



## Open Research Online

### Citation

Corsini, Hanna and Ongaro, Edoardo (2025). Bureaucratic Responses to Populist Government: Explaining Foreign Policy (Non-)Change. *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* (Early Access).

### URL

<https://oro.open.ac.uk/103830/>

### DOI

<https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.13748>

### License

(CC-BY 4.0) Creative Commons: Attribution 4.0

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

### Policy

This document has been downloaded from Open Research Online, The Open University's repository of research publications. This version is being made available in accordance with Open Research Online policies available from [Open Research Online \(ORO\) Policies](#)

### Versions

If this document is identified as the Author Accepted Manuscript it is the version after peer review but before type setting, copy editing or publisher branding

# Bureaucratic Responses to Populist Government: Explaining Foreign Policy (Non-)Change

HANNA CORSINI<sup>1</sup>  and EDOARDO ONGARO<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>European Studies, University of Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, Paris <sup>2</sup>Public Management, The Open University, Milton Keynes

## Abstract

Populism has become a defining feature of global politics. As populists become part of elected governments, an increasingly rich literature has been investigating their influence on a country's foreign policy. Nonetheless, such scholarly endeavours have neglected one specific element: the interplay between elective officials and the bureaucracy, notably the diplomatic corps. Through this article, we aim at filling such gap. We address the research question by means of a comparative case study of two populist governments in EU member states: the Orbán Second and Third governments in Hungary (2010–2014 and 2014–2018) and the Conte First government (2018–2019) in Italy. Such cases have been selected for the differences in the case outcomes, the nature of the governing party coalition configuration and the role of the bureaucracy and its capacity to provide policy continuity. We adopt as main theoretical lenses Barr's politico-strategic approach and Peters' politics of bureaucracy theory. Our findings demonstrate that, following Hermann's categorisation of foreign policy change, the Conte I government underwent adjustment changes, whilst the Orbán executives launched an international orientation change of Hungary's foreign policy. Two factors are key in shaping the outcome of foreign policy change: (i) the governing coalition dynamics and (ii) the extent to which the diplomatic corps conceives of its role as guarantor and guardian of continuity in foreign policy. Length of stay in power plays a key role in shaping the dynamic interactions of these factors and ultimately foreign policy change.

**Keywords:** foreign policy; institutions; populist government; bureaucracy; strategic management; politics of bureaucracy

## Introduction

Populism has become a defining feature of global politics. As populist forces come to power, the relationship between foreign policy and populism has been investigated in a fast-expanding literature (Cadier, 2024; Chryssogelos, 2017; Coticchia, 2021; Destradi and Plagemann, 2019; Hadiz and Chryssogelos, 2017; Jenne, 2021; Müller and Gebauer, 2021; Verbeek and Zaslove, 2017; Visnovitz and Jenne, 2021; Wajner and Giurlando, 2023). Nonetheless, what appears to be missing in such analyses is the interplay with bureaucratic responses: how the bureaucracy (the collective of those holding tenured positions in public administration) responds to differential pressures for policy change wielded by the new incumbents-holders of elective positions in government, and how such interactive dynamics shape it. This becomes even more important if we consider the field of foreign policy: as authoritatively noted by Hermann 'to understand foreign policy change (...) one must examine the bureaucratic conditions governing the policy process' (Hermann, 1990, p. 8).

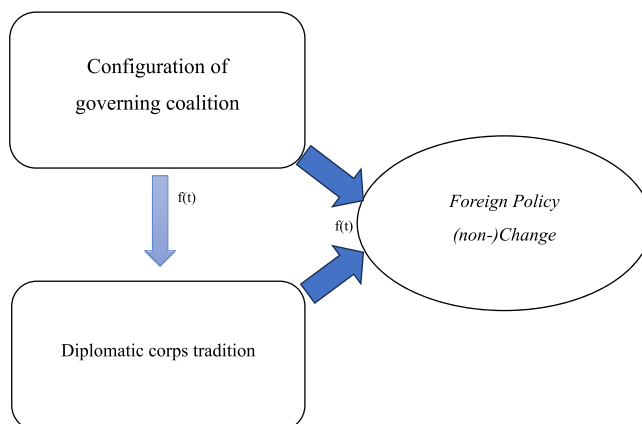
This study addresses explicitly this question. We aim to generate knowledge about the dynamics that unfold between elective government and the bureaucracy when populist

forces enter government and the implications of such dynamic interactions for policy change in the domain of foreign policy. We formulate the research question as follows: what explains policy change in the domain of foreign policy when populist forces are in government?

We address the research question by means of a comparative case study of two populist governments – namely the Orbán Second and Third governments in Hungary (2010–2014 and 2014–2018) and the Conte First government (2018–2019) in Italy. Such cases have been selected for the differences in the case outcomes (the populist government in Hungary did change the foreign policy of the country; the populist government in Italy did not – as we recount in detail), the nature of the governing party coalition configuration (single party government in Hungary; coalition of right- and left-wing parties in government in Italy) and the role of the bureaucracy and its capacity to provide policy continuity (the Italian diplomatic corps understood itself as guarantor and guardian of the Italian foreign policy around the two pillars of Atlanticism and Europeanism that characterised Italy’s foreign policy since WWII; the Hungarian diplomatic corps had recently come out of a radical purge after the end of Communist rule, fundamentally changing not only its personnel, but also marking a disruptive change in the country’s foreign policy since the end of the WWII).

Our findings demonstrate that, following Hermann’s categorisation of foreign policy change, the Conte I government underwent adjustment changes, whilst the Orbán executives launched an international orientation change of Hungary’s foreign policy. Two factors are key in shaping the outcome of foreign policy change: (i) the governing coalition dynamics and (ii) the extent to which the diplomatic corps conceives of its role as guarantor and guardian of continuity in foreign policy. Length of stay in power plays a key role in shaping the dynamic interactions of these factors and ultimately foreign policy change. These are illustrated in Figure 1 (arrows indicate causal influences; the notation “ $f(t)$ ” highlights influence is also a function of the duration of stay in power).

Figure 1: Factors Affecting Foreign Policy Change Under Populist Government. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]



Our theoretical framework combines the politico-strategic approach (Barr, 2018), to explain the behaviour of populist elective officials in government centred on the means and ends of building power based on mobilisation and wielding that power to overwhelm those defending the institutions, complemented and supplemented by the theoretical contributions stemming from the growing literature on the strategic management of public organisations (Bryson, 2018; Bryson and George, 2020; Ferlie and Ongaro, 2022), and the theory of the politics of bureaucracy as developed by Guy Peters (2010), a theoretical perspective to interpreting and explaining bureaucratic influence on policy-making.

Other factors, such as ideology, can play a role and have been discussed at length in populism literature. In this article, whilst fully recognising the significance of these factors, we concentrate our analytical focus and empirical investigation on how populists behave once they are in government. As such, we have opted for the politico-strategic definition of populism, which enables us to shift the focus from aspects concerning the ‘fundamental nature’ of populism to the means by which it is practiced and done (Jansen, 2011, p. 82) – as Moffitt describes it, these scholars’ aim is to analyse how populists pursue and sustain power (Moffitt, 2020, p. 17). This analytical lens aligns with one of the core objectives of this study: fostering a meaningful dialogue between the fields of public administration and of populism research. Barr’s definition of populism serves as a foundation for this objective, emphasising practical governance strategies over ideological content.

Pappas, an author who extensively researches populist rule in his book *Populism and Liberal Democracy: A Comparative and Theoretical Analysis*, elaborates a ‘populist blueprint’ common to all cases of populist governance, which ‘includes “grabbing the state” and an expansion of executive power, an onslaught on liberal institutions, and patronage politics’ (Pappas, 2019, p. 190) leading to ‘an almost complete seizure of state power’ (Pappas, 2019, 190), which can entail, amongst other things, ‘the appointment of party loyalists at all levels of state bureaucracy; empowering the executive at the expense of other branches of state power; (...) and, ultimately, regime change through the introduction of bold constitutional reforms’ (Pappas, 2019, p. 190). In this sense, although not using the ideational approach or focusing on ideology more broadly, Pappas comes to a rather similar conclusion – the attack against liberal institutions. Ultimately, in this analytical thrust, the central issue appears to be less about ideology itself and more about the tension between populism and liberalism or liberal democracy. This perspective resonates with broader discussions in the field, such as those by Urbinati (2019) and Moffitt (2020), which explore the complex relationship between populist governance and liberal democratic norms.

The article unfolds as follows: the next section provides a review of the literature on populism in government and its influence on foreign policy, highlighting a gap regarding the study of the role of the bureaucracy in resisting populists’ decisions. The subsequent sections outline the theoretical framework and the research design and methods. The empirical cases are discussed in the following two parts, showing how the Orbán government managed to take control of the bureaucratic apparatus and change the country’s foreign policy in Hungary by shifting it towards ‘the East’, whilst the Italian diplomatic apparatus was able to actually reframe within the country’s foreign policy tradition a similar attempt to tilt the foreign policy of Italy towards eastern Asia, notably China. The final section, by comparing the cases of Hungary (2010–2014 and 2014–2018, both separately and as a whole) with the case of Italy

(2018–2019), examines the way in which the factors mentioned above stand out in shaping the dynamics of the politics–bureaucracy interactions and their influence on foreign policy.

## I. Literature Review

Given the rise of populist forces in numerous jurisdictions (Dieckhoff et al., 2022, p. 4), there is a growing scholarly interest in analysing the implications on public policies at large (Sheingate and Greer, 2021) and, specifically, foreign policy. Out of the larger set of studies in the field, we focus on those analysing European cases. Initially, most works investigated the foreign policy preferences of European populist parties (Heinisch et al., 2018; Henke and Maher, 2021; Vignoli and Coticchia, 2020) and how these can be projected at the EU level (Falkner and Plattner, 2020; Futák-Campbell and Schwieter, 2020; van Berlo and Naturski, 2019). More recently, the gap in the study of how national foreign policy changes when populists hold governmental positions has started to be filled, as the special issue edited by Destradi et al. in *Comparative European Politics* exemplifies (Destradi et al., 2021, p. 664).

Nonetheless, empirical results in this field are partly inconclusive. For instance, scholars disagree about the potential impact of the all-populist M5S-Lega government on Italy's foreign policy: whilst some have argued that their effect was disruptive (Casarini, 2019; Cladi and Locatelli, 2021; Dossi, 2020), others have claimed that there were mere rhetorical disruptions, which did not radically shift the country's foreign policy orientation or methods (Coticchia, 2021; Giurlando, 2021; Lequesne, 2021; Monteleone, 2021; Pugliese et al., 2022). Conversely, there is a rather strong scholarly consensus about Prime Minister (PM) Orbán's important influence on Hungary's foreign policy (Jenne, 2021; Müller and Gazsi, 2023; Varga and Buzogány, 2021; Végh, 2015; Visnovitz and Jenne, 2021). Why the differences between the two cases? What are the factors determining such variations?

In our view, there are two reasons why empirical studies have not been able to explain such variations across cases. First, 'we lack systematic *comparative* insights on populist governments' foreign policies *in Europe* [emphasis added]' (Destradi et al., 2021, p. 665). In turn, this makes it less straightforward for authors to engage in a comparison between cases, highlighting similarities and dissimilarities that might explain differences in the policy outcome. Second, the *interaction* between populist forces in government and the bureaucratic apparatus has not been subject of scholarly inquiry so far. The only two notable exceptions (Lequesne, 2021; Müller and Gazsi, 2023) focus on the way in which populists try to 'capture' the diplomatic corps, either failing (as in the cases of Austria and Italy) or succeeding (as in Hungary and Poland). Nonetheless, their point of departure is quite different from the one adopted in this article: they analyse the populists' attempt to control the bureaucratic apparatus, rather than focusing on the dynamics of the interaction between elective and tenured officials and the way in which this affects – in turn – foreign policy. This is the gap our article aims at filling as 'any foreign policy change must overcome normal resistance in political, administrative, and personality structures and processes' (Hermann, 1990, p. 8).

## II. Theoretical Framework

In order to interpret the behaviour<sup>1</sup> of elected and tenured officials and their dynamic interplay in the foreign policy field, we adopt as main theoretical lenses Barr's politico-strategic approach and Peters' politics of bureaucracy theory, building upon and further refining Bauer et al. (2021) framework of how populists in government can approach the bureaucratic apparatus (illustrated in Figure 1).

In an edited book, Bauer et al. elaborate an analytical framework outlining three approaches populists can adopt vis-à-vis the bureaucracy: sideline, ignore or use the bureaucratic apparatus. In turn, also depending on the way in which populists approach the bureaucracy, the bureaucracy can either work with, shirk or sabotage the populists' rule (Bauer et al., 2021, p. 17). We aim at refining this framework by providing an answer to two questions that are not directly addressed in the Bauer et al.'s work: first, what is the 'populist' element of these populists' behaviour? Second, what explains the bureaucrats' reaction?

To better understand the populist element of the equation, we suggest integrating Barr's definition of populism. The author aims at explaining the behaviour of populist elective officials in government as hinging around the dynamics of the means and ends of building power based on mobilisation and wielding that power to overwhelm those defending the institutions (Barr, 2018, p. 44). Barr defines populism as characterised by mobilisation of popular support through 'the use of anti-establishment, pro-people appeals and plebiscitarian linkages' (Barr, 2018, p. 49), in which the notion of 'anti-establishment' 'captures the politics of opposition to those wielding power' (Barr, 2009, p. 31) – or, in other words, any appeal that features an 'us versus them' or Manichean attitude (Barr, 2018, p. 47): populists present one choice to their voters, who may accept or reject it. In this sense, citizens do not actively participate in the decision-making process – such as through participatory linkages – and are only offered a 'take it or leave it' choice. This means that the plebiscitarian linkage 'vests a single individual with the task of representing "the people," replacing political parties in that role (...) [and] may be associated with a form of "direct democracy," albeit a highly majoritarian, Rousseauian version, where any intermediation or redistribution of the responsibility of representation leads to inefficiency and ineffectiveness' (Barr, 2009, p. 36).

Barr uses the terms 'strategy' and 'strategic' to qualify the behaviour of populists in government, drawing from the foreign and security policy literature. We argue that his approach can be complemented and supplemented with findings of the studies from the field of public management focused on the transposition of notions of strategic management for application to public administration and management (Bryson, 2018; Bryson and George, 2020; Ferlie and Ongaro, 2022), a growing stream of literature that can provide important concepts about what 'strategy' and 'strategic behaviour' is about for public sector organisations, notably at the politics–bureaucracy interface, thereby complementing the strategy literature from the field of foreign and security studies. Strategic management thinking furnishes approaches to understanding the strategy of public organisations. Strategy is in this literature associated to the notion of high-level and long-term impact

<sup>1</sup>As Barr argues, his approach to populism 'captures political behavior. Using the word behavior (...) does not imply the use of rational choice assumptions or behavioralism's methods' (Barr, 2018, p. 47).

decisions and on consistency (or absence thereof) of decisions over time; the dynamics of decision-making processes in the public sector organisation are the focus of the analysis; the notion of power (who gets to decide on the objectives and resources and how) is important but rather less central, and the focus is on the outcomes of the decisions, what they produce in terms of setting the strategic direction of the public sector organisation. Specifically, we have found certain theoretical approaches to understanding strategy in public organisations (Ferlie and Ongaro, 2022, call them ‘schools of thought of strategic management’) especially amenable to being applied to explain the change processes in the foreign policy field we account for here.

First, the so-called *design school of thought of strategic management* (Ferlie and Ongaro, 2022, pp. 30–34 in particular) is predicated on strategy ultimately residing in one mind: someone forming a vision of a possible future that then gets ultimately realised by deploying the required courses of action. In this approach, strategy as vision comes first, and the organisational structure of the organisation(s) involved follows and is correspondingly reshaped. This approach to strategy is especially amenable to interpreting what occurred in the Hungarian case, as we illustrate in detail in the section on foreign policy in Hungary, where Mr. Orbán masterminded the change in the basic foreign policy orientation of the country, enabled by length of stay in power by ‘his’ single party, and through a series of interconnected moves he was ultimately able to reshape the organisational structure of the ministry of foreign affairs.

Second, the *cultural school of thought in strategic management* (Ferlie and Ongaro, 2022, pp. 62–70 in particular) takes a very different theoretical perspective to explain strategy, and it assumes organisational culture to hold a higher order influence on decision processes in an organisation. The organisational culture in this perspective provides an ideational basis for all those socialised into the organisation, a set of value-laden guiding principles and ideas about what overarching goals to pursue and the appropriate courses of action to be undertaken. This approach to strategy is especially helpful in explaining continuity in foreign policy in Italy under populist government, continuity notably around the two post-World War II pillars of Italian foreign policy, namely, Europeanism and Atlanticism, as we illustrate in the case study on foreign policy (continuity) in Italy.

Third, other schools of thought in strategic management can also be deployed for explaining the two cases studied. These are the *learning school* (Ferlie and Ongaro, 2002, pp. 51–56), which explains decisions over time emphasising the significance of social actors learning about the evolving circumstances they operate in, and the *strategy-as-practice school*, which looks at embedded social practices as key to explaining processes of change or absence thereof (Ferlie and Ongaro, 2002, pp. 88–96). We use both these theoretical approaches from the strategic management of public organisations literature as part of our explanation of the case processes and outcomes of populist government and foreign policy change in Hungary and Italy.

Overall, we found theories and concepts from the growing stream of literature on the strategy of public organisation can complement and supplement Barr’s framework by introducing analytical lenses through which to interpret the behaviour of both the populist politicians in their thrust to leverage on political mobilisation for capturing the bureaucratic apparatus, as well as aspects of the patterns of the bureaucratic responses, and the dynamic interactions between the two social groups.

In order to further refine our understanding of the latter group, namely, the bureaucracy – and specifically for the cases studied in this work: the diplomatic corps – we also leverage the theory of the politics of bureaucracy as wrought out by Peters. Peters' politics of bureaucracy is a theoretical perspective to interpreting and explaining bureaucratic influence on policy-making. One central idea of what is nowadays a classic of public administration is the analogy with how a political party may influence policy (Peters, 2010, pp. 197 ff. in particular). By revisiting the work of Rose (1974), who provides a set of criteria that a political party must fulfil if it is to provide government after it has been elected, and modifying the components that apply strictly to political parties, Peters identifies a set of criteria that any group attempting to govern ('the root word for government implying control and steering') a society has to fulfil (Peters, 2010, p. 197): (a) the group must formulate policy intentions for enactment in office – in other words, it must have its own well-developed idea about what government should do (applied to bureaucracy, this has been labelled 'agency ideology'); (b) these intentions must be supported by the availability of 'not unworkable means' to the ends; (c) there should be some competition over the allocation of resources; (d) the group should be in sufficient numerical strength in the most important positions in the regime; (e) those given office in such positions must have the skills necessary for running a large bureaucratic organisation; and (f) high priority must be given to the implementation of goals. Peters then discusses the extent to which bureaucracies and bureaucrats fulfil such criteria. He concludes that He concludes that bureaucracies encounter many limitations in fulfilling such criteria (Peters, 2010, pp. 197–210 in particular) and, of course, ultimately, they can only provide 'non-consensual directions'. Bureaucracies, as providers of government, ultimately lack legitimacy from the public: although operational legitimacy as the appropriate collective allocators of values may under certain conditions be gained by bureaucracies, formal legitimacy remains the missing element (Peters, 2010, p. 228) and popular control remains a highly problematic issue in a 'politics of bureaucracy' perspective. Other important contributions in this stream of literature in relation to the objective of this article to shed light on foreign policy change and the role of the bureaucracy include Kaarbo (1998), who studied how bureaucratic minorities are able to resist change (amongst the strategies she mentions, they might mobilise procedural rules and practices to delay and distort the original intentions of particular policies they consider as going against their interests), and Alden and Aran, who notice that 'institutional sources of resistance to change may be tied to the levels of bureaucratic embeddedness in the decision-making process through role socialization, procedural scripts and cultural rationales, but there is little discussion in Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA) of processes such as institutional learning and its impact on foreign policy choice' (Alden and Aran 2011, p. 12). Both these perspectives provide important insights; overall, however, they are less geared to the specific analytical goal of this article than Peters' framework, which is more versatile and encompassing for the purpose of highlighting the role of the bureaucracy, and specifically the diplomatic corps, in the policy process, which is why we pluck this theoretical perspective for framing our analysis.

Intriguingly, Peters' politics of bureaucracy was written from the assumption that elected government was fully legitimised by its compliance with the constitution and rules and by the government's service (at least lip-service) to the common good of the entire political community. But what about a populist government? As Urbinati compellingly argues, populists claim that there is one specific part of the people that is supposed to be the



'true' ones (*a pars pro parte*-logic). Consequently, they engage in a form of exclusionary politics, in which a faction becomes the only one entitled to rule (Urbinati, 2019, pp. 47 ff.). This, which can be exemplified through their anti-establishment and pro-people appeals, brings forward the following question: are populists legitimate to exert their functions in the name of the political community as a whole? Considering such reasoning, bureaucracy may well claim its own 'legitimacy' in providing government to society. Ultimately, the issue of legitimacy might be pertinently revisited (some of the conditions under which the legitimacy deriving from electoral mandate in the case of populist government may be contested by the bureaucracy are spelt out by Bauer, 2023, and Yesilkagit et al., 2024; see also Ongaro, forthcoming 2025, chapter 5).

The basic idea of the politics of bureaucracy perspective, as wrought out by Peters, is that, albeit only sector by sector and without any unifying philosophy of government, bureaucratic government may occur. The bureaucracy may supply government to a society; in our case, the analytical focus is on the diplomatic corps as the key bureaucracy for the foreign policy of a given country, capable of supplying government to society, notably the foreign policy of the country in question.

To conclude on our theoretical framework, we need to also elaborate on how to gauge change in foreign policy, in order to 'measure' our explanandum, which is foreign policy change. To this purpose, we adopt Charles Hermann's (1990) typology of foreign policy change, which categorises shifts based on their degree of departure from the status quo. Adjustment change represents the most minor form, entailing slight modifications in execution without altering objectives or overarching strategy (as illustrated in more detail in the dedicated empirical section, the case of the Conte I government in Italy falls under this category). Programme change involves shifts in the methods or instruments used to pursue foreign policy objectives, leaving the goals unchanged but altering the means. Goal change reflects a redefinition of what the state seeks to achieve, indicating a shift in its foreign policy objectives. The most profound change, international orientation change, entails a fundamental transformation in a state's role, identity or alignment within the international system (as illustrated in the dedicated section later, the case of the third Orbán executive may be positioned in this category). Our empirical research situates the case studies within these categories; this is amply discussed in the final part of the article.

### III. Research Design and Methods

The research design is a qualitative comparative case study approach using process tracing (PT) as a method. The choice of method has been driven by the research objective: uncovering the mechanisms through which populists in power can influence foreign policy processes, institutions and outcomes. Our work is also aligned with Pugliese et al., who use PT for their analysis of the foreign policy adopted by the Conte First government (Pugliese et al., 2022, p. 1037).

PT 'seeks to detect the transmission of causal forces through a causal mechanism to produce an outcome in a single case' (Beach and Pedersen, 2013, p. 75). Thus, it allows to discuss *how* populism influences foreign policy decision-making processes. PT is also an apt method for enabling the unpacking of causality as it develops over time; thus, '(i)f one states that context and time matter, one needs to use process tracing, because things

do not happen “*ceteris paribus*” (...) and mechanisms have to be understood within their specific institutional and historical environment’ (Trampusch and Palier, 2016, p. 448).

We used both primary and secondary sources. In addition to official documents, press conferences and journalistic investigations, we based our research on semi-structured elite interviews with career diplomats and civil servants having worked at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the two countries during the period of analysis, thus gaining access to accounts that would not be available from other sources (something particularly useful when using PT, see Tansey, 2007, p. 766) as well as enabling us to go beyond the populists’ communication strategies and grasp what happened behind closed doors. In the case of Hungary, as bureaucrats were not inclined to speak to a researcher in fear of losing their job, we included also researchers in government-led think tanks, professors in universities and career diplomats who do not work at the Ministry but are still part of the diplomatic corps. All details concerning the interviews are presented in Appendix A (Table A1 for the Conte I government and Table A2 for the Orbán executives).

In order to enable cross-comparison, we decided to opt for the analyticist approach proposed by Van Meegdenburg. As it takes into account the actors’ agency, it enables us to introduce the possibility of ‘multi-finality’, namely, the fact that same mechanisms can produce different outcomes even though they are within the same structural conditions (Guzzini, 2017, p. 432). Indeed, Van Meegdenburg distinguishes between mechanisms as abstract ideal types and the concrete instantiations that exemplify them. The former are ‘an analytical construct that defines, in abstract terms, how a given set-up or entity transfers motion in an identical or closely similar ways over a variety of situations’ (van Meegdenburg, 2023, p. 408). The latter are the mechanism’s occurrence in empirical reality and thus case- and context-specific, often part of a larger process. It is through this distinction that Van Meegdenburg introduces multi-finality (or ‘portability’, as she calls it) in her approach: since mechanisms interact with their context, their outcome cannot be determined a priori – hence, the same mechanisms can produce different outcomes (van Meegdenburg, 2023, p. 412).

The case studies that have been selected are the First Conte government in Italy (2018–2019) and the Second and Third Orbán executives in Hungary (2010–2014 and 2014–2018), which we analyse both individually and jointly and then compare with the Italy case. Considerations for case selection criteria include, first, that each government has had at least one populist force participating in the executive. Indeed, in the literature, there is scholarly consensus on the fact that Lega, MSZ and Fidesz are populist forces, regardless of the approach used to define populism. Second, we have opted for countries that are both EU member states. Third, case outcomes are different: the Italian diplomatic corps managed to respond in the foreign policy domain to attempts at policy change by the populist government; by contrast, populist leader Orbán managed to implement his ‘vision’ and strategic design, disempowering effectively the bureaucratic apparatus and putting into effect a major policy change. Fourth, the nature of the governing party coalition configuration is different: a single party government in Hungary and an all-populist coalition of right- and left-wing parties in Italy. Lastly, the diplomatic corps are quite different in terms of their tradition and their capacity to provide policy continuity: as Lequesne points out, the corporatist tradition and the prestige enjoyed by the diplomatic corps in Italy safeguarded its bureaucratic autonomy (Lequesne, 2021, pp. 788 ff.); conversely, after the collapse of the Communist regime, Hungary’s foreign policy apparatus

had undergone quite important changes, with purges in its personnel ranks, but also more broadly a radical shift in the country's foreign policy tradition – this having occurred even before Orbán's arrival to power and contributing to explain how the Orbán government managed to reshape foreign policy.

#### IV. Populist Government and International Orientation Change in Hungary (2010–2014 and 2014–2018)

When Orbán's party Fidesz conquered a two-third parliamentary majority in 2010, the populist leader did not change the country's foreign policy immediately (Müller and Gazsi, 2023; Varga and Buzogány, 2021; Végh, 2015; Visnovitz and Jenne, 2021). Indeed, he decided to have, as Minister of Foreign Affairs, the moderate János Martonyi, an 'older gentleman'<sup>2</sup> extremely attentive to other countries' sensitivities and with a neutral communication style.<sup>3</sup> He was a highly experienced minister who knew very well the European institutions<sup>4</sup> and whose position was clearly Euro-Atlantic.<sup>5</sup> Thus, he symbolised a clear commitment to the country's extant foreign policy priorities (Visnovitz and Jenne, 2021, p. 689). By this choice, PM Orbán pursued a clear strategy: given that Hungary was about to take over its first Presidency of the Council of the EU (first half of the year 2011), he preferred to maintain the status quo and to have an experienced figure at the head of the Ministry in charge of handling this task.<sup>6</sup> Thus, 'Minister Martonyi largely relied on the extant, experienced bureaucracy to run Hungary's 2011 presidency of the European Council' (Müller and Gazsi, 2023, p. 405). It was only after his second consecutive electoral victory in 2014 that PM Orbán nominated Péter Szijjártó as the new Minister of Foreign Affairs, who was formerly his spokesperson (2010–2012) and then Minister of State for Foreign Affairs and External Economic Relations at the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) from 2012 to 2014.<sup>7</sup> Such decision was a clear sign of his intentions to radically change the country's foreign policy.

This course of action was already foreshadowed in a 2010 speech, when Orbán declared that whilst Hungary remained anchored to its Western roots, a wind coming from the East was blowing in the world economy. In his view, Hungary had to reposition itself and to intensify its foreign trade relations with and attract investments from countries in the East (Rácz, 2011, pp. 145 ff.). Although some elements were already part of the Hungarian foreign policy thinking before the populist's arrival to power (for more details, see Végh, 2015), the strategic turn under Orbán presented two major novelties: first, the prioritisation of trade and, second, the leader's assessment of the international situation as characterised by the economic decline of the West, which meant the need for Hungary's economic development to diversify and strengthen its ties with partners to the East, like Russia or China (Végh, 2015, p. 61). In fact, to better grasp the populist's strategy, we look into the so-called 'Openings' policy, namely, the decision to centre Hungary's relations with its foreign partners around trade. Symbolically, the name of the Ministry was changed

<sup>2</sup>7\_20.05.2022\_HU.

<sup>3</sup>7\_20.05.2022\_HU.

<sup>4</sup>5\_10.05.2022\_HU.

<sup>5</sup>4\_10.05.2022\_HU, 5\_10.05.2022\_HU.

<sup>6</sup>5\_10.05.2022\_HU.

<sup>7</sup><https://2015-2019.kormany.hu/en/ministry-of-foreign-affairs-and-trade/the-minister> (accessed 12 July 2023).

in 2014, adding to the title ‘Trade’. Particularly relevant is that the word order is different between the English and the Hungarian versions.<sup>8</sup> In the former (hence, for the ‘foreign’ audience), the translation was ordered to be ‘Foreign Affairs’ followed by ‘Trade’. In the latter (hence, in the law changing the name as well as on all official documents and buildings), the word order is reversed, putting ‘Trade’ at the beginning of the title (*Külgazdasági és Külügyminisztérium* or ‘Ministry of Trade and Foreign Affairs’).

Importantly, during the 2010–2014 period, the ‘Eastern Opening’ was not pursued by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, but rather by the PMO, and more specifically, under Péter Szijjártó’s leadership, who had been nominated State Secretary for Foreign and External Economic Affairs of the PMO in June 2012, as well as Commissioner for Hungarian–Russian economic relations and for the harmonisation of Hungarian–Chinese bilateral relations in March 2013 (Végh, 2015, p. 51). Szijjártó was later to become minister for foreign affairs during the 2014–2018 term. Whilst, back in 2011, also, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs presented the so-called ‘Global Opening’ (*‘Globális Nyitás’*) – a document that described the value of partnerships outside of the EU (Visnovitz and Jenne, 2021, p. 696) – a division of tasks became more and more visible, with the PMO starting ‘to develop a distinct foreign policy profile in parallel to that of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, albeit predominantly focused on the trade and investment aspects of external relations’ (Végh, 2015, p. 51). Although both having the word ‘Opening’, the two strategies differed significantly as the one pursued by the PMO was a foreign policy tool which aimed at increasing trade and investment ties with countries in the East (Tarrósy and Vörös, 2020, p. 117). Ultimately, the main idea behind this doctrine was to subordinate foreign affairs to foreign trade (Varga and Buzogány, 2021, p. 1454).

After his second consecutive electoral victory in 2014, PM Orbán presented (in August) the guiding principles for the new era of foreign policy during the meeting of the Hungarian heads of missions. In the speech, he stated his vision to apply the logic of the ‘Eastern Opening’ to Hungary’s foreign policy as a whole (Végh, 2015, p. 51), meaning the rejection of a normative-driven foreign policy and a reorientation towards bilateral relations based on trade and economy (Hettyey, 2021, p. 185). In a nutshell, in his 2014 speech, Orbán argued that ideology-driven foreign policy was invented by smart countries for dumb ones: Hungary should therefore enter a foreign policy phase based upon the prioritisation of its economic interests. With Szijjártó’s arrival, the ‘newly established Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade declared attracting investments and foreign trade to be the Hungarian diplomacy’s top priority’ (Varga and Buzogány, 2021, p. 1454). Foreign trade indeed became prioritised, notably through an increase of the number of commercial attachés or special economic attachés.<sup>9</sup> Foreign trade had become central and been placed above foreign affairs and ‘classic’ diplomacy.<sup>10</sup>

Besides specific staffing interventions, much more generally Orbán managed to impose his strategy through the radical reform of the diplomatic corps. The reform of the Hungarian civil service law, enacted in the year 2011 (Visnovitz and Jenne, 2021, p. 689), impacted the diplomatic corps in 2014. One clause of the new code was particularly important: it requires ‘civil servants to remain “professionally loyal” to their superiors and

<sup>8</sup>2\_07.03.2022\_HU, 5\_10.05.2022\_HU.

<sup>9</sup>6\_10.05.2022\_HU.

<sup>10</sup>2\_07.03.2022\_HU, 3\_17.03.2022\_HU.

the “professional values” thereof, with a “loss of confidence” by superiors providing grounds for dismissal’ (Müller and Gazsi, 2023, p. 407). With the appointment of Minister Szijjártó in 2014, PM Orbán clearly signalled that the ‘grace period’ the diplomatic corps had enjoyed during the stint of Minister Martonyi was coming to an end. As one interview partner<sup>11</sup> recalls, the minister said that he had been given a clear order upon his arrival at the Ministry, namely, the radical change of the personnel in the bureaucratic apparatus – and ‘he was proud of having changed most people in the Ministry’.<sup>12</sup> Estimations about the level of such staff turnover vary, with one interview partner talking about at least 60%, but more likely 70%<sup>13</sup> – as the official estimates cited in the literature indicate as well (Müller and Gazsi, 2023, p. 406). However, one diplomat declared: ‘I heard estimations that 90% of staff before 2010 was changed (...) 10% of diplomats who were there before (like me) are now still [part of the] (...) the Foreign Service’.<sup>14</sup> The few staffers from the ‘old guard’ who were retained felt sidelined and treated with suspicion. Remarkably, the turnover did not only involve the highest levels of the administrative ladder (ambassadorial and state secretary positions): indeed, the changes went all the way down to the desk level.<sup>15</sup> The reshuffle impacted not only those hired before Orbán’s arrival to power in 2010 but also those who had been hired under Minister Martonyi, as they were still seen as being loyal to the EU/NATO and transatlantic relations more generally.<sup>16</sup>

The newly appointed civil servants are described as ‘unexperienced young people’<sup>17</sup> who ‘are completely newcomers’.<sup>18</sup> The criteria to become a diplomat are no longer professionalism or experience in the field of foreign policy (with some saying that it is still helpful,<sup>19</sup> whilst others being more pessimistic<sup>20</sup>) but rather political loyalty<sup>21</sup> and, more specifically, being loyal to the party and having good connections.<sup>22</sup> One interview partner described it as a form of ‘clientelism’<sup>23</sup> – only ‘friends’ can become diplomats. In turn, this means that higher positions are filled with youngsters who did not have to climb the hierarchical ladder step by step and thus lack the experience and maturity to hold such senior positions. In comparing it with the diplomatic corps under the Communist regime, s/he expressed his/her regret towards that time, when diplomats were indeed trained in Moscow, but at least they were professionals.<sup>24</sup> The overall quality of staff is judged by several interview partners as having lowered significantly those years.<sup>25</sup>

This massive turnover brought about the end of the Euro-Atlantic mentality that had been part of the diplomats’ view since the collapse of Communism. Instead, diplomats were required to defend the Hungarian interests as defined by the Fidesz leadership (Müller and Gazsi, 2023, p. 408). This was described in a similar manner during the

<sup>11</sup>5\_10.05.2022\_HU.

<sup>12</sup>5\_10.05.2022\_HU.

<sup>13</sup>5\_10.05.2022\_HU.

<sup>14</sup>2\_07.03.2022\_HU.

<sup>15</sup>3\_17.03.2022\_HU.

<sup>16</sup>1\_21.02.2022\_HU, 5\_10.05.2022\_HU.

<sup>17</sup>5\_10.05.2022\_HU.

<sup>18</sup>2\_07.03.2022\_HU.

<sup>19</sup>3\_17.03.2022\_HU, 4\_10.05.2022\_HU.

<sup>20</sup>1\_21.02.2022\_HU, 2\_07.03.2022\_HU.

<sup>21</sup>2\_07.03.2022\_HU.

<sup>22</sup>2\_07.03.2022\_HU.

<sup>23</sup>4\_10.05.2022\_HU.

<sup>24</sup>4\_10.05.2022\_HU.

<sup>25</sup>2\_07.03.2022\_HU, 3\_17.03.2022\_HU, 4\_10.05.2022\_HU, 5\_10.05.2022\_HU.

interviews: they are required to defend the government's decisions and to follow the line imposed by the political level<sup>26</sup> without any room for manoeuvre.<sup>27</sup> More generally speaking, diplomats are no longer expected to be 'diplomatic' but rather to quarrel with the local press, to take the floor at conferences and to be present in the public debate.<sup>28</sup> At the same time, they are not asked to take the time to listen to the foreign interlocutor – matters are simplified around two poles: yes or no.<sup>29</sup>

Ultimately, the episode accounted for here reveals the strategy designed by the populist leader and the way in which he systematically imposed his vision over the diplomacy of Hungary, by deploying a well-crafted course of action, designed in advance, throughout the two terms in office that form the period of observation in this study.

## V. Populist Government and Adjustment Changes in Italy (2018–2019)

The First Conte Government was supported by a coalition of two populist parties: the Five Star Movement or M5S, with its leading figure Luigi Di Maio, and the Lega ('Ligue'), headed by Matteo Salvini. From the very beginning, the two leaders announced their willingness for their government to be characterised by 'change': tellingly, the name they chose for their executive was 'the government of change' (*il governo del cambiamento*). Whether much change, and what type, actually happened is questionable: to investigate this, in this study, we focus the episode of the memorandum of understanding (MoU) with China, which was signed in March 2019. This episode clearly shows both the attempts of the populists forces to change the Italian foreign policy and the decisive counteracting intervention of the bureaucratic apparatus to stem such radical shift. Ultimately, this case study reveals that the diplomatic corps emptied the MoU of any meaningful change, thereby securing continuity in the Italy's foreign policy.

A few preliminary elements are in order. Populist leader and Deputy PM Luigi Di Maio (M5S) was Minister for Economic Development. He held a pivotal position in this policy episode, as the section on commercial agreements was transferred from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to his ministry at the beginning of the legislative period.<sup>30</sup> Another central figure in this setting was Michele Geraci,<sup>31</sup> Undersecretary for Economic Development, who had been designated by the Lega yet also had strong relationships with the co-founder of the M5S, Beppe Grillo. The process of negotiation of the MoU took several months, something quite unusual for these type of agreements (Pugliese et al., 2022, p. 1050) – already a first hint to the difficulties behind the signing of the MoU.

Di Maio and Geraci were at the forefront of the negotiation process, at least during its initial phase. The text of the agreement was elaborated mainly by the Ministry of Economic Development.<sup>32</sup> The process was fraught with difficulties: on 6 March 2019, the United States expressed clearly its opposition to the MoU, through an interview by Garrett Marquis (then-Spokesperson for the National Security Council) to the *Financial Times*.

<sup>26</sup>1\_21.02.2022\_HU.

<sup>27</sup>4\_10.05.2022\_HU.

<sup>28</sup>5\_10.05.2022\_HU.

<sup>29</sup>4\_10.05.2022\_HU.

<sup>30</sup>8\_1\_02.05.2023\_IT.

<sup>31</sup>One of the interview partners called him 'the Chinese in the government', as he spoke Mandarin fluently (2\_07.04.2022\_IT).

<sup>32</sup>8\_1\_02.05.2023\_IT.

Such warning words coming from the White House sparked an internal discussion opposing Salvini on one side and Di Maio and PM Conte on the other. The Ligue requested important changes to the text of the MoU – notably the deletion of three key words from the MoU, namely, telecommunications, interoperability and energy. Eventually on 20 March 2019, after several meetings involving not only PM Conte and the two populist leaders but also Foreign Affairs Minister Moavero Milanese and the Secretary of the Council of Ministers Giancarlo Giorgetti (Ligue), an agreement was found, and the executive announced that the MoU would be signed during President Xi's state visit. Populist leader Di Maio's triumph – at least as a public communications operation – was complete, as he was the one signing the MoU.

But why was not the Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs Moavero Milanese to sign the agreement<sup>33</sup>? After all, it was his Chinese counterpart (Wang Yi) who did so for the PRC. Such decision was deliberate: if the minister had signed the agreement, his signature would have given it a foreign policy relevance. By contrast, his absence symbolised their strictly commercial value.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, the interviews revealed a clear position shared by both Moavero Milanese and the diplomatic corps: on the one hand, the PRC was seen as a country having an imperial foreign policy spearheading a global vision of dominance. Thus, there was a strong awareness within the Ministry that the MoU had the potential to become extremely dangerous for Italy and its position at the international level.<sup>35</sup> On the other hand, it was clear to both of them that the country had a commercial gap in its commercial exchanges with China that needed to be overcome.<sup>36</sup>

Avoiding the dangers behind the MoU, whilst taking advantage of it for the country's economic development: this summarises the main interests of the diplomatic corps. And indeed, diplomats directly intervened and radically changed the text negotiated by the Ministry for Economic Development<sup>37</sup>: diplomats worked over the weekend just preceding the state visit (on 16 and 17 of March 2019) to modify the 16 governmental protocols between Italy and China, adding several reminders to the fundamental pillars of the European legislative framework. For instance, as one diplomat recalled, the final version of the text did not include any reference to critical infrastructure such as 5G or the strategic ports of Trieste and Genoa.<sup>38</sup> Although both PM Conte and Minister Di Maio described it as a new Versailles Treaty or a new Congress of Vienna, they overstated its value and tried to hide such downgraded reality.<sup>39</sup>

One diplomat was clear: the text was blocked by diplomacy and the bureaucrats to counter certain impulses that came from the political levels.<sup>40</sup> Another described the sentiment that accompanied the presentation of the finalised version: 'there was a bit of dissatisfaction when the text of the MoU came out – everyone was aware that in reality the text was much less committed/"welcoming" than what had been expected'.<sup>41</sup> The diplomats' effort was to

<sup>33</sup> Confirmed by 7\_12.05.2022\_IT.

<sup>34</sup> 8\_1\_02.05.2023\_IT.

<sup>35</sup> 7\_12.05.2022\_IT, 8\_1\_02.05.2023\_IT.

<sup>36</sup> 8\_1\_02.05.2023\_IT. More generally, the idea was to support Italian entrepreneurial system to find a new market to boost its export possibilities (3\_09.04.2022\_IT).

<sup>37</sup> 1\_04.04.2022\_IT, 6\_12.05.2022\_IT, 8\_1\_02.05.2023\_IT.

<sup>38</sup> 7\_12.05.2022\_IT.

<sup>39</sup> 8\_1\_02.05.2023\_IT.

<sup>40</sup> 1\_04.04.2022\_IT.

<sup>41</sup> 5\_03.05.2022\_IT.

frame the MoU within the European regulatory framework, to make it a state-of-the-art example of a partnership between the PRC and an EU member state. Simply put, the text should have a clear reference to the agreements and, more generally, to the partnerships that already existed between China and the EU, thus showing that what Italy was about to do (signing the MoU) was coherent within this general framework.<sup>42</sup>

More generally speaking, diplomats revealed that – although they felt as they had ‘won’ against the impulses coming from the populists in power – they were also very much aware of the fact that the ending could have been different as well<sup>43</sup> (‘it turned out well [*alla fine è andata bene*]<sup>44</sup>). They considered this period as being quite a difficult one (‘it has been difficult to keep the boat steady [*tenere la barra dritta*]<sup>45</sup>) and the fact that it was not such a long governmental experience was also seen as an element of their success<sup>46</sup> in maintaining Italy’s foreign policy on track.<sup>47</sup> As one civil servant described it, the government was dominated by the idea that they could do whatever popped up in their heads (in the words of one interviewee, governing had become ‘the big party [*la grande festa*]<sup>48</sup>). Hence, they saw it as their mission to re-establish the equilibrium.<sup>49</sup> As they were convinced that Italy’s foreign policy framework is the best suited to serve the country’s interests,<sup>50</sup> this group of diplomats engaged in a battle to maintain its traditional pillars<sup>51</sup> (‘to be a diplomat you need to be a patriot (...) it is within this context that the rebalancing and the recovery mechanisms work’<sup>52</sup>). In pursuing this course of action, they may have also felt enabled by the behind the scenes yet potentially powerful political role wielded by President of the Republic Sergio Mattarella. Indeed, whilst interviewees did not explicitly mention any direct intervention by President of the Republic Mattarella into the process (which is why this is not part of our account), they did emphasise his decisive influence in other foreign policy episodes during the Conte I government (for instance, his role in repairing Italy’s relationship with France following the recall of Ambassador Masset was widely recognised). The interviewees consistently viewed the President of the Republic as the ultimate guarantor of Italy’s system, particularly in opposing policies that might undermine the country’s foreign policy foundations. Additionally, at the outset of coalition negotiations between Salvini and Di Maio, President Mattarella ensured the appointment of two technocrats, Tria and Moavero Milanesi, to key ministerial positions – an effort to reassure international partners. Hence, the political influence of a pro-European President of the Republic can be seen as playing a complementary role and influence on the unfolding of the events recounted here.

In a nutshell, the work behind the scenes demonstrates a strong esprit de corps aiming, in the intention of the tenured officials, rescuing Italy’s international reputation and keeping steady the direction of its foreign policy tradition.

<sup>42</sup> 1\_04.04.2022\_IT.

<sup>43</sup> 5\_03.05.2022\_IT, 6\_12.05.2022\_IT.

<sup>44</sup> 5\_03.05.2022\_IT.

<sup>45</sup> 5\_03.05.2022\_IT.

<sup>46</sup> 5\_03.05.2022\_IT.

<sup>47</sup> 1\_04.04.2022\_IT, 5\_03.05.2022\_IT.

<sup>48</sup> 5\_03.05.2022\_IT.

<sup>49</sup> 2\_07.04.2022\_IT, 5\_03.05.2022\_IT, 6\_12.05.2022\_IT.

<sup>50</sup> 5\_03.05.2022\_IT, 7\_12.05.2022\_IT.

<sup>51</sup> 8\_2\_09.05.2023\_IT.

<sup>52</sup> 5\_03.05.2022\_IT.



## Conclusion

The empirical analyses of the two country cases (the Hungarian case inclusive of the two embedded cases of the Orbán Second and Third governments, respectively) reveal significant differences in the dynamics of the relationships between the populist elected officials and the bureaucratic apparatus. In the Hungarian case, we can clearly see an international orientation change in the country's foreign policy. In this sense, the episode of the 'Eastern Openings' compellingly exemplifies the way in which the populist leader Orbán managed to radically shift the country's foreign policy, in terms of not only policies but also its diplomatic apparatus (whose radical change enabled and paved the way to the significant foreign policy change occurred under the Orbán Third government in 2014–2018). Such change can, at least tentatively, be positioned as international orientation change, using the typology in Hermann's framework.

Quite the opposite was the situation in the Italy case, where our empirical analysis has shown that behind the slogans, Italy's foreign policy displayed remarkable continuity in substance, due to a significant extent to the decisive role performed by the bureaucracy (thus also showing a difference in the bureaucratic stance towards populist government expressed by the diplomatic corps as compared to other compartments of the Italian bureaucracy, see Di Mascio et al., 2021).<sup>53</sup> As such, it can be defined as an adjustment change according to Hermann's categorisation, nothing more than a shift in diplomatic tactics or tone, such as or adjusting the rhetoric in speeches. Although from a rhetorical point of view, the populist leaders in power displayed a victory lap for the 'changes' put on show; ultimately, the emphasis was more on announcing – to obtain their electorate's consensus – rather than on content and substance (as also shown in Pugliese et al., 2022).

To explain the difference between the Hungarian and Italian case, our analysis revealed two factors that played an overarching role: (i) the governing coalition dynamics and (ii) the extent to which the diplomatic corps conceives of its role as guarantor and guardian of continuity in foreign policy. Both factors are dynamic, not static, and are crucially affected by the length of stay in power of the populist government (our explanatory framework is illustrated in Figure 1 and further discussed throughout the remainder of this section).

The 'Openings' turn in Hungary's foreign policy is a key policy episode that reveals the way in which the populist leader managed to impose step by step his designed strategy. This was made possible thanks to his *length in power*, thereby indicating how this affected the outcome. Indeed, not only did he create a parallel foreign policy structure within the PMO, thus sidelining the Ministry of Foreign Affairs during the 2010–2014 period, but in a concerted effort, soon after being elected in 2010, he 'pushed through the modification of the Hungarian civil service law (...) making it possible to lay off civil servants without justification' (Visnovitz and Jenne, 2021, p. 689). It is true that already before 2010, 'the Hungarian civil service legislation authorized ministers to pursue far-reaching organizational reforms that provided them with considerable discretion to dismiss civil servants' (Müller and Gazsi, 2023, p. 406). Nonetheless, the 2011 law made dismissals easier and even more so dependent on political considerations (Müller and Gazsi, 2023, p. 406), thus enabling Orbán to graft party loyalists into positions that had been previously held by non-partisan bureaucrats (Visnovitz and Jenne, 2021, p. 689). In academic literature,

<sup>53</sup>3\_09.04.2022\_IT, 5\_03.05.2022\_IT, 7\_12.05.2022\_IT, 8.1\_02.05.2023\_IT.

scholars have described this phenomenon as (state or political) ‘capture’ (Lequesne, 2021; Müller and Gazsi, 2023). Therefore, not only did length of stay in power enable the populist government to pursue foreign policy change in a profound manner (at the highest degree possible according to Hermann’s categorisation) – the duration in power paved the way to policy change by enabling the government to remove a very key factor of potential resistance to change, namely, the *diplomatic corps tradition*, and specifically its pro-European and western stance (albeit occurred only recently and with limited roots in the country’s history). By replacing the diplomatic corps (who acted as custodian of the traditional foreign policy stance), the very source of the bureaucratic resistance was altogether removed (as accounted for in the first period analysed, the second Orbán government), and *only then*, in the successive period (the third Orbán government), the radical foreign policy change was put into effect unhindered.

In Italy, on the contrary, due to the relatively short length of stay in power of the government, which lasted approximately a year, the populist government was not able to impose radical changes in the country’s foreign policy. As we have seen and is well known in the literature, administrative reforms take time, almost always one term in government may not be enough (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2017), hence the relative short duration of the government, and its precarious standing even before it collapsed due to continual bickering between the coalition parties is to be factored in explaining why change occurred mostly at the level of rhetoric, rather than at the level of actual policy decisions and implementation. This government did not have the time to radically reshape the diplomatic corps, which proved to (continue to) be an actor in its own right in foreign policy; the diplomatic corps, acting as custodian of the traditional pro-European policy and an enforcer of such fundamental stance or orientation of the Italian foreign policy, was able to resist, by effectively diluting, all the attempted modifications to the Italian foreign policy.

The first key factor that enabled Orbán to implement his vision thus was the total control over his own political party, Fidesz, and, crucially, the very fact his government was a *single party government*<sup>54</sup> and moreover one in which the parliamentary majority enabled enacting constitutional-level reforms. As we have seen, control over the regulatory process enabled the radical redesign of the foreign affairs ministry, most notably through the replacement of diplomatic officials with loyalists, thereby totally sapping any possibility for the diplomatic corps to push back and resist the new course of action in foreign policy. Importantly, also, at the time the European Union was not actively intervening in countering populist policies, a stance which emerged only later on (Ongaro et al., 2022).

By contrast, in Italy, the presence of a *government coalition* triggered quite different mechanisms. Indeed, the governmental experience of two populist forces in power was characterised by almost daily feuds between the two leaders (Baldini and Giglioli, 2021, p. 516) – an internal rivalry that worsened with the approaching of the European parliamentary elections in May 2019 (Nelli Feroci, 2019, p. 6) and that ultimately weakened governmental policy consistency.

There is a research strand in Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA) dedicated to analysing how coalition dynamics (including the ideologies of coalition parties, the relative position of populist parties, whether as senior or junior members of the coalition or both and the

<sup>54</sup>Officially in a coalition with the Christian Democratic People’s Party or KNDP, which can be considered as a satellite party of Fidesz.

interactions with other parties ideologies) can influence a country's foreign policy (Beasley and Kaarbo, 2014; Hagan, 1993; Hagan et al., 2001; Kaarbo, 1996; Kaarbo and Beasley, 2008; Maoz and Russett, 1993; Oktay, 2022; Oppermann and Brummer, 2014, 2020; Oppermann et al., 2017; for a recent example encompassing populism in the analysis, please see Corsini, 2025). The scope of this specific article is confined to critically analysing the interplay of the government coalition with the role of the bureaucracy, which is why such considerations are not further wrought out in our theoretical framework.

The second key factor was the *diplomatic corps tradition*. In this sense, Hungary is quite an interesting case: when Orbán came to power, the foreign policy bureaucratic apparatus was rather 'new' (less than 20 years old). This was due to the changes it underwent after the end of the Communist regime and the transition towards a democratic system, which meant the firing of several career diplomats that had been trained in Moscow. Such changes are self-evident, given the radical shift in the country's foreign policy from a Soviet- to a Western-orientated one (see, for instance, Banai, 2015; Hettyey, 2021; Niklasson, 2006). As such, when Orbán reformed the system to be able to place party loyalists in the diplomatic corps, there was no strong esprit de corps uniting those working in the foreign policy apparatus in the first place. In short, the diplomatic corps was likely to provide at most a somewhat limited potential resistance to the foreign policy change envisioned and later pursued by the populist government. However, interestingly, if we compare the first Orbán government (2010–2014) with Italy's 2018–2019 populist government's action in the foreign policy domain, we notice that it was the latter (the Italian government) to try and push harder to change foreign policy, and its action was effectively contrasted and nullified by the bureaucracy. Ultimately, the Hungarian government's action in changing foreign policy proved much more effective because it had at first dismantled one of the main sources of resistance, namely, the diplomatic corps tradition, and then pursued its favoured course of action.

Quite different, in fact, is the case of Italy, in which the diplomatic corps did push back, and it managed to do so effectively and, ultimately, successfully, thus reasserting their long-term and deeply rooted vision of Italy's foreign policy. As highlighted, some diplomats considered the Conte I as a moment in which the foreign policy of the executive was not in line with the international frameworks within which the country's foreign policy is enshrined.<sup>55</sup>

The bureaucracy can indeed be an agent in its own right in the public policy process – in the case of the diplomacy, by acting as custodian and guarantor of the traditional foreign policy worldview and anchorage.

Wrapping up, our analysis has shown that the two key factors highlighted in our analysis – (i) the governing coalition dynamics and (ii) the extent to which the diplomatic corps conceives of its role as guarantor and guardian of continuity in foreign policy – operate as enabling/disabling conditions for populist governments to change the foreign policy of their country. Such factors have to be considered dynamically: in terms of their 'direct' influence on foreign policy change, time may be a factor playing either in favour of the populist government orientated to change it, or in favour of the bureaucracy, who may resort to a wide array of bureaucratic tactics (Peters, 2010) to hamper, stall or

<sup>55</sup>2\_07.04.2022\_IT, 5\_03.05.2022\_IT.

outright reverse in its course the attempted change to the foreign policy of the country. However, as an enabler of an indirect yet crucial mechanism, namely, the dismantling of the bureaucratic corps and its tradition by the populist government, time can definitely play in the hands of populists' intent on taming the diplomatic apparatus and making it subservient to its policy priorities.

These factors may be considered in further studies (e.g., through comparative analysis, whether qualitative or quantitative) aimed at generating knowledge about the dynamics of policy change when the consequences of populist forces taking office is the focus of the analysis.

Our study has also shown the value of applying in a combined way the theoretical lenses of political strategy, complemented and supplemented with strategic management in public service organisations, and Peters' politics of bureaucracy. These frameworks, to our knowledge, have so far been applied in more disjointed ways; hence, a contribution of this article lies in providing a framework to employ these two theoretical frameworks in a combined way. Finally, our study highlights the significance of encompassing the bureaucracy, as an agent in its own right, into the explanatory framework, by considering in a combined way policy, administration and institutions.

#### Correspondence:

Hanna Corsini, European Studies, University of Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, Paris, France.  
email: [hanna.corsini@univ-paris1.fr](mailto:hanna.corsini@univ-paris1.fr)

## References

- Alden, C. and Aran, A. (2011) *Foreign Policy Analysis: New Approaches* (London: Routledge).
- Baldini, G. and Giglioli, M.F. (2021) 'Bread or Circuses? Repoliticization in the Italian Populist Government Experience'. *Government and Opposition*, Vol. 56, pp. 505–524.
- Banai, K. (2015) 'Permanent and Changing Features of Foreign Policy in Hungary Since 1989'. *Südosteuropa*, Vol. 63, No. 2, pp. 223–248.
- Barr, R.R. (2009) 'Populists, Outsiders and Anti-Establishment Politics'. *Party Politics*, Vol. 15, No. 1, pp. 29–48.
- Barr, R.R. (2018) 'Populism as a Political Strategy'. In de la Torre, C. (ed.) *Routledge Handbook of Global Populism* (London: Routledge), pp. 44–56.
- Bauer, M.W. (2023) 'Administrative Responses to Democratic Backsliding: When Is Bureaucratic Resistance Justified?' *Regulation & Governance*, pp. 1–14.
- Bauer, M.W., Guy Peters, B., Pierre, J., Yesilkagit, K. and Becker, S. (2021) 'Introduction: Populists, Democratic Backsliding, and Public Administration'. In Bauer, M.W., Guy Peters, B., Pierre, J., Yesilkagit, K. and Becker, S. (eds) *Democratic Backsliding and Public Administration. How Populists in Government Transform State Bureaucracies* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press), pp. 1–21.
- Beach, D. and Pedersen, R.B. (2013) *Process-Tracing Methods: Foundation and Guidelines* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press).
- Beasley, R.K. and Kaarbo, J. (2014) 'Explaining Extremity in the Foreign Policies of Parliamentary Democracies'. *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 58, No. 4, pp. 729–740.
- Bryson, J.M. (2018) *Strategic Planning for Public and Nonprofit Organizations* (5th edition) (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley).
- Bryson, J.M. and George, B. (2020) 'Strategic Management in Public Administration'. In *Oxford Encyclopedia of Politics* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press).

- Cadier, D. (2024) 'Foreign Policy as the Continuation of Domestic Politics by Other Means: Pathways and Patterns of Populist Politicization'. *Foreign Policy Analysis*.
- Casarini, N. (2019) 'Rome-Beijing: Changing the Game. Italy's Embrace of China's Connectivity Project, Implications for the EU and the US'. Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) Paper 19/5.
- Chryssogelos, A. (2017) *Populism in Foreign Policy* (Oxford, UK: Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics).
- Cladi, L. and Locatelli, A. (2021) 'Explaining Italian Foreign Policy Adjustment After Brexit: A Neoclassical Realist Account'. *Journal of European Integration*, Vol. 43, No. 4, pp. 459–473.
- Corsini, H. (2025) 'Populism, Coalition Dynamics and Foreign Policy'. In Destradi, S., Chryssogelos, A. and Cadier, D. (eds) *Routledge Handbook of Populism and Foreign Policy* (London: Routledge).
- Coticchia, F. (2021) 'A Sovereignist Revolution? Italy's Foreign Policy Under the "Yellow-Green" Government'. *Comparative European Politics*, Vol. 19, No. 6, pp. 739–759.
- Destradi, S., Cadier, D. and Plagemann, J. (2021) 'Populism and Foreign Policy: A Research Agenda (Introduction)'. *Comparative European Politics*, Vol. 19, No. 6, pp. 663–682.
- Destradi, S. and Plagemann, J. (2019) 'Populism and International Relations: (Un)predictability, Personalisation, and the Reinforcement of Existing Trends in World Politics'. *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 45, No. 5, pp. 711–730.
- Di Mascio, F., Natalini, A. and Ongaro, E. (2021) 'Resilience Without Resistance: Public Administration Under Mutating Populisms in Office in Italy'. In Bauer, M.W., Peters, B.G., Pierre, J., Yesilkagit, K. and Becker, S. (eds) *Liberal-Democratic Backsliding and Public Administration* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp. 47–75.
- Dieckhoff, A., Jaffrelot, C. and Massicard, É. (2022) 'Introduction: Populists in Power, a Global Perspective'. In Dieckhoff, A., Jaffrelot, C. and Massicard, É. (eds) *Contemporary Populists in Power* (The Sciences Po Series in International Relations and Political Economy) (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan), pp. 1–13.
- Dossi, S. (2020) 'Italy-China Relations and the Belt and Road Initiative: The Need for a Long-Term Vision'. *Italian Political Science*, Vol. 15, No. 1, pp. 60–76.
- Falkner, G. and Plattner, G. (2020) 'EU Policies and Populist Radical Right Parties' Programmatic Claims: Foreign Policy, Anti-Discrimination and the Single Market'. *Journal of Common Market Studies*, Vol. 58, No. 3, pp. 723–739.
- Ferlie, E. and Ongaro, E. (2022) *Strategic Management in Public Services Organisations: Concepts, Schools and Contemporary Issues* (2nd edition – first edition 2015 edition) (London and New York: Routledge) <https://www.routledge.com/Strategic-Management-in-Public-Services-Organizations-Concepts-Schools/Ferlie-Ongaro/p/book/9780367517151>.
- Futák-Campbell, B. and Schwieter, C. (2020) 'Practising Populism: How Right-Wing Populists Negotiate Political Competence'. *Journal of Common Market Studies*, Vol. 58, No. 4, pp. 890–908.
- Giurlando, P. (2021) 'Populist Foreign Policy: The Case of Italy'. *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal*, Vol. 27, No. 2, pp. 251–267.
- Guzzini, S. (2017) 'Militarizing Politics, Essentializing Identities: Interpretivist Process Tracing and the Power of Geopolitics'. *Cooperation and Conflict*, Vol. 52, No. 3, pp. 423–445.
- Hadiz, V.R. and Chryssogelos, A. (2017) 'Populism in World Politics: A Comparative Cross-Regional Perspective'. *International Political Science Review*, Vol. 38, No. 4, pp. 399–411.
- Hagan, J.D. (1993) *Political Opposition and Foreign Policy in Comparative Perspective* (London: Lynne Rienner).
- Hagan, J.D., Everts, P.P., Fukui, H. and Stempel, J.D. (2001) 'Foreign Policy by Coalition: Deadlock, Compromise, and Anarchy'. *International Studies Review*, Vol. 3, No. 2, pp. 169–216.

- Heinisch, R., Massetti, E. and Mazzoleni, O. (2018) 'Populism and Ethno-Territorial Politics in European Multi-Level Systems'. *Comparative European Politics*, Vol. 16, No. 6, pp. 923–936.
- Henke, M. and Maher, R. (2021) 'The Populist Challenge to European Defense'. *Journal of European Public Policy*, Vol. 28, No. 3, pp. 389–406.
- Hermann, C.F. (1990) 'Changing Course: When Governments Choose to Redirect Foreign Policy'. *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 34, No. 1, pp. 3–21.
- Hettyey, A. (2021) 'Die Ungarische Außenpolitik 1990 Bis 2018: Europäisierung Ohne Überzeugung'. In Bos, E. and Lorenz, A. (eds) *Das Politische System Ungarns* (Wiesbaden: Springer), pp. 173–189.
- Jansen, R.S. (2011) 'Populist Mobilization: A New Theoretical Approach to Populism'. *Sociological Theory*, Vol. 29, No. 2, pp. 75–96.
- Jenne, E.K. (2021) 'Populism, Nationalism and Revisionist Foreign Policy'. *International Affairs*, Vol. 97, No. 2, pp. 323–343.
- Kaarbo, J. (1996) 'Power and Influence in Foreign Policy Decision Making: The Role of Junior Coalition Partners in German and Israeli Foreign Policy'. *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 40, No. 4, pp. 501–530.
- Kaarbo, J. (1998) 'Power Politics in Foreign Policy: The Influence of Bureaucratic Minorities'. *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 4, pp. 67–98.
- Kaarbo, J. and Beasley, R.K. (2008) 'Taking It to the Extreme: The Effect of Coalition Cabinets on Foreign Policy'. *Foreign Policy Analysis*, Vol. 4, No. 1, pp. 67–81.
- Lequesne, C. (2021) 'Populist Governments and Career Diplomats in the EU: The Challenge of Political Capture'. *Comparative European Politics*, Vol. 19, No. 6, pp. 779–795.
- Maoz, Z. and Russett, B. (1993) 'Normative and Structural Causes of Democratic Peace, 1946–1986'. *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 87, No. 3, pp. 624–638.
- Moffitt, B. (2020) *Populism* (Cambridge, U.K.; Medford, Massachusetts: Polity Press).
- Monteleone, C. (2021) 'Foreign Policy and De-Europeanization Under the M5S-League Government: Exploring the Italian Behavior in the UN-General Assembly'. *Journal of European Integration*, Vol. 43, No. 5, pp. 551–567.
- Müller, P. and Gazsi, D. (2023) 'Populist Capture of Foreign Policy Institutions: The Orbán Government and the De-Europeanization of Hungarian Foreign Policy'. *Journal of Common Market Studies*, Vol. 61, No. 2, pp. 397–415.
- Müller, P. and Gebauer, C. (2021) 'Austria and the Global Compact on Migration: The "Populist Securitization" of Foreign Policy'. *Comparative European Politics*, Vol. 19, No. 6, pp. 760–778.
- Nelli Feroci, F. (2019) 'The "Yellow-Green" Government's Foreign Policy'. Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) Paper 19/10.
- Niklasson, T. (2006) 'Regime Stability and Foreign Policy Change: Interaction between Domestic and Foreign Policy in Hungary 1956–1994'. Lund University.
- Oktay, S. (2022) *Governing Abroad. Coalition Politics and Foreign Policy in Europe* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press).
- Ongaro, E. (2025) *Connecting Philosophy and Public Administration: Directions of Inquiry* (London: Palgrave).
- Ongaro, E., Di Mascio, F. and Natalini, A. (2022) 'How the European Union Responded to Populism and Its Implications for Public Sector Reforms'. *Global Public Policy and Governance*, Vol. 2, pp. 89–109.
- Oppermann, K. and Brummer, K. (2014) 'Patterns of Junior Partner Influence on the Foreign Policy of Coalition Governments'. *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, Vol. 16, No. 4, pp. 555–571.
- Oppermann, K. and Brummer, K. (2020) 'Who gets what in foreign affairs? Explaining the allocation of foreign ministries in coalition governments'. *Government and Opposition*, Vol. 55, No. 2, pp. 241–259.

- Oppermann, K., Brummer, K. and van Willigen, N. (2017) 'Coalition Governance and Foreign Policy Decision-Making'. *European Political Science*, Vol. 16, pp. 489–501.
- Pappas, T.S. (2019) *Populism and Liberal Democracy: A Comparative and Theoretical Analysis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Peters, B.G. (2010) *The Politics of Bureaucracy* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge).
- Pollitt, C. and Bouckaert, G. (2017) *Public Management Reform. A comparative analysis: Into the Age of Austerity* (4th edition) (Oxford: oxford University Press).
- Pugliese, G., Ghiretti, F. and Insisa, A. (2022) 'Italy's Embrace of the Belt and Road Initiative: Populist Foreign Policy and Political Marketing'. *International Affairs*, Vol. 98, No. 3, pp. 1033–1051.
- Rácz, A. (2011) 'A Limited Priority: Hungary and the Eastern Neighbourhood'. *Perspectives: Review of Central European Affairs*, Vol. 19, No. 2, pp. 143–164.
- Rose, R. (1974) *The Problem of Party Government* (London: Macmillan).
- Sheingate, A. and Greer, A. (2021) 'Populism, Politicization and Policy Change in US and UK Agro-food Policies'. *Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis*, Vol. 23, No. 5-6, pp. 544–560.
- Tansey, O. (2007) 'Process Tracing and Elite Interviewing: A Case for Non-Probabilistic Sampling'. *PS Political Science & Politics*, Vol. 40, No. 4, pp. 765–772.
- Tarrósy, I. and Vörös, Z. (2020) 'Hungary's Pragmatic Foreign Policy in a Post-American World'. *Politics in Central Europe*, Vol. 16, No. 1, pp. 113–134.
- Trampusch, C. and Palier, B. (2016) 'Between X and Y: How Process Tracing Contributes to Opening the Black Box of Causality'. *New Political Economy*, Vol. 21, No. 5, pp. 437–454.
- Urbinati, N. (2019) *Me the People. How Populism Transforms Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press).
- van Berlo, M. and Natorski, M. (2019) 'When Contestation Is the Norm: The Position of Populist Parties in the European Parliament Towards Conflicts in Europe's Neighbourhood'. In Johansson-Nogués, E., Vlaskamp, M.C. and Barbé, E. (eds) *European Union Contested: Foreign Policy in a New Global Context* (Cham: Springer), pp. 191–211.
- van Meegdenburg, H. (2023) 'Process Tracing. An Analyticist Approach'. In Mello, P.A. and Ostermann, F. (eds) *Routledge Handbook of Foreign Policy Analysis Methods* (London: Routledge), pp. 405–420.
- Varga, M. and Buzogány, A. (2021) 'The Foreign Policy of Populists in Power: Contesting Liberalism in Poland and Hungary'. *Geopolitics*, Vol. 26, No. 5, pp. 1442–1463.
- Végh, Z. (2015) 'Hungary's "Eastern Opening" Policy Toward Russia: Ties That Bind?' *International Issues & Slovak Foreign Policy Affairs XXIV*, Vol. 1–2, pp. 47–65.
- Verbeek, B. and Zaslove, A. (2017) 'Populism and Foreign Policy'. In Kaltwasser, C.R., Taggart, P., Espejo, P.O. and Ostiguy, P. (eds) *The Oxford Handbook of Populism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), pp. 384–405.
- Vignoli, V. and Coticchia, F. (2020) 'Populist Parties and Foreign Policy: The Case of Italy's Five Star Movement'. *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, Vol. 22, No. 3, pp. 523–541.
- Visnovitz, P. and Jenne, E.K. (2021) 'Populist Argumentation in Foreign Policy: The Case of Hungary Under Viktor Orbán, 2010–2020'. *Comparative European Politics*, Vol. 19, No. 6, pp. 683–702.
- Wajner, D.F. and Giurlando, P. (2023) 'Introduction to Populist Foreign Policy (PFP)'. In Giurlando, P. and Wajner, D.F. (eds) *Populist Foreign Policy: Regional Perspectives of Populism in the International Scene* (Springer International), pp. 1–35.
- Yesilkagit, K., Michael Bauer, B., Peters, G. and Pierre, J. (2024) 'The Guardian State: Strengthening the Public Service against Democratic Backsliding'. *Public Administration Review*, Vol. 84, No. 3, pp. 414–425. <https://doi.org/10.1111/puar.13808>.

## Appendix A: Details on the Key Informant Interviews

### Conte I Executive

Table A1: Details Key Informant Interviews – Conte I Executive.

Code	<i>Interview partner</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Meeting format</i>	<i>Language</i>	<i>Recording technique</i>
1_04.04.2022_IT	High ranking civil servant	4 April 2022	In-person (Rome, Italy)	Italian	Audio
2_07.04.2022_IT	Former senior diplomat	7 April 2022	Online (via Zoom)	Italian	Audio
3_09.04.2022_IT	High ranking civil servant	9 April 2022	Telephone (via WhatsApp)	Italian	Notes per hand
4_20.04.2022_IT	Top level political appointee	20 April 2022	Online (via Zoom)	Italian	Audio
5_03.05.2022_IT	High ranking civil servant	3 May 2022	Online (via Zoom)	Italian	Audio
6_12.05.2022_IT	High ranking civil servant	12 May 2022	In-person (Vienna, Austria)	Italian	Audio
7_12.05.2022_IT	High ranking civil servant	12 May 2022	In-person (Vienna, Austria)	Italian	Notes per hand
8.1_02.05.2023_IT	Top level political appointee	2 May 2023	Online (via Zoom)	Italian	Notes per hand
8.2_09.05.2023_IT	Top level political appointee (follow-up)	9 May 2023	Online (via Zoom)	Italian	Notes per hand



**Orbán executives**

Table A2: Details Key Informant Interviews – Orbán Executive.

Code	<i>Interview partner</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Meeting format</i>	<i>Language</i>	<i>Recording technique</i>
1_21.02.2022_HU	Former Hungarian politician and activist	21 February 2022	Online (via Zoom)	English	Audio
2_07.03.2022_HU	Senior diplomat	7 March 2022	Online (via Zoom)	English	Audio
3_17.03.2022_HU	Senior diplomat	17 March 2022	Online (via Zoom)	English	Audio
4_10.05.2022_HU	Researcher	10 May 2022	In-person (Budapest, Hungary)	French	Audio
5_10.05.2022_HU	Professor	10 May 2022	In-person (Budapest, Hungary)	English	Audio
6_10.05.2022_HU	Researcher	10 May 2022	In-person (Budapest, Hungary)	English	Audio
7_20.05.2022_HU	Researcher	20 May 2022	Online (via Zoom)	English	Audio
8_08.07.2022_HU	Top level EU official	8 July 2022	Online (via Zoom)	English	Audio