

Does Populism Matter in EU–China Relations? The Cases of Italy and Czechia

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Abstract

This article investigates whether populism affects the foreign policy of European Union (EU) member states towards China and, if so, through what mechanisms. In order to answer this question, we examine the cases of Italy and Czechia, both of which went through turbulent relations with China in the recent decade whilst also experiencing several government changes between populist and non-populist parties. Our analysis reveals that whilst populist-led governments appeared to be more China-friendly than non-populist governments, the impact of populism is not direct but mediated through other variables, namely, thick ideology, economic pragmatism and international positioning. We propose this model as a hypothesis for testing in future research. In addition, our findings suggest a need to rethink the relationship between thin–thick ideologies in the study of populism and to emphasise the role of ‘economic pragmatism’ as a mediating variable, which has been largely missing from the literature on populist foreign policy.

Keywords: Czechia; EU–China relations; foreign policy; Italy; populism

Introduction

Much attention has been paid in recent years to the growing wave of populist parties entering governments. In the European context, two tendencies accompanying the rise of populism have been noted. The first centres on right-wing populist parties and the simultaneous rise of ethno-nationalism, democratic backsliding and Euroscepticism (Destradi and Plagemann, 2019, p. 712; Norris and Inglehart, 2019). The second, often closely tied to Euroscepticism, is the trend of seeking foreign policy alternatives amongst external authoritarian regimes, in particular by aligning with and being vehicles for Russian influence (Rohac et al., 2017; The Economist, 2018).

However, whilst there is a growing populist foreign policy (PFP) literature, there are no systematic studies discussing how populists view and approach China. Amongst the works focusing on European Union (EU)–China relations in the context of authoritarian backsliding, especially in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), scholars have noted that China arguably exerts a greater impact on the so-called ‘flawed democracies’ than ‘full democracies’ (Collins and O’Brien, 2023). Some studies even speak of normative convergence between ‘illiberal democracies’ and China (Hála, 2020; Jakimów, 2019; Walker and Ludwig, 2017). These studies, however, do not assess the importance of populism as a factor, as opposed to political regime type, ideology, regional context or other important variables influencing foreign policy. Moreover, whereas many studies have analysed singular cases of either CEE or South European (SE) countries’ PFPs (e.g., Havlík and

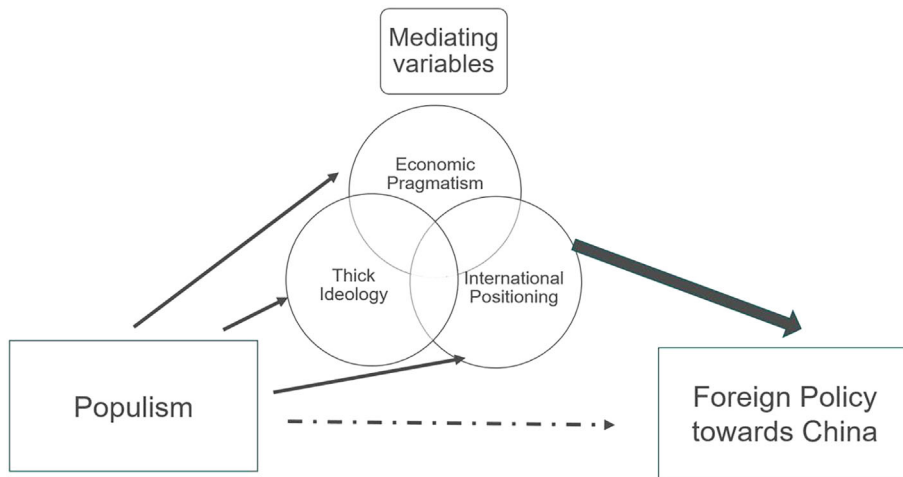
Kluknavská, 2022; Müller and Gazsi, 2023; Pugliese et al., 2022), there is a lack of research analysing PFP across various subregions. Likewise, the focus on right-wing populism overshadows the study of left-wing or pure/entrepreneurial types of populism (e.g., Bergmann et al., 2021; Hackenesch et al., 2022), especially in the CEE regional context.

To fill these gaps, this article addresses the question of whether populism affects the foreign policy of EU member states towards China and, if so, through what mechanisms. To do so, we examine two case studies: Italy and Czechia. Both countries have experienced shifts from non-populist to populist governments over the previous decade, with Italy being ruled by the coalition led by a left-wing populist party Five Star Movement (M5S) between 2018 and 2021 (also including a right-wing populist Lega in 2018–2019) and Czechia being ruled by a coalition led by entrepreneurial-type populist party Action of Dissatisfied Citizens (ANO) in 2017–2021. Moreover, both countries saw a reverse shift to non-populist governments during the COVID-19 pandemic, the only two EU countries experiencing such dynamics. Coincidentally, Italy and Czechia also experienced turbulent relations with China over the last decade, becoming the symbols of close political engagement with the authoritarian great power (for which they were also criticised) (see Horowitz, 2019). These characteristics make Italy and Czechia ideal cases for our study, as they offer the chance to observe the interplay of the key variables in two different contexts and with populist parties across the entire ideological spectrum (left–right–centre). Although we treat Italy and Czechia as two separate case studies, we analyse individual governments in both cases through a common analytical framework, so the study has a comparative dimension. Eventually, we formulate a hypothesis of the particular mechanisms through which PFP towards China works based on those two case studies, which can be tested in future research involving other cases and large-*N* studies.

Unlike much of the populism literature, this article constrains itself to the study of populists in power, that is, populists who were elected to government (and to other important state posts, including Czech President). There are a few important facets that distinguish looking at populism in power from looking at populism in opposition. First, a study of populists in power allows us to look beyond the narrative, as we can take the actual policy actions into account. Second, populism in power has a distinctly normative edge in terms of its relationship to democracy: it tends to push towards more dictatorial or authoritarian solutions, something that is severely limited when populists are in opposition (O'Donnell, 1994; Urbinati, 2019). Indeed, populists in power are considered the main driver of democratic backsliding (Norris, 2020, p. 699; Norris and Inglehart, 2019). Given the existing studies' view that democratic backsliding translates into closer ties with China on the one hand and that populism drives democratic backsliding on the other, it could be expected that populism leads to closer ties with China.

Our study's results suggest that the impact of populism in Italy's and Czechia's foreign policies towards China is not direct but mediated by three interlinked and overlapping variables: (a) *thick ideology*; (b) *the degree of economic pragmatism*; and (c) *the international positioning* of the parties/politicians studied, which we present in the analytical model below (Figure 1). Moreover, we identified some important variations in this mechanism in the cases of Czech and Italian populists in power. In the case of Italy, it was *thick ideology* and *international positioning* that played the most important role in shaping their foreign policy towards China, whilst in Czechia, *economic pragmatism* and *international*

Figure 1: The Article's Analytical Framework and Findings.



positioning played a more prominent role. These differences seem to interplay with ideological differences between the left-wing Italian populists and the centre-entrepreneurial Czech populists. Our findings contribute to populism theory, particularly the study of PFP, by providing a nuanced understanding of how these three mediating variables blend with the ‘thin ideology’ of populism, which leads to different foreign policy outcomes as compared with non-populists. Particularly, the role of ‘economic pragmatism’ – which interacts with the other two mediating variables but merits to be considered in its own rights – has been largely missing from the literature of PFP, and our findings suggest that more scholarly attention should be paid to it. Our study also problematises the thick–thin ideology debate in the field, suggesting the need for a more nuanced approach when discussing the influence of intra-ideological diversity upon PFP.

I. Understanding PFP in the Context of EU–China Relations

PFP is a relatively new field, largely incorporating internationalists’ and comparativists’ insights into the particularities of foreign policy-making by populists in power (Wajner and Giurlando, 2023). Indeed, most populist parties lack a systematic approach to foreign policy,¹ which suggests a need for an in-depth study into populists-in-power’s foreign policy narratives and actions and, therefore, the relevance of this growing field. Most of the PFP research incorporates the understanding of populism as a thin-centred ‘ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, “the pure people” versus “the corrupt elite”’ (Mudde, 2004, p. 543).² Scholars have so far struggled to isolate such understood populism as a factor in foreign policy-

¹As is the case for ANO and M5S, who had not articulated their foreign policy objectives in their political programmes prior to their elections in 2013 and 2017, respectively (Cadier and Lequesne, 2020, p. 4).

²Whereas we find this definition helpful to differentiate between the primary, or so-called ‘thick-centred’ ideologies (right vs. left) and the ‘thin-centred’ populism for analytical purposes, our findings (presented in the conclusion) invite us to re-think such an understanding of populism.

making, but some particular features of PFP have been noted. Some studies argue that populism has an impact on the *process* of foreign policy-making, as it has led to its greater centralisation (Destradi et al., 2021, p. 670), but in terms of its *content*, the influence of populism is largely mediated by other factors, such as parties' thick ideologies and/or the country's positioning in the international context (Chryssogelos, 2021; Chryssogelos et al., 2023; Varga and Buzogány, 2020; Verbeek and Zaslove, 2017; Wehner and Thies, 2021). Some other studies argue that populism can be a factor in the *content* of foreign policy too: populists politicise foreign policy issues employing the 'us-versus-them' binary, which might, for instance, result in a more revisionist foreign policy (Cadier and Szulecki, 2020; Destradi et al., 2022; Jenne, 2021). Destradi et al. (2021) conclude that populism always works in interaction with other factors, which are (a) 'external structural conditions and geopolitical pressures', (b) 'domestic institutional and constitutional architecture' and (c) 'the thick ideologies of the populist parties or leaders studied' (p. 672).

In order to better understand the relevance of these factors, we draw on foreign policy analysis (FPA) as an approach that can help us shed light on the processes and outcomes of PFP. As an actor-specific approach (Hudson, 2005), FPA places the focus, as we do in our article, on disaggregating the state into its constituent agents, whether individuals (in our case, presidents, prime ministers, foreign ministers, etc.) or groups (political parties), in order to account for the array of actors that are part of foreign policy decision-making. Moreover, a significant portion of FPA highlights that foreign policy choices are derived from both domestic and international pressures (Brighi, 2013). In the latter case, the size of the country and its geopolitical weight in the regional and global context (geopolitical positioning) have a bearing on a state's ability to make independent foreign policy choices. In the case of PFP, it has been noted that the findings derived from the case of American PFP under Trump cannot be successfully applied to many other countries with populists in power due to their less significant geopolitical position (Giurlando, 2021, p. 253; Krieger, 2019). Moreover, the specific context of the EU is crucial to take into account, as the EU not only bears significant influence upon the foreign policy direction of its member states but also serves as the target of populists' attacks (the 'bureaucratic elite').

When it comes to populism's 'authoritarian pull', the studies have noted that populism 'can stretch constitutional democracy toward its extreme borders and open the door to authoritarian solutions', even leaning towards dictatorship (Urbinati, 2019, pp. 112–113). In the case of the European PFP, this translates into a tendency to undermine procedural diplomatic channels, formal international alliances, including the EU, and institutionalised foreign policy co-operation (Cadier and Lequesne, 2020, p. 3; Destradi and Plagemann, 2019). However, in terms of the assumed collusion of populists in power with authoritarian regimes, populists have been found to side with these rhetorically but to rarely diverge from the common EU policies (Cadier and Lequesne, 2020). Several studies claim that populists in power do not tend to change the foreign policy orientations set by their non-populist predecessors (Chryssogelos, 2021; Plagemann and Destradi, 2019; Pugliese et al., 2022).

However, a greater insight into the particular relationship with China is needed to test these assumptions, as China is somehow an anomaly in the PFP. Cadier and Lequesne (2020, p. 7) argue that when compared with relations with other authoritarian states (for instance, Russia), populist-led governments tend to go against the EU's grain and side

with China over core issues pertaining to the European common foreign policy, such as human rights. Some studies on relations between China and European states (particularly CEE/16+1) noted that China exerts some normative power practices, including the potential to influence states' institutions and norms in the region (Garlick and Qin, 2023; Jakimów, 2019; Vangeli, 2018; Walker and Ludwig, 2017). Whilst these findings mirror those on PFP discussed above, they refer to the national or subregional dynamic of CEE vis-à-vis China, rather than populism as a factor.

II. Methodology

This article studies the impact of populism on the EU countries' foreign policy towards China. Specifically, we seek to study the relevance of the three factors, which we identified from the empirical case studies presented in the next sections, but which also emerge as important variables influencing PFP from previous studies presented above. These are (a) *thick ideology*, understood as adherence to traditional left–right–centre values, which influences the extent of normative convergence with the China-projected values; (b) *the degree of economic pragmatism*, defined as material interest-driven behaviour; and (c) *international positioning*, that is, the international orientation of the given party or a politician (e.g., pro-Western and pro-diversification).

Whilst Destradi et al. (2021, p. 672) have also identified thick ideology and 'external structural conditions and geopolitical pressures' (our 'international positioning' variable is cognate but more actor centred following the FPA approach) as important factors, 'economic pragmatism' has not been previously treated as a factor influencing PFP, although it does speak to the domestic conditioning of foreign policy choices (the third variable mentioned by Destradi et al., 2021). Our variable of 'economic pragmatism' differs from the previously introduced concept of *political opportunism*, understood as 'exploiting any opportunity for mass mobilization and political gain', usually deployed through the politicisation of 'people-versus-elite' battles (Fouquet, 2023, pp. 5, 18). In contrast, our notion of 'economic pragmatism' depicts a more specific instance of prioritising the pursuit of a material benefit. As such, it is not necessarily unique amongst populists, whereas political opportunism has been argued to be 'an inherent inclination' of populist leaders (Fouquet, 2023, p. 3). Moreover, whilst 'non-ideological pragmatism' (similar to 'political opportunism') has been previously linked to technocratic populists (Mietzner, 2015, p. 25), economic pragmatism's role in PFP has not yet been theorised.

In order to provide a coherent classification of parties in terms of the level of populism and their ideology, we employ Norris's (2020) expert-based Global Party Survey (GPS), which places both parties' ideology and level of populism on a spectrum. This classification is comprehensive as it compares the outcomes of other major party surveys, such as Populism and Political Parties Expert Survey (POPPA) (Meijers and Zaslove, 2021). The results of the survey are summarised in Figure 2. According to the survey, Czech ANO, Italian Lega and M5S all scored relatively high in the populist spectrum, in contrast to the 'pluralist' Czech Civic Democratic Party (ODS) and the Pirate Party, as well as the Italian Democratic Party (PD). As for the Italian National Unity Government (2021–2022), it did not figure in the GPS, but as a broad-spectrum coalition composed of nine parties, with 17 out of 24 cabinet members coming from non-populist parties and under non-populist Prime Minister (PM) Mario Draghi, it clearly was a non-populist-led

Figure 2: The Classification of the Parties in Terms of the Degree of Pluralism/Populism and Ideology, as Based on the Global Party Survey (GPS) (Norris, 2020). Note: Pluralist–populist scale in terms of parties’ rhetoric: pluralists scoring 1–5 and populists scoring 6–10. Left–right economic values: left-leaning scoring 1–5 and right-leaning scoring 6–10. Liberal–conservative social values: with liberals scoring 1–5 and conservatives scoring 6–10. For a full definition of the categories used, see Norris (2020, p. 706). The table is adapted from the source: <https://www.globalpartysurvey.org/>.

| Country | Party | Score on pluralism-populism scale | Score on left-right economic values scale | Score on liberal-conservative social values scale |
|---------|---|-----------------------------------|---|---|
| Italy | PD (classified within the Centre-Left Coalition) | 2.4 - Pluralist | 3.6 - Left | 2.1 - Liberal |
| | M5S | 8.9 - Populist | 3.8 - Left | 3.8 - Liberal |
| | Lega (classified within the Centre-Right Coalition) | 8.8 - Populist | 7.7 - Right | 8.5 - Conservative |
| Czechia | ČSSD | 4.4 - Pluralist | 3.2 - Left | 3.9 - Liberal |
| | ANO | 8.4 - Populist | 3.8 - Left | 5.0 - Liberal (Centre) |
| | ODS | 3.6 - Pluralist | 7.7 - Right | 7.1 - Conservative |
| | Czech Pirate Party | 2.9 - Pluralist | 6.6 - Right | 1.5 - Liberal |

government. In terms of thick ideology, we recognise that most populists tend to adopt rhetoric affiliated with diverse ideological positions. Indeed, both M5S and ANO have been labelled not only as left-wing populists (Coticchia and Vignoli, 2020; Norris, 2020) but also as ‘catch-all’, ‘pure’ or ‘entrepreneurial’ populists (Destradi et al., 2021, p. 667; Meijers and Zaslove, 2021; Zielonka and Rupnik, 2020). According to the GPS data, in terms of economic ideology, ANO and M5S are classified as economically left wing and Lega as economically right wing, whilst in terms of social values, ANO is classified as centrist (value neutral), M5S as ‘socially liberal’ and Lega as ‘socially conservative’. Here, we side with the GPS results by labelling M5S as a left-wing party, as they have been squarely pursuing left-wing policies over the past 5 years, and ANO as a centrist (value neutral).

In addition, it is also important to include non-party-aligned influential political figures when these are relevant to their countries’ foreign policy towards China. Whilst the GPS survey does not include the ideology-populism measure of individual politicians, we use existing studies, these politicians’ rhetoric and their past party affiliation to determine their populist and ideological inclinations. In this respect, in the case of Czechia, we survey the views of President Miloš Zeman, who has also played a prominent part in the forging of closer Czech–China relations. We include Zeman in the ‘catch-all’ or ‘pure’

populist category, as despite his 'left-wing' background, much of his rhetoric can be interpreted as centre-right and conservative. Similarly, in the Italian context, we surveyed the approach to China of the independent PM Mario Draghi. His political career and former affiliations indicate that he can be best positioned in the centre of the political spectrum with strong pro-EU views, making him a typical target of populists from both the left and right sides of the spectrum.

We survey the decade between 2013 and 2022, from the initiation of a deeper engagement with China in both countries to the final stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. This period allows us to assess the politics of both non-populist-led governments (prior to 2017 in Czechia and 2018 in Italy), followed by the period of populist takeover up to 2021, when non-populist governments returned to power (a period that lasted up until 2022 in Italy). Whilst non-populist and populist governments were ruling in both countries in parallel periods, we do not directly compare the two countries and instead approach them as two separate case studies offering us observations of various governments. This is in line with our goal of exploring the mechanisms by which populism may affect EU foreign policy towards China, and eventually generating a new hypothesis for future studies (Gerring, 2006). The fact that we have selected two cases for our study (and not just one) offers several benefits. First, the two countries provide a broad ideological spectrum of populist parties and politicians in power (right/centre/left), including the so-called entrepreneurial populist cases. Second, despite the common denominator of being EU countries, Italy and Czechia differ in many characteristics, such as being located in different EU subregions, being of different relative sizes and having different historical experiences influencing their political culture.

We aimed to identify the narratives about China as well as the actions towards China. In order to analyse the narratives, we performed a qualitative discourse analysis of sources from multiple platforms and texts in native languages (Czech and Italian). In the Italian case, the bulk of the analysis is based on China-related parliamentary debates (2018–2022), relevant party members' blogs and official statements from key politicians. In Czechia, we relied on the analysis of Twitter accounts, media appearances and governmental communiqués to the wider public. We manually searched the texts of both populists in power and their non-populist predecessors and successors to identify the language that these actors used in reference to China and to analyse how it changed over time. We have employed the process-tracing method in relation to the populists-in-power's policy actions. Finally, we compared the narrative analysis with tangible actions that the populists and non-populists in power took to assess to what extent these narratives translated into actions. In the next two sections, we present the findings from the case studies, and we discuss our findings in the concluding section of the article.

III. Ideology and International Positioning: The Italian Case

Over the last decade, there seemed to be a cross-party consensus in Italy that the strategic partnership with China was 'beneficial' and that Italy should try to make the most of the great potential that the Chinese market offered to the country's export-led economy. The PD, the centre-left party in power between 2013 and 2018, rolled out a China policy that was aimed at engaging Beijing to attract investment opportunities. When attending the Belt and Road Forum in May 2017, then Italian PM Paolo Gentiloni, from the PD, noted

that Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) investments ‘could have important consequences for Italy: ports, infrastructures and trade in general. It’s a history that’s been ongoing for centuries’ (Agenzia Nazionale Stampa Associata (ANSA), 2017).

The 2018 general elections led to the formation of the first government of Giuseppe Conte, from the M5S, supported by a coalition of two populist parties, his own left-leaning M5S and the right-wing Lega. It was under this populist-led government that, in March 2019, Italy signed the memorandum of understanding (MoU), establishing itself as a major partner in the BRI and the first G7 country to do so. The BRI memorandum, whilst non-binding in nature, triggered a swift backlash from Italy’s allies, with the United States’ National Security Council tweeting that endorsing the BRI lends ‘legitimacy to China’s predatory approach’ (Horowitz, 2019). At the core of both populist parties’ vision lies the claim that they represented and protected the interests of the hard-working people against the elites, especially those in Brussels, accused of undermining the Italian national interest. It is against such a backdrop of Eurosceptic international positioning that one needs to place the debates around the signing of the MoU.

In March 2019, Conte argued in a parliamentary speech that ‘[Italy’s] economic and commercial attention towards this infrastructure and towards China is entirely legitimate and it is justified in light of our national interests’. He emphasised the economic interests behind the initiative, saying that ‘through the BRI we will be able to strengthen our export towards a market of enormous proportions; our enterprises will have the chance to directly participate in the realisation of new and important infrastructural investments’, and reaffirmed a pro-Western stance, saying that ‘the perimeter of the MoU on the BRI is purely economic (...) and it does not imply a reconsideration of our [Italy’s] Euro-Atlantic posture’ (Camera dei Deputati, 2019).

But despite such affirmation, the party’s rhetoric soon turned anti-Western. In defence of the MoU, one M5S deputy noted that China ‘does not want geopolitical changes, but mutual respect for each other’s sovereignty; it does not want to impose its development model, but to adapt to diversity, both in poor and developed countries’, whilst Germany, the United Kingdom and France’s criticism towards the Italy–China MoU resembled that of ‘competitors’ despite the fact that they had commercial exchanges with China at much greater volumes than Italy (Camera dei Deputati, 2019). Along similar lines, another M5S deputy stated that in China, it is ‘as if a good idea of socialism meets a good idea of free market’. He then dubbed as ‘unfounded’ the concerns expressed by Italy’s allies on the MoU, adding that the criticisms were ‘linked to an old vision of international relations’ and ‘inspired by a misunderstood faithfulness, which risks becoming servility towards the Atlantic Pact allies, which we are and will continue to be part of, but without any subaltern position’ (Camera dei Deputati, 2019).

As far as the Lega deputies are concerned, we find both similarities and differences in the way in which they spoke about the MoU. First off, one Lega deputy was the proponent of a resolution (Number 6/00056), which committed the government to ‘take the necessary steps to avoid that the new bilateral ties with the People’s Republic of China could reasonably be interpreted abroad as the beginning of Italy’s detachment from the Atlantic Alliance’ (Camera dei Deputati, 2019). Another deputy noted that ‘commercial relations with China should be conducive not only to attract investments in our [Italy] country, but also [...] to strengthen exports in the immense market of the Asian giant’. At the same time, he also reaffirmed that Lega ‘supports Italy’s belonging to the Atlantic Alliance

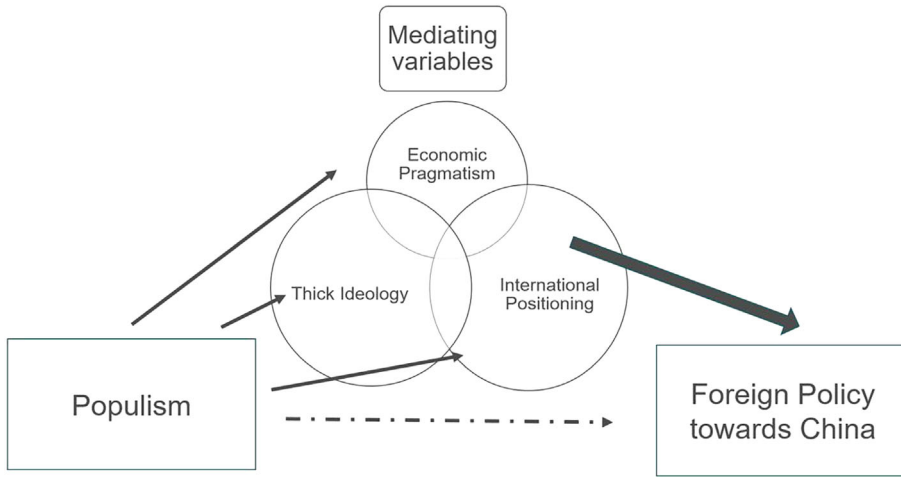
and to sharing Western values', adding that nothing in Italy's 'traditional alliance, amity and closeness to the US was being questioned by the MoU' and that Italy 'is and will always be faithful to the pillar of the alliance with the US' (Camera dei Deputati, 2019). Along similar lines, another Lega deputy, whilst also reaffirming the 'importance of the Atlantic Alliance', expressed that the MoU would be 'a step ahead' for Italy as it would mean 'more investments, technological increments, infrastructure and exports' (Camera dei Deputati, 2019).

Two themes emerge from these speeches that are relevant for the analysis presented in this article. First, the rationale behind the signing of the MoU that was emphasised by both M5S and Lega deputies was primarily economic, a trend in line with previous non-populist governments. This echoes what other studies (for instance, Boni, 2023; Pugliese et al., 2022) have found, particularly regarding the continuity of Italy's approach to China. Second, the different international positioning of the two populist parties in government is worth noting: whilst M5S deputies criticised both EU partners and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies whilst praising the Chinese development model and approach to the international order, Lega deputies have almost invariably reaffirmed their allegiance to the US, NATO and Western values more broadly. Thus, whilst the pragmatic (economic) rationale was the same for both populist parties in government – and largely in line with the previous non-populist parties' approach – the key difference emerging from the speeches is the M5S's positive international positioning towards China and ideological convergence with it on key issues.

Italy's openness to China reached its apex during the first days of lockdown in Italy in March 2020. Sino-Italian ties at the onset of the pandemic are best epitomised by the live stream of the China Eastern Airlines flight's arrival in Rome bringing doctors and medical supplies on the official Facebook page of the then Italian foreign minister, Luigi Di Maio (ANSA, 2020). A week later, in a TV interview, Di Maio stated that 'those who derided us about the Silk Road now have to admit that investing in that friendship has allowed us to save lives in Italy' (Fanpage.it, 2020). Along similar lines, the then undersecretary of foreign affairs, Manlio Di Stefano from M5S, when asked whether China could emerge stronger from the fight against COVID-19, replied that 'China has been much faster and more precise in managing the crisis, but we also have to tell, that it could do so thanks to a socio-political system very different from the Western model' (Ministero degli Esteri, 2020).

However, as the first wave of the pandemic in 2020 was fading away and United States–China relations progressively worsened, Italy–China ties entered into a new phase, characterised by a de-risking approach to bilateral partnership. Italy's traditional international Euro-Atlantic posture, coupled with pressures from the United States and a growing realisation amongst political parties about the political implications (including, but not limited to, Italy–United States relations) of ties with China, started to weigh in. Interestingly, the then Italian foreign minister, Di Maio from M5S, was also part of this Italian U-turn on China, signalling his move to more moderate political positions, which eventually led him to quit M5S in 2022 (Cuzzocrea, 2021). Such a U-turn amongst Italian political parties was part of the wider 'negative stigmatising' of China, which emerged across the political spectrum at the time as a result of a growing realisation of China's responsibility in the mishandling of the COVID-19 pandemic as well as it having crossed 'critical normative thresholds' on Hong Kong and Xinjiang (Andornino, 2022, p. 16).

Figure 3: The Article's Analytical Framework and Findings: The Case of Italy. Note: The size of the circles representing the mediating variables reflects their relative importance.



Such a negative outlook on Sino-Italian relations deepened further under the non-populist national unity government of Mario Draghi. This new government marked a return to a more China-sceptic policy favoured by the United States, labelling Italy's ties with Washington as 'far more important' than those with Beijing (Han and Harth, 2022; Jones, 2021), hinting that the Italian government would 'closely examine' the MoU with China, de facto signalling a willingness to freeze some of the more controversial aspects of the co-operation. In addition to this wider re-alignment of Italy's position closer to the United States, Draghi used the Golden Power five times whilst in office.³

Whilst under Draghi, Lega took a more hawkish stance towards China, there seemed to be more ambiguity in the M5S's approach. On the one hand, there was a progressive shift of the key figures (e.g., Foreign Minister Di Maio) from being openly China leaning towards a more moderate Euro-Atlantic approach. On the other hand, the blog of Beppe Grillo, the founding father and the ideologue of the party, has continued to reproduce some of the key Chinese narratives on international issues. Between February 2021, when the new government was sworn in, and the elections in September 2022, the blog hosted five articles by an academic close to the M5S showing that beyond the economic rationale, there remains a persistent international positioning of the party, which continues to drive the M5S's approach to China. As an example, in an article in March 2021, the author opposed Western criticism of Xinjiang and concluded his piece by noting that 'the world has changed and it no longer accepts the diktats coming from Washington (or any other hegemon) [...]. It is the era of multipolarity and of a shared future' (Parenti, 2021).

³The Golden Power is a policy tool that can be deployed by Italian governments to protect strategic economic sectors from foreign takeovers deemed risky to national security. It has been used seven times in total since its introduction in 2012.

Overall, in Italy's case, we find evidence of all three mediating variables playing a role in driving the PFP towards China. However, the *thick ideology* of the left-wing M5S, which drives its affinity with China-projected values (and less so of the right-wing Lega), and the M5S's *international positioning*, with its pronounced critical outlook towards the EU and the United States, represent the two variables that help explain PFP towards China in the case of Italy. In comparison with the non-populist predecessor government, which was also led by a left-wing party (PD), the thick ideology played a more prominent role in the M5S-led populist government's foreign policy towards China. Similarly, the different international positioning of the populist government was influenced by populism, as it differed considerably from the non-populist previous and successor governments' international positioning. The difference in how these variables in turn affected foreign policy towards China by making it overall more positive in the case of a populist government suggests that populism affects foreign policy towards China (Figure 3).

IV. Pragmatism Versus Values: The Czech Case

Before 2012, Czechia had been credited with having the most negative policy towards China within the EU (Fox and Godement, 2009). This was a result of the traditional 'value-based' foreign policy inspired by Václav Havel's ideas of support for democracy and human rights internationally, which remained dominant even after he left the office of the president in 2003 (Fürst, 2010). The foreign policy direction only started to change course after 2012 (Zelenka, 2021), with the breakthrough coming in 2013, when Miloš Zeman, a populist, became president and pledged to establish more friendly relations with China.⁴ Zeman explicitly wanted to distinguish himself from Havel and his pro-Western value-based approach, allegedly to benefit Czech national interests by taking advantage of the economic opportunities presented by China. Also in 2013, the conservative pro-Western coalition collapsed, and Zeman (in a controversial step) named his own caretaker government of Jiří Rusnok, who started taking China-friendly positions in the newly formed 16+1 platform involving China and other CEE countries (Bajerová and Turcsányi, 2019).

After the subsequent parliamentary elections in 2013, Bohuslav Sobotka of the Czech Social Democratic Party (ČSSD), largely regarded as non-populist (see Figure 2), became the PM, and Lubomir Zaorálek (also of ČSSD) became the Minister of Foreign Affairs (MFA). The Sobotka government then implemented a self-described shift in Czech foreign policy from 'value-based' to 'pragmatic' (similarly to President Zeman), which also meant that human rights issues were sidelined in favour of economic diplomacy when dealing with China (Šebeňa and Turcsányi, 2021). The primary goal, in the context of the post-2008 economic crisis recovery, was to bring material benefits, especially in the form of increased exports and new investments (Turcsányi, 2020).

When the populist ANO reversed positions with the ČSSD after the elections in 2017,⁵ the new populist PM Andrej Babiš made it clear that, whilst being in favour of a pragmatic foreign policy, he did not see relations with China as bringing any significant fruits. He even said at the 16+1 summit in Dubrovnik that 'in the past, many politicians went

⁴It is important to note that whilst the president is not the head of government in Czechia, he or she still plays an influential agenda-setting role in foreign policy.

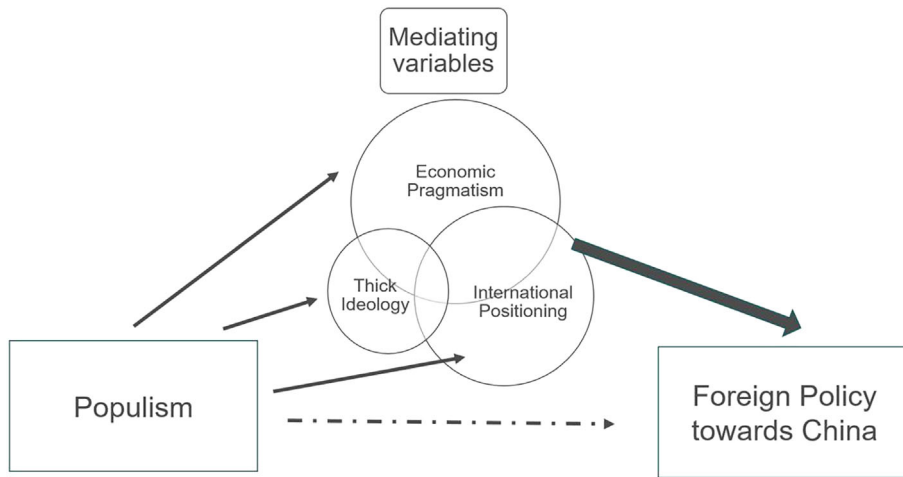
⁵ANO was a junior coalition partner previously, without direct control over foreign policy.

there, but no result has been seen' (Czech News Agency (ČTK), 2019a). On the other hand, Babiš also invited his Chinese counterpart over to Prague, suggesting that he was not against engaging China in principle but wanted to see the benefits from doing so. Towards the end of 2018, following American and other European states' growing perception of China as a security threat (Jakimów, 2024), Babiš was confronted with a crisis surrounding the National Cyber and Information Security Agency's (NCISA) warning against the use of Huawei and ZTE technologies in critical infrastructure. On that account, he met with the new Chinese ambassador, Zhang Jianmin, who later commented on Facebook that the Czech PM apologised and promised 'not to repeat similar mistakes again' (Chinese Embassy in Prague, 2018). Apparently, this was not how Babiš saw the meeting, and he pointed that out publicly on Czech TV: 'What he wrote is nonsense. It's a lie (...)', adding in an unusually assertive tone that '[Czechia] is an independent, sovereign state, [and] there's nothing to apologize for' (ČTK, 2019b). It is noteworthy that the usual populist emphasis on national sovereignty and interests, which played a role in Zeman's turn to China, now surged as the factor turning Babiš's government in the opposite direction, when China was seen as intervening in the issue of Czech sovereignty.

Subsequently, however, with the COVID-19 pandemic reaching Czechia in March 2020, the government's attitude towards China changed substantially. As China became the crucial provider of much-needed medical supplies, several key politicians, including Zeman and Babiš, backtracked on their earlier critical remarks. Babiš immediately announced that Zeman's close relations with China were very helpful in securing quick assistance from China (iRozhlas, 2020a). Similarly to the Italian case, PM Babiš and the Minister of the Interior, Jan Hamáček (ČSSD), gave a lavish welcome to the Chinese aircraft carrying the medical supplies (iRozhlas, 2020b). Soon, the medical equipment to fight the pandemic replaced investments and trade as the main substance in the 'pragmatic' relations. Already on 19 March 2020, Zeman suggested that China was the only country helping Czechia with the pandemic, whilst criticising Western European countries for failing to deal with the pandemic efficiently due to their 'liberal' approach (Lidovky, 2020). In a public opinion survey later that year, it was revealed that Czechia, alongside Italy, were the only two EU states where the public perceived China's help as greater than the EU's (Turcsányi, 2020). This indicates how populist public recognition of China's material assistance and criticism of the role of the EU impacted the public perception of the issue. In the 2021 16+1 summit, Zeman praised the role of Chinese vaccines in beating the pandemic (Kučerová, 2021).

The new government of Czechia, led by Petr Fiala of the ODS party, entered office in December 2021, supported by four junior coalition parties (TOP09, STAN, KDU-CSL and the Pirates), with the MFA being controlled by Jan Lipavský of the Pirates, a liberal party. The Fiala government was ideologically diverse, combining both left- and right-wing parties, but it explicitly rejected populism and declared a clear pro-Western orientation (Havlík and Kluknavská, 2022). Indeed, its initial declaration of foreign policy goals included statements about the 'revision of relations with Russia and China' (Government of Czechia, 2022). Fiala also announced in his first parliamentary speech in January 2022 that Chinese companies (alongside the Russian ones) would not be allowed to participate in the tender to build a nuclear reactor at Dukovany (Forum24, 2022), prioritising security concerns over economic pragmatism. Minister Lipavský also declared that China had never accepted the basic rules of international order, and despite its important role in

Figure 4: The Article's Analytical Framework and Findings: The Case of Czechia. Note: The size of the circles representing the mediating variables reflects their relative importance.



international trade, he did not expect it to become a major investor in Czechia. He also added that he would not hesitate to raise human rights concerns with China. Whilst he refrained from labelling China as the ‘enemy’, he did call it a ‘systemic rival’ (amplifying the 2019 EU’s use of the word). Besides, he made it clear he would develop relations with other democratic actors in the Indo-Pacific region, such as Japan, South Korea and Taiwan (Prchal, 2021).

Empirical findings from the Czech case do not suggest a clear-cut difference between the populist and 2013–2017 non-populist governments. An explanation for this can be found in the particularities of the ČSSD-led coalition (2013–2017). In fact, although ČSSD is generally regarded as a non-populist party (score 4.1/10 in the GPS), its use of populist rhetoric has fluctuated: in the election of 2013 (after which it led the government), it employed populist rhetoric to a similar extent as ANO, whilst in the next election of 2017, it refrained from it (Naxera, 2022). Indeed, when comparing only the vocally anti-populist ODS government with the ANO government, the difference between the populists and anti-populists in terms of international positioning and preference for economic pragmatism is apparent.

Overall, *economic pragmatism* and *international positioning* are the two variables from our model, which are the strongest driving forces of the PFP towards China in Czechia. Populists are more likely to be open to the diversification of foreign partners outside of the traditional Western alliances (international positioning), which subsequently informs their approach to China, driven largely by economic pragmatism. This can be regarded as a typical characteristic of ‘pure’ or ‘entrepreneurial’ populists (Saxonberg and Heinisch, 2022), also closely related to ‘non-ideological pragmatism’ (Mietzner, 2015). Moreover, the ČSSD’s pragmatic engagements with China as a junior coalition partner also stem from the role of left-leaning ideology, which made it more inclined to engage with China. In contrast, the strong pro-Western international positioning of the non-populist Fiala government led it to oppose China, with the role of thick

ideology orientation (particularly liberal) of individual parties of the government driving their China-antipathy being the second important factor (Figure 4).

Discussion and Conclusion

In this article, we analysed the foreign policy approaches to China of populist- and non-populist-led governments in two EU countries, Italy and Czechia, between 2013 and 2022. In doing so, we assessed the contribution to foreign policy of populist ANO and President Miloš Zeman in Czechia as well as Lega and M5S in Italy. The populist actors are close on the scale of their level of populism but differ in their ideologies, international positioning and the level of pragmatic assessment of economic benefits stemming from engaging China. We also compared these governments to their predecessors (PD in Italy and ČSSD in Czechia) and their successors (a national unity government of both non-populist and populist parties led by PM Mario Draghi in Italy and a broad coalition of non-populist parties under PM Petr Fiala in Czechia).

Our findings suggest that populism's impact on foreign policy towards China is not direct but rather mediated through three variables. The *international positioning* appeared to be most clearly influenced by populism, which in turn affected foreign policy towards China. Strong pro-Western orientation tended to be a defining factor of the non-populist governments (except for ČSSD), whilst populists tended to be more in favour of diversification of international partners outside of their traditional Western alliances. In terms of the *thick ideology*, the left-leaning parties tended to be more favourable towards China than the right-leaning parties, and populism seemed to strengthen this mechanism (e.g., observing the difference between consistently China-friendly M5S and their left-wing non-populist coalition partners, PD, in the Draghi government, who were more China-sceptic). *Economic pragmatism* was a factor that played an important role in driving the China-friendly policies of both populist and non-populist governments. However, our findings suggest that populists might be more likely to stress the benefits stemming from engaging China than non-populists. Also, in the case of 'pure/entrepreneurial populists', economic pragmatism tends to be the dominant mediating variable, particularly trumping ideology. Moreover, these three mediating variables are interlinked, which means that they mutually reinforce one another (for instance, a pro-diversification stance leads to greater emphasis on economic pragmatism, or a left-wing ideology predisposes a populist party to be more anti-US and anti-EU in its international positioning). To sum up, we found sufficient regularities to propose the hypothesis that populism indeed indirectly contributes to a more China-friendly foreign policy of EU countries through the three mediating variables, but the way in which it interacts with those depends primarily on the ideological affiliation of a populist actor.

These findings provide important contributions to the PFP field. First, they provide a replicable framework that clearly delineates important variables that mediate the impact of populism on foreign policy and where different mediating variables may play a more or less prominent role, depending on the ideological affiliation of the populists in question. Second, they add theoretical nuance to the previously identified factors, such as thick ideology and international positioning. In particular, our study calls to reconsider the clear delineation of populism as 'thin-centred ideology' from 'thick-centred ideologies' (echoing Giurlando's, 2021, study) by pointing to two important phenomena in this

regard. One is the merging of thick ideologies and populism in a way that leads to different foreign policy choices for populists as compared with non-populists with the same thick ideology. Another is that our study explains the link between economic pragmatism and PFP, which has been largely absent from the literature, showcasing that in the case of pure/entrepreneurial populists, populism serves as a more central thick ideology. This last finding echoes some other studies in the field that refer to ‘depth of populism’ in relation to anti-elite versus people centrism (i.e., Destradi et al., 2022), but it adds another nuance to these observations. By embracing more centrally economic pragmatism as opposed to value-based ideological affinity (which is opposed as yet another form of elitism), ‘pure’ populists showcase how populism can be understood as a thick-centred ideology. Our findings indicate not only the relevance of intra-populist ideological differences to their conduct of foreign policy but also the different levels of merging thin ideologies of populism with thick ‘traditional’ ideologies depending on the location of an actor on the ideological spectrum, which leads to a new understanding of the role of ideology in PFP.

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