accusant-l-italie-d-ingerences-la-france-rappelle-son-ambassadeur_1707950); Miles Johnson, 'Matteo Salvini accuses France of "stealing" Africa's wealth', *Financial Times*, 22 January 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/ebe797c0-1e2f-11e9-b2f7-97e4dbd3580d>.
8. Isabel Morillo, 'Las "conquistas" de Vox en inmigración: cambios en el discurso, no en las políticas', *El Confidencial*, 4 November 2019, [https://www.elconfidencial.com/espana/andalucia/2019-11-04/conquistas-vox-inmigracion-cambios-discurso-politicas\\_2312932/](https://www.elconfidencial.com/espana/andalucia/2019-11-04/conquistas-vox-inmigracion-cambios-discurso-politicas_2312932/); Antonio R. Vega, 'Marruecos, un país "amigo" de la Junta de Andalucía y nueva meca de los negocios', *ABC*, 23 June 2019, [https://sevilla.abc.es/andalucia/sevi-marruecos-pais-amigo-junta-andalucia-y-nueva-meca-negocios-201906230039\\_noticia.html?ref=https:%2F%2Fwww.google.es%2F](https://sevilla.abc.es/andalucia/sevi-marruecos-pais-amigo-junta-andalucia-y-nueva-meca-negocios-201906230039_noticia.html?ref=https:%2F%2Fwww.google.es%2F)
9. 'Vox propone en el Congreso levantar un muro en Ceuta y Melilla contra 'la invasión migratoria'', *El Mundo*, 12 September 2019, <https://www.elmundo.es/espana/2019/09/12/5d7a192ffc6c83426d8b4646.html>.
10. 'Vox propone que los inmigrantes irregulares paguen por la atención médica durante la alarma', *La Vanguardia*, 25 March 2020, <https://www.lavanguardia.com/politica/20200325/4890147593/vox-inmigrantes-irregulares-paguen-atencion-medica-coronavirus.html>; 'Vox preguntará al Gobierno por las ayudas a Marruecos para luchar contra el coronavirus', *El Faro de Ceuta*, 6 April 2020, <https://elfarodeceuta.es/vox-gobierno-ayudas-marruecos/>.
11. The leader of this party raised this issue during the electoral debate on 4 November 2019. This was not the first time; see, for instance, 'Vox quiere privilegiar la inmigración procedente de América Latina', *La Vanguardia*, 29 March 2019, <https://www.lavanguardia.com/politica/20190329/461317050343/vox-santiago-abascal-inmigracion.html>.
12. See, for instance, the decalogue published by this party entitled 'Vox, Israel and the Middle East'. Available in Spanish: <https://www.voxespana.es/noticias/vox-israel-y-oriente-medio-20160601>.
13. Point raised by VOX leader Abascal in the electoral debate on 4 November 2019. VOX preferred to integrate with the European Conservatives and Reformists Party in the European Parliament alongside the Polish Law and Justice Party, instead of opting for the far-right Europe of Nations and Freedom led by the French RN and the Lega.
14. See, for instance, the 2015 document entitled 'Seven urgent measures to combat the so-called Islamic State', <https://podemos.info/seven-urgent-measures-to-combat-the-so-called-islamic-state/>.
15. Interview with a member of Podemos, Barcelona, 28 November 2019.
16. 'Spain: Valencia Endorses Pro-Palestinian BDS as Podemos Leader Calls Israel 'Criminal Country'', *Telesur*, 10 June 2018, <https://www.telesurenglish.net/news/Spain-Valencia-Endoses-Pro-Palestinian-BDS-as-Podemos-Leader-Calls-Israel-Criminal-Country-20180610-0008.html>; Daniella Levy, 'Spain wants to recognize Palestine? Let's recognize Catalonia', *Times of Israel*, 16 September 2018, <https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/spain-wants-to-recognize-palestine-lets-recognize-catalonia/>.
17. UFM Secretariat, 'Meeting with Ada Colau: UfM paving the way to the 25th anniversary of the Barcelona Process', 19 November 2019, <https://ufmsecretar>

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19. 'Erdogan thanks Orbán for 'support at the international stage' *Euractiv*, 15 October 2019, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/justice-home-affairs/news/erdogan-thanks-Orbán-for-support-at-the-international-stage/>.
20. Gregori Gotev, 'Hungary takes fight against NGOs to EU level', *Euractiv*, 16 October 2018, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/future-eu/news/hungary-takes-its-fight-against-ngos-to-an-eu-level/>.

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## ORCID

Eckart Woertz  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9526-2668>

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