

Populists in the Shadow of Unanimity: Contestation of EU Foreign and Security Policy

Ana E. Juncos ¹  and Karolina Pomorska ² 

¹ School of Sociology, Politics and International Studies, University of Bristol, UK

² Institute of Political Science, Leiden University, The Netherlands

Correspondence: Ana E. Juncos (a.e.juncos@bristol.ac.uk)

Submitted: 23 January 2024 **Accepted:** 15 April 2024 **Published:** 9 September 2024

Issue: This article is part of the issue “Unpolitics: The Role of Populist Governments in EU Decision-Making” edited by Ariadna Ripoll Servent (University of Salzburg) and Natascha Zaun (Leuphana University of Lüneburg), fully open access at <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.i381>

Abstract

The arrival of populist political parties to power in several member states and the increasing politicisation of EU foreign policy has made intra-European consensus more difficult to reach in the past decade. This article examines the impact of populist contestation on EU foreign policy negotiations in the Council, a policy area governed by unanimity. This decision-making mode makes the policy especially vulnerable to the impact of contestation and, at the same time, gives power to those willing to use their veto. Drawing on the idea of unpopulist politics, this study shows how Hungary and, to a lesser degree, Poland have contested the established formal and informal norms (such as consensus-building or reflex coordination) through discursive and behavioural non-compliance. The “domestication” of EU foreign policy has meant that, in general, populists show less willingness to compromise and resort to non-decisions to demonstrate the EU’s weakness. However, there are exceptions, and it is possible to see variations in populist strategies when faced with similar challenges, as exemplified by the EU’s response to Russia’s war in Ukraine. By testing the scope conditions under which unpolitics might be activated, we show that the same crisis situation did not lead to a uniform response amongst populist governments. This is because both the nature of the crisis and perceptions of risk/gain were understood differently (and actively constructed as such) by populists in power. This finding emphasises the social, relational, and multi-level nature of unpolitics as a phenomenon.

Keywords

Common Foreign and Security Policy; EU; politicisation; populism; unpolitics

1. Introduction

The foreign and security policies of the EU were, for some time, excluded from scholarly debates on the rising influence of populism within the EU. This was because, generally speaking, foreign policy tends to be characterised by continuity despite changes in government. In the case of countries such as Poland, for instance, a cross-party consensus had existed on these policies since the early 1990s. In other cases, populist parties seemed not overly concerned with foreign policy, focusing instead on matters relating to migration and identity politics. However, even in the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), research has shown increased politicisation, contestation, and more difficulties in reaching a consensus (Biedenkopf et al., 2021; Hackenesch et al., 2021; Petri et al., 2020). This has been partly attributed to the crisis of the liberal international order (Zürn, 2019) and the rise of populists in power in several EU member states (Börzel & Zürn, 2021). Recent discussions over the introduction of a qualified majority voting (QMV) in this policy domain are partly a result of the frustration with countries governed by populists blocking consensus and contesting established constitutive and procedural norms (Pomorska & Wessel, 2021).

“Unpolitics” has been described as a destructive approach to politics that representatives of populist governments use to undermine EU policy-making (Taggart, 2018; Zaun & Ripoll Servent, 2023). This article contributes to the debate about the nature and impact of unpolitics by focusing on EU foreign and security policies as a case study. In so doing, we seek to determine whether it is possible to see the use of unpolitics across different policy areas and the conditions that enable its use by populists in power. We put to the test the three hypotheses linked to unpolitics and the expected behaviour of populist governments in EU negotiations: (a) the rejection of formal and informal norms in the Council, (b) the rejection of compromise and preference for maximalist positions, and (c) the use of non-decisions to mobilise against the EU. Compared with other policy studies on this thematic issue, we expect that foreign policy is especially vulnerable to unpopulist behaviour because of the unanimity rule and the fact that populist governments hold veto powers. While foreign policy has never been high on the populist agenda, we suggest in this article that the arrival of populist parties to power in several EU member states has recently led to a “domestication” of foreign policy, with foreign policy goals increasingly subjected to domestic and party goals. This domestication of EU foreign policy has meant that populist governments are more likely to disregard the established informal procedural norms, use non-decisions as a negotiating strategy, and show less willingness to compromise.

Although we observe many similarities in populists’ behaviour within the Council in the area of foreign policy, we also see differences. To illustrate this, we consider the EU’s response to Russia’s aggression against Ukraine to show how the same crisis can be differently constructed for the domestic audience and, consequently, how the populist governments of Hungary and Poland acted differently within the Council. Whereas Poland, largely due to its security concerns and perceived high risk, remained constructive, Hungary repeatedly threatened to use its veto to block agreements.

We first discuss the specific features of foreign policy and how this matters for the likelihood of unpolitics impacting EU policy-making. In this regard, we discuss each of the three hypotheses and then continue by delving into the empirical evidence to determine the extent to which we can observe instances of unpolitics in this policy area. Finally, we focus on the case study of the EU’s reaction to the Russian aggression against Ukraine and the divergent behaviour of the governments of Poland and Hungary. Our empirical evidence comes from 40 in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted with national representatives in the Council

and officials working for the European External Action Service who were involved in CFSP negotiations either by attending or chairing the working groups or committees. The interviews used a semi-structured questionnaire, lasted an average of one hour, and were coded to maintain the interviewees' anonymity.

2. Unpolitics, Populist Foreign Policy, and EU Policy-Making

Several characteristics of foreign policy are relevant to this article and to comparisons with other policies analysed in this issue. Firstly, unlike some other policies covered in this thematic issue, in our case, negotiations do not take place under the “shadow of the QMV,” but under the “shadow of the veto.” This makes the policy highly vulnerable to the disruption caused by populists. Secondly, as explained in the editorial of this thematic issue (Ripoll Servent & Zaun, 2024), the extent to which populist governments employ the strategies of unpolitics is facilitated by a crisis environment, which makes politicisation and mobilising domestic audiences easier. Foreign policy is often described as crisis-driven, so there are plenty of opportunities for populist parties to politicise these, though most of the time, foreign policy tends to be characterised by continuity and cross-party consensus. However, crises in the EU's neighbourhood have become more frequent and intense in the past decade, so this might provide a fertile ground for populist governments to politicise foreign policy, including at the EU level. Yet not all crises are the same, and we argue in this article that the type of crisis and how populists construct it at home matters in their response and contestation in Brussels. Thirdly, foreign policy is usually (with exceptions) not very high on the populist's agenda (Chryssogelos, 2021; Mudde, 2016). This has not diminished opportunities for populists to make instrumental use of foreign policy or to politicise foreign policy issues. In fact, an issue that unifies populist parties and governments is their anti-foe mentality and the use of foreign policy and external threats to mobilise supporters at home (Destradi et al., 2022). Therefore, we argue that foreign policy is increasingly subjected to domestication, with an almost exclusive focus on domestic audiences. In other words, in countries governed by populist parties, foreign and security policy becomes disproportionately subjected to the goals of internal or even party politics. As a result, negotiations in Brussels have become more politicised and more public and incentives to find consensus and a compromise at the EU level have decreased as foreign policy is seen as another way for the party to defend the sovereignty of the “people” vis-à-vis undemocratic international bureaucracies.

Though foreign policy could be generally seen as an area of high gain and low risk and consequently very prone target of unpolitics (see Ripoll Servent & Zaun, 2024), we would like to nuance this picture and emphasise that in some situations, such as in the face of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, the costs of non-decision may be very high. This has proven to be the case for countries bordering Russia, for whom national security is at stake. Therefore, we would argue that foreign policy issues may be classified across the whole spectrum, i.e., from low to very high risk, depending on how the crisis is perceived and constructed by populist governments. When the risk is perceived as high, we would see less behaviour linked to unpolitics and the inverse. To investigate this difference, we have included in this article the case of Russia's aggression on Ukraine and we examine responses to this crisis by different populist governments, namely Hungary and Poland.

The editorial of this thematic issue lays out three hypotheses regarding how populist governments will likely use unpolitics in Council decision-making. We consider each of them in turn, how they apply in the specific context of the CFSP, and our expectations regarding the outcomes.

H1: Populist governments are more likely to break formal and informal policy-making rules and do so explicitly (reject norms).

We expect that this hypothesis will be confirmed by the analysis of EU foreign and security policy. This is because there is a clash between some of the procedural rules underpinning CFSP policy-making in the Council and the norms embedded into the populist ideology. CFSP has historically developed in a very informal manner and in an atmosphere of relative secrecy and insulation from public debate, which allowed for a high level of flexibility. The CFSP has also developed a well-defined set of policy-making practices or procedural norms, defined as rules of appropriate behaviour an individual should adopt within a particular group in a particular situation (Juncos & Pomorska, 2006). These norms are well documented in the academic literature (see Juncos & Pomorska, 2006, 2008, 2021; Michalski & Danielson, 2019; Smith, 2004; Tonra, 2001) and include coordination reflex, consensus-building, respect for the so-called “agreed language,” retaining horizontal and vertical consistency and avoiding isolation within the group. The literature also shows that, in general, the norms have been followed by member states’ diplomats, which made agreements possible in this policy. However, because populists prioritise domestic over foreign policy and emphasise the defence of the people from “unaccountable” supranational institutions, we expect that some of the procedural norms will be questioned and undermined, including the need to consult with others prior to negotiations, consensus-building, and avoiding isolation. This differs from non-populist governments, which comply with the norms as documented in the literature.

An additional argument that supports this expectation is that as a result of the anti-elitism embedded into the populist ideology (Stanley, 2008, p. 101), populist governments tend to distrust experts (Lequesne, 2021) and put greater emphasis on officials’ loyalty to the party. This general mistrust towards the elite, in turn, may manifest in more frequent rotation from postings abroad, including in the case of EU positions, and a higher level of clientelism when it comes to distributing posts in ministries of foreign affairs and defence. It might also result in a reduction of the leeway of experts negotiating in these domains. This has often led to substantial changes in diplomatic staff, such as in the case of the permanent representations to the EU.

H2: Populist governments are less likely to compromise than mainstream governments and stick to their maximum positions (reject compromise).

Given the fact that unanimity is the prevailing formal procedure in CFSP, compromise (or consensus-building) has become one of the core norms in CFSP decision-making. In this sense, it provides a different institutional set-up from many other policies analysed in this thematic issue. This explains how 27 member states, with very different foreign policy interests and strategic cultures, have managed to avoid paralysis in the past. Consensus-building has been mentioned as a key practice underpinning European foreign policy negotiations since its establishment in the 1970s. According to Nuttall (1992, p. 12), the European Political Cooperation “[did] not operate under the perpetual threat of veto,” but instead, participants would make “genuine efforts to reach a positive outcome.” Later research on the Committee of Permanent Representatives (Lewis, 2008), the Political and Security Committee (Howorth, 2010; Juncos & Reynolds, 2007; Maurer & Wright, 2021), and other CFSP committees (Cross, 2010; Juncos & Pomorska, 2006, 2021) confirmed that consensus-building, rather than hard-bargaining was the predominant behaviour in CFSP negotiations. Sticking to maximum positions is generally perceived as unhelpful “trouble-making” and is likely to be followed by peer pressure from the other member states. Even if the positions of

(non-populist) governments differ from the consensus, in foreign policy there would traditionally be a strong pressure to move from the radical position towards the common ground. Diplomats based in Brussels often re-negotiate their mandates with their capitals in such circumstances, acting as “change agents.” If they need to retain their position, it is done only exceptionally. National diplomats will ensure their position is well-explained and understood by others.

However, the literature on populist foreign policy has suggested that populists in power often seek to break with long-established foreign policy principles and partnerships, and that they are less likely to adopt compromising attitudes on foreign policy when compared to non-populist governments (Destradi et al., 2022). While acknowledging that these assumptions are still very preliminary and need further testing, they align with the second hypothesis in that we should expect unpolitics to result in less cooperative attitudes towards negotiation compromises. This is further strengthened by the perception of the EU as an arena where national interests clash. While valuing consensus and trying to keep everyone on board have often been considered traits of a successful European-oriented negotiator in the CFSP, national diplomats representing countries governed by populist governments are now expected to act as “national heroes” in Brussels, even if this means isolation or no agreements at the end of the day. Therefore, in our case, this hypothesis is very closely linked to the previous one (i.e., the rejection of procedural norms), and we expect it to be confirmed.

H3: Populist governments tend to use non-decisions by the EU strategically to show that the EU is weak and useless (reject solutions).

As support for European integration in the area of foreign and security policy consistently scores high among the citizens of the EU, with overall 77% support for a common European defence policy across the Union (European Union, 2022), contestation in this policy area may bring relatively lower advantages vis-à-vis domestic audiences compared to other policy issues (e.g., migration policy). As mentioned previously, this is also one of the reasons that this policy tends to be, in general, not among the priorities of populist governments (Chryssogelos, 2021). For this reason, we could expect less strategic use of non-decisions than in other areas. Having said that, an issue that unifies populist parties and governments is their anti-foe mentality and the instrumental use of foreign policy to mobilise domestic audiences, which we refer to as domestication (see Destradi et al., 2022). In addition, by emphasising that the EU is unable to deal with crises, populist governments can show their capacity to solve problems as the true representatives of the people in contrast to the international elites. In this way, they strive to legitimise their own domestic actions by keeping the EU in a “permanent state of disequilibrium” (Hodson & Puetter, 2019; Kelemen, 2020). While the phenomenon of blaming Brussels for certain actions or non-action has been known to apply in the case of non-populist governments, it has usually been done as an excuse for the government’s failures. In the case of populists, as explained in the editorial of this thematic issue (Ripoll Servent & Zaun, 2024), drawing attention to the EU’s weaknesses presents an opportunity to further their Eurosceptic and anti-elitist agendas and to keep the EU in a permanent state of disequilibrium (Hodson & Puetter, 2019; Ripoll Servent & Zaun, 2024).

As mentioned above, when discussing the characteristics of foreign policy, the perceived risk of non-decision will vary depending on the issue. While blocking the signing of a new agreement or a statement condemning China’s violations of human rights may be considered as low risk, any non-action in the case of Russia’s invasion

Table 1. Unpolitics expectations in the case of CFSP negotiations.

<p>H1: Populist governments are more likely to break formal and informal policy-making rules and do so explicitly (reject norms).</p>	<p>To be confirmed: Domestication of foreign policy and populist foreign policy (anti-pluralism and anti-elitism) work against informal procedural rules in CFSP negotiations and expert role of national diplomats.</p>
<p>H2: Populist governments are less likely to compromise than mainstream governments and stick to their maximum positions (reject compromise).</p>	<p>To be confirmed: Populist foreign policy (sceptical of international cooperation, supranationalism, and anti-foe mentality), rejection of procedural norms (consensus-building) + shadow of the veto = likelihood of populist governments less likely to compromise.</p>
<p>H3: Populist governments tend to use non-decisions by the EU strategically to show that the EU is weak and useless (reject solutions).</p>	<p>To be partially confirmed: Euroscepticism and conservatism of far-right populist foreign policy; Use of non-decisions likely where decisions touch upon migration or gender issues or where costs of non-decision are low.</p>

of Ukraine may be seen as very high risk, especially in bordering countries. We also expect greater contestation of foreign policy issues that relate to issues that are high on the populist agenda, such as reproductive rights or immigration. Therefore, we expect partial confirmation of this third hypothesis, depending on the issue. Having laid out our expectations (see Table 1), in Section 3, we turn to our empirical evidence to examine each of the hypotheses in turn.

3. Populists and CFSP Negotiations in the Council: A Case of Unpolitics?

3.1. Non-Compliance With Formal and Informal Rules

After populists came to power in countries such as Hungary and Poland, one of the first observable impacts of populist foreign policy was on staffing policies and, in particular, the recall of senior diplomats based at the permanent representations in Brussels to be replaced with loyal officials (“Ambasador przy Unii Europejskiej,” 2016; Müller & Gazsi, 2023; Visnovitz & Jenne, 2021; “Zmiany personalne w MSZ,” 2016). This policy removed those diplomats who had already been socialised into the informal norms of policy-making and negotiations and replaced them with those loyal to the government and aware of the roles that populist parties expected them to play (Interview 29 and 25; Lequesne, 2021). Another notable change has been the increasing centralisation of decision-making, in line with populist mistrust towards elites (Interviews 17, 21, 23, and 30).

As a result of these changes, national diplomats in Brussels have less room for manoeuvre to work on compromises. This lack of flexibility and the more hierarchical and centralised policy-making process has, in turn, affected the reputation of experts from countries such as Hungary and Poland and undermined trust from other colleagues within the group, impacting negotiation dynamics. Reflecting on the impact this had on the ability of Poland to negotiate effectively in Brussels, a diplomat stated: “Poland is no longer the attractive nucleus that grouped together [in the past] some member states. Now, we still have some ability to form coalitions, but it is ‘dry’ and not making too much noise” (Interview 18). Another Polish diplomat mentioned that Poland’s declining reputation undermined his ability to form coalitions due to the rule of law

issues: “It does matter. It has its consequences, maybe not so much in formal settings but rather in informal ones” (Interview 20). It was also noted that although there was clear evidence of such change in behaviour at the working group level, this change was even more pronounced at higher levels, i.e., the Committee of Permanent Representatives and the Foreign Affairs Council (Interviews 23, 24, 33, and 34).

As mentioned earlier, CFSP procedural norms are routinely observed in negotiations to facilitate compromise in a context where the shadow of the veto is always present. However, representatives from countries with populist governments, namely those from Hungary and Poland, were more prone to break those informal rules. For instance, recalling incidents where the consensus-building norm had not been respected, some representatives summed up their frustration as: “It is impossible to come up with a common position!” (Interview 37). Other representatives saw this kind of behaviour as a clear breach of the code of conduct: “What we don’t like is [when] a member state comes and blocks [the decisions] for a domestic agenda, and it happens. If you have a strong national interest, then defend it” (Interview 22).

Interviewees were not only frustrated with the blocking of particular decisions but with the fact that the usual “way of doing things” was not being respected; in other words, procedural norms themselves became the object of contestation. For instance, expressing strong national positions within the Council or even threatening to veto decisions was now seen by populist governments not as a last resort or something to be avoided but as a show of strength (Interview 19). Representatives from populist governments were criticised for not following this code of conduct, particularly in the following instances: (a) when national diplomats challenged the consensus without any clear justification, (b) when it was always the same diplomats that became isolated in the group, and (c) when national representatives went against previously agreed positions within the Council/Committee.

To be sure, disrespecting the informal procedural roles in the Council was not a result of not being aware of them but rather a choice to behave differently to benefit domestic political goals. As noted by the interviewees, for the governments of Hungary and Poland, blocking was “not a weakness” (Interview 19) but rather an action related to demonstrating “heroism back at home” (Interview 21). The evidence presented here thus confirms H1 as diplomats from populist governments have contested procedural norms through discursive and behavioural non-compliance.

3.2. Consensus-Building and the Rejection of Compromises

Following on from the previous discussion, our evidence suggests that populist governments often opt to stick to their maximum positions without attempting to fit into the compromise. In the case of Poland and Hungary, one interviewed diplomat mentioned that “there are no good faith efforts, some people have no space to make concessions...the negotiator does not have power, there is no space to work out a solution” (Interview 17). This attitude towards Brussels mentioned above also pointed to the increasing tension between the capital and national representatives in the group, as noted by some colleagues in the working groups: “Hungary does not care about being isolated. The diplomats here try to compromise, but it is difficult” (Interview 21). Evidence from our cases showed that for populist governments, becoming isolated—a key CFSP informal rule—was not a problem. In fact, in some cases, they made a virtue of it (Interview 39). For instance, a Polish diplomat recognised that perspectives in Warsaw differed greatly from those of diplomats based in Brussels: “Is blocking a weakness? Our leaders have a different approach. They will even say ‘A’ if the other 27 say ‘B’ and do that

loudly [‘demonstracyjnie’], even at the working group levels” (Interview 19). This was especially true with Hungary, whose “capital did not mind being isolated” (Interview 21). As a result, one of the interviewees argued that populist governments no longer negotiated “in good faith” (Interview 17).

For instance, Hungary’s opposition to the Global Compact for Migration (GCM) showed its disrespect for previously “agreed language,” breaching another key CFSP practice. As explained by Badell (2020, p. 355): “The EU delegation in New York tried to persuade Hungary by referring to the entrapment of the common position.” This strategy was not successful, and Hungary pulled out of the GCM. Still, the EU managed to save some face and hold off Hungary’s contestation by appointing Austria (at the time holding the rotating presidency of the Council of the EU) to speak on behalf of the other EU-27. However, this success was short-lived, as Austria’s populist government would later join Hungary in contesting the GCM. It is interesting to note that, according to Badell (2020, p. 356), it was still possible to differentiate between the very “aggressive” style of Hungarian diplomats and the more “respectful” tone adopted by the Austrian counterparts, which was duly acknowledged by other colleagues in the working groups.

The effects of this rejection of compromise have become visible in that foreign and security policy decisions have been blocked more frequently in the past years, especially because of Hungary’s use of the veto. Some of those have been highly public and made it to the international press, for example, the blocking of the €50 billion EU aid for Ukraine in December 2023 (Lukiv & Parker, 2023) and the threat to veto the start of accession negotiations with Ukraine at the same summit. In a similar vein, Hungary has been making continuous threats to block EU funds for weapons for Ukraine to aid its war efforts (Rankin, 2023). Because of the position of Hungary, the EU has also been more silent than it would have liked on human rights issues at the UN, with Hungary blocking an EU statement on China (Chalmers & Emmott, 2021).

Drawing on empirical evidence, we see that the H2 (populist governments are less likely to compromise than mainstream governments and stick to their maximum positions) is confirmed. Our interviewees and evidence from the Council and European Council decisions point to the fact that, with time, populist governments have become more assertive and ready to reject compromise (Interviews 18 and 24).

3.3. Strategic Use of Non-Decisions

As we have shown in the previous two sections, populist governments violate informal practices in the Council and, more often than other governments, stick to radical positions without making efforts to achieve compromise. H3 focuses on the aftermath, i.e., how these decisions are framed at home. One of the interviewees also noted this strategy being used, saying that “Hungary is building its power through negating the EU. Their negotiator would stop the political talks. They make a show” (Interview 15). Another diplomat remarked: “What is not appreciated here [in Brussels] is when the EU is used domestically and telling ‘we show the EU how things work’” (Interview 22). Occasionally, populists spoke very openly about their strategy, such as the Polish foreign affairs minister, Witold Waszczykowski, who publicly stated his government’s intentions: “We have to drastically decrease the trust towards the European Union, start conducting a negative policy” (“Szef MSZ,” 2017, para. 1).

There is indeed some evidence to support the hypothesis that non-decisions in foreign and security policy and broader understood external action are used to show the weaknesses of the EU, in contrast to a strong state.

In October 2023, Viktor Orban, speaking on the state radio, claimed that the EU's strategy on Ukraine "has failed" ("Hungary's Orban," 2023, para. 1), which echoed the foreign minister announcing earlier that the EU's sanctions were "a total failure" (Roya News, 2022; see also CNBC International TV, 2023a). Almost a decade earlier, Orban had already called the EU's sanctions against Russia "shooting oneself in the foot" ("Hungary PM Orban condemns," 2014, para. 1). Hungary also referred to the EU sanctions against China as "pointless" (Chalmers & Emmott, 2021, para. 5). The Hungarian government used a similar rhetoric when talking about the so-called migration crisis, which is, of course, intertwined with foreign and security policy. For example, Orban emphasised that in the case of the migration crisis, "Hungary wanted to take its own initiative in handling the migration crisis because the problem was great enough; however, it did not believe that the European Union had enough power or the ability to handle this issue" (Orban, 2015). He suggested that Hungary should act on its own because of the EU's weakness. Hungary also blocked the EU's Africa–Pacific Trade and Development Deal because it would encourage more migration into the EU (Komuves & Emmott, 2021).

At the same time, populist leaders have tried to build a common front against the EU. As formulated by the Hungarian minister of foreign affairs, "The Brussels bureaucracy is waging a revenge campaign against Hungary and Poland, but the two countries can always count on each other" (Szijjártó, 2019). In a similar vein, Polish Prime Minister Morawiecki said in 2020 that "the Union after the financial crisis, the Union with growing inequalities, the Union after Brexit eagerly reacts over its failures in Poland and Hungary" (Partyla, 2020, para. 8), while Polish President Duda described the EU as "weak decision-making-wise" ("Andrzej Duda krytykuje," 2016, para. 1). These are, however, more general remarks about the weakness of the EU as an institution rather than its foreign and security policy specifically.

As shown in this section, populist elites have indeed used their discursive justifications of opposition to certain EU decisions to show that the EU is weak and unable to address those issues; however, this strategy has been limited to the few areas where the perceived risk is low and gains high (e.g., migration; or in the case of Hungary, sanctions against Russia and China). It should be noted, however, that in most cases, it is not non-decisions per se but a threat to veto decisions that has been more frequently used. On those occasions where Hungary has blocked a decision, such as the EU's statement on China (Chalmers & Emmott, 2021), this has been used to protect Hungary's commercial interests (in this case, with China) rather than as a way to undermine the EU. Moreover, while there is plenty of Eurosceptic discourse and anti-EU elite statements coming from populist leaders because the shadow of the veto is always present in CFSP and used by both populist and non-populist governments (e.g., Cyprus' veto on sanctions against Belarus), it is difficult to conclude that populist governments have made more use of non-decisions to prove the weakness of the EU.

4. Russia's Aggression Against Ukraine: Divergence of Populist Responses

We have explained earlier that foreign policy is usually categorised as high gain and low risk, but there are exceptions to this rule, particularly when it comes to (acute) crises. To illustrate this, we present the case study of the EU's response to Russia's aggression against Ukraine, which, for many member states, is a clear example of a low-gain and high-risk scenario.

We have shown in Section 3 that populists in power share many characteristics regarding foreign policy. However, there are also differences, as shown in this section. The purpose of this example is not to show the

typical behaviour of both governments, which we have addressed in the earlier parts of this article, but to caution against generalisations regarding populists' reactions to crises. Often, a crisis creates an opportunity for populists to mobilise their supporters and construct the perception of "others," but there are also times when a crisis does not easily allow for the construction of populist narratives (Kopper et al., 2023). An example of this is Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, launched in February 2022. In this case, the behaviour of the Hungarian and Polish governments diverged, and it is important to understand why. Regarding risk perception, this case may be considered exceptional, at least in the case of Poland, for whom the risk of non-action was very high. The crisis was perceived as existential and of utmost importance for the state's national security. Therefore, in a situation considered high risk and low gain, we could expect fewer incentives to resort to unpolitics in the Council. The situation was somewhat different in the case of Hungary, where the invasion did not seem to be perceived as such high risk by the Hungarian government. Therefore, we could classify it as medium risk but also potentially high gain if Orbán's government managed to use this opportunity to successfully construct the perception of the "other" to further the government's interests.

From the very start of the war, the Polish government showed solidarity with Ukraine and generally supported common EU solutions. President Duda immediately condemned Russia and expressed solidarity with Ukraine ("Duda: Zrobię wszystko," 2022). He subsequently visited Ukraine five times between February 2022 and August 2023. A year and a half into the war, Duda emphasised that for Poland, "supporting Ukraine is something obvious" (Żurek & Rebelińska, 2023, para. 1). Within the EU, Poland often pressed for stricter sanctions against Russia, e.g., in the case of diamonds, the ban on liquefied petroleum gas imports, and it also volunteered to host the Headquarters of the EU's Military Assistance Mission in support of Ukraine. The Polish government also lobbied from the start in favour of a quick decision on accession negotiations with Ukraine. Poland did not block decisions or go against the consensus in this case. The domestic narrative was one of national security, solidarity with Ukraine, and the need for the EU to be active and assist. As put by President Duda, "If Russia is not defeated, it will attack again...We have no doubts that today Ukraine is a place where the fate of our security is decided" (Żurek & Rebelińska, 2023, para. 3).

In contrast, as shown in the previous sections, Orbán's government has become a "troublemaker" concerning the EU's response to Russia's aggression: from not agreeing to facilitate the transit of weapons through its territory, threatening to veto sanctions in June 2022 unless Orthodox Patriarch Kirill of Moscow was spared, blocking financial aid to Ukraine, or threatening to veto the start of accession negotiations with Ukraine in December 2023. As summarised by an anonymous diplomat quoted by Reuters: "Across the board...the Hungarian hooligans are a problem when it comes to our policy vis-à-vis Russia's aggression against Ukraine" (Baczynska & Gray, 2023, para. 10). The Hungarian government's narrative emphasised its concern about the Hungarian minority living in Ukraine and used it to justify its reluctance to open accession negotiations or deliver weapons. For instance, the Hungarian minister of foreign affairs claimed that the more weapons delivered to Ukraine, the longer the war would last, and the more Hungarian people would die (CNBC International TV, 2023b). The EU's response to the war in Ukraine was described as ineffective (Than & Komuves, 2022). It was also used to strengthen the government's position at home, for instance, with the decision to hold a consultation on "Brussels oil sanctions" (Tidey, 2022, para. 14). Unsurprisingly, the consultation overwhelmingly supported, with 97% of the votes, the Hungarian government's argument that EU sanctions were "misguided" (Brzozowski, 2023, para. 5) but also registered very low participation, with

less than 20% of respondents. Not least, Hungary's agreement to release more funds to Ukraine was also used as a bargaining tool to force the European Commission to release funds to Hungary that had been held up due to repeated breaches of the rule of law.

The case of the EU's response to the war in Ukraine thus shows that it is difficult to generalise when it comes to populist willingness and ability to politicise external crises and to use unpolitics strategies. When it comes to foreign policy, populist responses are often constrained by longstanding national strategic cultures and threat perceptions, which might vary from country to country. Their willingness to use those crises to demonise supranational institutions and block EU policy-making will be determined by how those crises (and the associated threats) are perceived but also constructed at the domestic level.

5. Conclusions

In this article, we have shown that foreign and security policy is certainly not immune to the process of unpolitics as defined by the editors of the thematic issue. Following the hypotheses outlined in Section 2, populists in power do not adhere to the generally accepted rules of foreign policy and, instead, they subject it to domestic or even party politics back at home. This is why we prefer referring to this phenomenon as a domestication of foreign policy, whereby foreign policy becomes subjected to a large extent to domestic goals. We have observed clear signs of unpolitics across all three hypotheses outlined by Ripoll Servent and Zaun (2024): (a) rejection of formal and informal norms in the Council, (b) rejection of compromise and opting for maximum positions, and (c) the use of non-decisions by populist governments to mobilise against the EU. While we have strong evidence in the case of the first two dimensions, the third is more complex. We observe a general discourse which depicts the EU as weak. However, it is not easily linked to the process of blocking CFSP decisions within the Council; rather than in traditional foreign and security policy, it happens in areas that cut across the EU's external relations (e.g., issues linked to migration).

We have argued that to understand the behaviour of populist governments in Brussels, one has to investigate variations in risk perception and different strategies aimed at mobilising the electorate at home. Such is the case of the Russian aggression of Ukraine, where the Hungarian framing of the crisis differed from that of Poland. As Kopper et al. (2023, p. 91) put it, "Not all crises are necessary a blessing for populists as not all crises allow for the easy construction of populist narratives." As demonstrated, the Polish government found it difficult to continue to utilise unpolitics in the Council because the war in Ukraine was perceived to be an existential threat. By contrast, Hungary perceived the war as a less direct threat to Hungarian security interests, and the use of unpolitics by the Hungarian government continued throughout this period, if anything, it increased over time.

Thus, this article shows that CFSP has not remained immune to unpolitics but that there are variations depending on the case at hand and the populist government. Moreover, the CFSP case shows that decision-making rules also matter when it comes to the use of unpolitics. Unanimity, as the main decision-making rule in CFSP, makes it easier for populist representatives to use, or threaten to use, their veto power. As far as every government occasionally threatens to block negotiations in foreign and security policy, populist contestation is different. Populist governments contest decisions more frequently; it is always the same countries that do so, and they often fail to justify their position to their counterparts. This point came across very strongly throughout our interviews. It was also evident from the interviews that

populist governments were perceived as breaking the longstanding code of conduct in the CFSP and were often referred to as “troublemakers.”

It is exactly the frustration with the behaviour of populist governments that brought the discussion on the possible introduction of the QMV back onto the political agenda, especially in some areas, such as sanctions and human rights. This caused immediate reactions among populist leaders, with Jarosław Kaczyński going as far as to say that such a change could not only lead to Poland losing its sovereignty but even “to the annihilation of the Polish state” (“Kaczyński o planach,” 2023, para. 3). This is because populist governments consider the power to veto decisions a strength and an advantage in EU decision-making. In any case, when it comes to effectively dealing with the impact of unpolitics in EU policy-making, we should also remember that institutional reforms, such as the move to QMV, will not tackle the root causes of populist politics, but just some of its manifestations.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers, the academic editors of this thematic issue, Ariadna Ripoll Servent and Natascha Zaun, and the participants of the thematic issue workshops for their valuable and constructive comments.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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About the Authors



Ana E. Juncos is a professor of European politics at the School of Sociology, Politics and International Studies, University of Bristol. Her primary research interest lies in European foreign and security policy, with a particular focus on EU conflict prevention and peacebuilding. She has published articles in high-ranking journals and is the author of *EU Foreign and Security Policy in Bosnia: The Politics of Coherence and Effectiveness* (Manchester University Press, 2013). She is currently the editor of the *Journal of European Integration*.



Karolina Pomorska is an associate professor at the Institute of Politics at Leiden University, where she also held a Jean Monnet Chair “Europe in the World.” She has researched European foreign and security policy, with a special emphasis on the processes of decision-making and socialisation among diplomats and officials and the Union’s policy towards Eastern neighbours. She has published numerous articles on the topic and is an associate editor of the *European Foreign Affairs Review*.