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Contesting the EU's external democratization agenda: an analytical framework with an application to populist parties

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Abstract *This article analyses how populist parties in power contest the external democratization agenda within the European Union (EU)'s European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). We present an analytical framework that conceptually unpacks both contestation and populism to argue that radical right, market liberal, regionalist and left-wing populist parties differ from each other concerning their views on external democratization. Our empirical focus is on the discursive strategies of Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) from PiS, Fidesz, Lega, Forza Italia and Movimento Cinque Stelle in European Parliament (EP) debates. The exploratory analysis reveals that populist actors rarely and selectively use the European arena for contesting democracy promotion. While an emphasis on stability and security in the neighbourhood prevails among all populist parties in our study, other considerations, such as migration policy, support for ethnic kin, suspicion towards Russia but also membership in the EP's Party Groups inform the differences between the parties.*

1. Introduction

Globalization—be it economic, social or cultural—is one of the most important common denominators for the concerns raised by populists of all stripes (Liang 2016, 8). But, in contrast to the vast literature dealing with the influence of populist parties on welfare or migration policies (see for example Akkerman

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2015; Lutz 2019), until recently little was known about populist parties' effects on foreign policy. This is surprising, since many populist parties have emerged as a reaction to external influences and/or the transfer of authority from the nation-state to regional or international institutions (Liang 2016, 2). Both globalization and Europeanization have been part and parcel of explanations of populists' emergence. Consequently, a new thread in the literature has started to show a growing interest in populists' influence on foreign policy, both at the national and European level (Cadier and Szulecki 2020; Varga and Buzogány 2021; Jenne 2021; Borriello and Brack 2019; Falkner and Plattner 2020; Plagemann and Destradi 2019; Coman and Leconte 2019; Chrysosgelos 2015, 2017; Van Berlo and Natorski 2020).

This article focuses on EU foreign policy through one of its specific fields—external democratization or democracy promotion—which has received less attention in the context of populist contestation. As democracy promotion stands at the intersection of sovereignty and democracy in ways that challenge some of the conceptual equivalents of populists, a focus on discourses of (external) democracy promotion offers a novel perspective on populist foreign policies. Comparing how *different* populists in power—holding the potential to co-determine common EU external democracy policies—frame democracy promotion allows us to assess the extent of their convergence, or lack thereof (Miller-Idriss 2019). Ultimately, this can serve as a further step towards understanding the substantive impact of political parties on foreign policy (Chrysosgelos 2020a, 2020b; Raunio and Wagner 2020).

Our contribution builds on current theoretical debates of norm contestation (Wiener 2004) and connects them to scholarship on democracy promotion (Wetzel and Orbie 2015). This research has emphasized the importance of *negotiation* and *contestation* in defining and implementing democracy promotion's norms and programmes (see Poppe, Leininger, and Wolff 2019). Our main contribution is an analytical framework that introduces a taxonomy of contested norms and relates them to different populist ideologies. While the article is exploratory in nature, we formulate a number of theoretically-guided expectations which we test through a plausibility probe by applying this analytical framework to the discourses of populist parties in the EP dealing with external democratization through the ENP. The ENP is the EU's main external democracy promotion-related programme targeted towards post-Soviet Eastern Europe and the Southern Mediterranean (Buşcaneanu 2015; Cianciara 2020). We expect differences in the way different populist ideologies address democracy promotion speaking. Our analysis focuses on the EP as an arena to shape the ENP (Cianciara 2017; Nițoiu 2017; Góra 2019a, Góra 2021) and contributes to the literature on how European party groups structure this debate as significant actors of EU democracy promotion (Chrysosgelos 2017).

Based on the qualitative analysis of parliamentary debates by MEPs from five important parties of different populist factions—radical right, regionalist, market liberal and left-wing—our findings show the existence of ideology-related differences while also suggesting that most of these parties rarely contest core EU democracy promotion norms openly when acting at the European level. Instead, their critique is oriented towards the organizing principles of EU democracy promotion. Populist parties' democracy promotion-related discourses, however, do hardly add up to a unified contestation of EU democracy

promotion policies and are, at least for the time being, insulated from the contestation of liberal democracy that populist parties pursue on the domestic level (Cianciara 2021). Our findings also highlight the moderating role played by European party groups in containing populist parties' extremism.

The article is structured as follows. The next section introduces the literature on external democracy promotion and norm contestation, and develops an analytic framework that combines norm contestation literature with the scholarship on populism's foreign policy effects. We define external democracy promotion as an action taken to influence the political development of other constituencies towards democratization. Section 3 explains our case selection and provides information about the empirical material we use. Section 4 provides empirical evidence for the discursive shifts on three levels of norm contestation of EU external democracy promotion by three Italian populist parties (Lega, Movimento Cinque Stelle (henceforth M5S) and Forza Italia), as well as Law and Justice (henceforth PiS) from Poland and Fidesz from Hungary. We compare, summarize and discuss the results in Section 5.

2. External democracy promotion as a contested norm

Promoting democracy and good governance abroad has become a hallmark of the post-1989 liberal order with both the US and the EU making external democracy promotion a strategic preference (Bridoux and Kurki 2015). The emergence of Western democracy as a 'world value' (McFaul 2004) has been accompanied by conceptual debates on the normative, strategic and practical aspects of external democracy promotion within International Relations. These debates address the question of whether externally influenced regime change can lead to democratization, rather than it being merely a smokescreen clouding the more mundane economic, trade or security interests of donor countries (Kahn-Nisser 2018).

While such questions affect democracy promotion worldwide, when analysing EU democracy promotion, we need to also take into account the different national traditions of EU member states when it comes to formulating a common EU position (Wetzel and Orbie 2015; Grimm 2015). Particularly the Eastern European member states, which have graduated from being subjects of EU democracy promotion to actors co-shaping these policies, have developed different traditions and specific regional interests concerning democracy promotion (Petrova 2014; Szent-Iványi 2014). It is often expected that the domestic erosion of democracy in these member states, especially of the rule of law, together with the EU's weak response to this development might also weaken the EU's external leverage (Orenstein and Kelemen 2017). This is further strengthened by populist parties' outspoken Euroscepticism and their focus on defending sovereignty not only domestically but also in external affairs (Chrysogelos 2020a; Coman and Leconte 2019). Democratic backlashes in the region have called the prematurely conferred *consolidated democracy* attribute into question. Particularly Hungary under the Fidesz-led government since 2010, and Poland under the PiS government since 2015 are seen to have departed from liberal democracy (Zielonka 2018; Zielonka and Rupnik 2020). This has left its mark also on their foreign policy discourses (see Varga and Buzogány 2021, Cadier and Szulecki 2020, Cianciara 2021). However, domestic

foreign policy discourses do not automatically translate to EU-level action because populist parties rarely hold government positions in the member states. Even if they do, as in the cases we analyse, their positions are usually moderated by their membership in the EP's party groups and in Europarties, which play an important role not only in allocating resources, such as speaking time in the EP, but also in shaping the EU's external relations more generally (Raunio and Wagner 2020, Chrysogelos 2021).

2.1. Populism and democracy promotion

We define populism as a thin-centred ideology with 'a restricted core attached to a narrower range of political concepts' (Freeden 1998, 750). These concepts can then be associated with a number of thicker host ideologies such as liberalism, conservatism or socialism. Populism's own core concepts are accordingly few: the people, the elite and the general will. Mudde regards populism as 'an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite', and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* of the people' (Mudde 2004, 543).

Given the focus on the people, elites and the general will, sovereignty and democracy are for populists one and the same: the unbounded capacity of the general will of the people to turn into effective decisions, unencumbered by the limitations that (elite) liberal democracy places on majoritarian rule. Mudde has called such an 'illiberal' version of democracy 'democratic extremism' (Mudde 2004, 561). In this framework, elites are often perceived as being in collusion with supranational institutions, globalist actors or, more generally, as being foreign to *the people*. The elite vs people dichotomy thus often overlaps with the distinction between foreign vs national and hence pits elites against sovereignty and democracy, which is particularly visible in populist parties' pronounced Euroscepticism (Kneuer 2019). To be sure, there is a nativist version of this national/non-national dichotomy (de Wilde et al. 2019). But there are also non-nativist ones: populists can include foreign-born residents as part of the people and their opposition to cosmopolitan elites, multinational companies, highly mobile capital owners, international markets and international organizations, for instance. It is in this sense that democracy promotion, and particularly EU democracy promotion, sits uneasily within this web of conceptual equivalences, mainly because it involves elites promoting democracy from outside a sovereign nation. The ways in which different populists square this circle and position themselves vis-à-vis EU democracy promotion can therefore shed light on some of the key conundrums of their foreign policy conceptions.

Verbeek and Zaslove (2017) note that perceiving populism as a thin-centred ideology holds important implications for the way we understand populist foreign policy as it will vary with each different ideology to which populism is attached. Conceptually, their overview differentiates between four kinds of populisms—populist radical right, populist market liberal, populist regionalist and populist left-wing—and outlines their respective foreign policies. *Populist radical right* (PRR) parties define the people in nativist terms. According to Minkenberg (2001, 21), with PRR policies the 'government of the people, by the people, for the people is not at stake, but the concept of the people is'.

Anything foreign to such a nativist definition of the *demos* is perceived as threatening. Accordingly, their foreign policy is isolationist, distrustful of multilateral institutions, protectionist and opposed to European integration (Liang 2016, 11) and, above all, is emphatically against trans-border migration. *Populist market liberals*, in turn, consider the general will of the people to be threatened by state intervention in the free market. They are open to multilateralism when it promotes the liberalization of trade and likewise favour regional integration when it serves the same purpose. In this sense, they are economic cosmopolitans. However, the picture becomes blurry with migration, an issue on which there seems to be substantial variation among parties and over time (Akkerman 2015). The *populist left-wing* regards *the people* as being opposed to the markets—or the *Staatsvolk* as opposed to the *Marktvolk* (Streeck 2013)—and tends to associate the former with the nation-state and the latter with neoliberal globalization or the EU. Accordingly, its foreign policy will be socially cosmopolitan, usually open to transborder migration and favourable to international agreements if they allow for the protection of the weak—but protectionist when it comes to trade because of the fear of labour displacement. Finally, Verbeek and Zaslove (2017) also outline the foreign policy of *populist regionalism*. This branch is less specific and comes in a number of different variations depending on the relationship between subnational regions, nation-states, the EU and international markets.

2.2. Contestations of democracy promotion: an analytical framework

Contestations of democracy promotion can have a number of different dimensions. We aim to avoid a simplistic dichotomy between being either for or against democracy promotion, and to instead capture the nuances of the populists' relationship with democracy promotion. In essence, contestation is undertaken to voice differences of experience, expectation and opinion regarding a certain policy (Wiener 2014). Importantly, this underlines the duality of norms, which are stable but also contested and dynamic. Antje Wiener (2014) distinguishes between three different types of norms, according to how general or specific they are. The broadest moral reach is attributed to *fundamental norms*, which have universal validity and are 'principles and rules of global (as well as regional) governance' (Wiener 2014, 24). *Fundamental norms* (or Type 1 norms) have a quasi-constitutional quality and are stipulated in treaties like the UN Charter or, when it comes to EU norms, the Treaty of the European Union (TEU), or the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU). Fundamental norms are not frequently contested as such. However, they can clash with other fundamental norms, with different actors drawing the boundaries between individual fundamental norms in varying ways. At the other end of the spectrum, *standardized procedures* (or Type 3 norms) entail detailed prescriptions as to how governments, organizations or individuals have to implement fundamental norms. In between stand *organizing principles* (or Type 2 norms), which are sector-specific and regulate the relationship between fundamental norms and standardized procedures (Wiener 2014, 43). Organizing principles bridge the divide between the two other kinds of norms, and thus translate broadly shared Type 1 norms into specific actions that also act as the framework for the formulation of the narrower scope.

External democracy promotion as a *fundamental norm* captures the general idea that the EU wishes to promote democracy in the world. In the EU context, the legal basis for external democratization can be traced back to the 2003 European Security Strategy (ESS), the 2016 Global Strategy (EUGS), and the treaties (Barbé and Morillas 2019). Article 21 of the TEU specifically mentions the promotion of democracy as one of the core principles of the Union's action on the international scene. The EU defines democracy mostly in its liberal version and stresses its conjunction with fundamental values such as rule of law and human rights (Wagner 2017). As argued, fundamental norms are the most general and broad statement of the norm and can clash with other fundamental norms. Two candidates seem obvious in this regard: sovereignty (and non-interference into domestic affairs) and security (understood in inward-looking terms). The narrative about the ENP has increasingly shifted to emphasizing stability over democracy (Cianciara 2017).

Building on Poppe and Wolff (2017), we propose that the contestation of *organizing principles* revolves around three separate issues. First, contestation can address the question of political order. Contesters can oppose the policy outcomes that they expect democracy will bring about in third countries. We also expect domestic policy templates of populist parties, such as a stronger state role or the support for traditional family values, to transcend into the foreign policy domain. Second, contestation can be directed at the means of democracy promotion and problematize the balance between the sticks and carrots wielded by the EU, as well as their nature. Conditionality, differentiation, or functional cooperation would be part of such debates (Freyburg et al. 2016, Buzogány and Costa 2009). The third line of contestation tackles the actors recognized as legitimate participants to negotiate political change, both on the sender and the recipient side. Engaging (secular and non-secular) civil society actors or non-democratic governments, for instance, poses different sets of normative dilemmas for external democracy promotion.

Finally, *standardized procedures* concern specific instruments or programmes that are aimed at enacting broader norms. This would include granular discussions on different programmes, funds and measures, particularly when they take place without activating broader debates about organizing principles or the fundamental norm itself. Table 1 summarizes the ways in which we organize the range of arguments that underpin external democracy promotion.

Verbeek and Zaslove (2017) do not extend their analysis to democracy promotion, and this is the contribution we offer here in this article. While our contribution paper is exploratory in nature and thus not oriented towards hypothesis testing, our conceptualization so far leads to a number of theoretically-guided expectations. We expect PRR parties' nativism to combine with related concerns over identity and migration and to shape their approach to democracy promotion. It will lead them to contest democracy promotion when they perceive that it can create instability and thus compromise the security of the in-group. As far as political order is concerned, they will raise questions as to whether the targets of democracy promotion are modern enough to be ready for democracy; as regards means they will raise the issue of the costs of democracy promotion since Europeans should come first; and they will measure the legitimacy of partners based on their alleged similarity or otherness vis-à-vis the people.

Table 1. Analytic framework

Norm type	General definition	Democracy promotion (ENP)
Fundamental norms	Broad moral reach, quasi-constitutional quality.	ESS 2003, EUGS 2016 ‘The EU will foster the resilience of its democracies, and live up to the values that have inspired its creation and development. These include respect for and promotion of human rights, fundamental freedoms and the rule of law. They encompass justice, solidarity, equality, non-discrimination, pluralism, and respect for diversity’, Article 21 of TEU. TEU refers to the general concept of democracy in conjunction with ‘the rule of law, the universality and indivisibility of human rights and fundamental freedoms, respect for human dignity, the principles of equality and solidarity’. These can clash with other fundamental norms such as sovereignty or security
Organizing principles	Translate fundamental norms into specific actions, establish the ways in which fundamental norms are interpreted related to: a) Political order b) Means c) Legitimate participants	Policy outcomes after democratization Sticks and carrots: offer of accession, conditionality, differentiation, ‘more for more’ For example: relationship with autocrats, civil society actors
Standardized procedures	Flanking measures, specific enactments of broader norms	Electoral monitoring missions Financial tools Party cooperation

Source: Authors’ compilation based on Wiener (2014) and Poppe and Wolff (2017).

Populist market liberals' governing principle is the power of unencumbered markets and interdependence as a force for good. We do not expect this to systematically lead to a fundamental contestation of democracy promotion. However, exceptions can exist regarding migration (seen as a security threat) and the occasions in which change can lead to the kind of instability that hinders market forces. Contestation will thus focus more on how democracy promotion is organized. Populist market liberals will want the political order created by democracy promotion to be liberal, politically stable and to follow minimalist conceptualisations of democracy; they will want international trade and interdependence to be the best means to promote democracy; and they will probably have an interest in engaging business associations as legitimate partners.

Populist left-wing parties will worry the most about democracy promotion turning into foreign coercion, or as a way to surreptitiously foster foreign interests. Only occasionally will this lead to the contestation of democracy promotion as such, seen as being in tension with sovereignty. Populist left-wing parties will more frequently raise concerns about organizing principles, particularly as regards means and legitimate participants, pushing to avoid those that can be associated with coercion and with the unabated promotion of European or Western political and corporate interests. Populist left-wing parties will thus promote democratization as the liberation of 'the people' from economic exploitation and emphasize a maximalist conceptualisation of democracy, including support for education and social security as essential prerequisites.

Finally, populist regionalists will present a diverse set of arguments, with a lot of variation among parties. This group is hard to define given the diversity of ways in which regional preferences (as understood by such parties) relate to state-wide and international processes. For the purposes of this paper, we can expect that populist regionalists fit, at the regional level, in any of the above-mentioned kinds of populism. The relationship between regional interests (as perceived by such regional parties) and national governments seems less relevant as regards democracy promotion in third countries.

While these expectations formulated by Verbeek and Zaslove (2017) concern populists of different stripes engaged in external affairs but within a domestic political environment, we need to be aware of the different dynamics unfolding in the EP, where political parties from the member states join different party groups. The literature on the EP has documented that decision-making in the EP is determined mainly by partisan rather than national affiliations (Raunio and Wagner 2020). This suggests that beyond the populist subtypes membership in EP party groups is also likely to shape how populists contest external democratization.

3. Methods and case selection

Differentiating studies of EU democracy promotion, Wetzels, Orbie, and Bossuyt (2015) distinguish between conceptual debates focusing on 'models', 'policies' and 'discursive frames' which democracy promotion actors use to support or contest policies. Our focus is on the latter, that is on the frames used by populist parties. The selection of populist parties follows Verbeek and

Zaslave's (2017) categorization of different populist types regarding foreign policy. These categorizations are not uncontroversial. For instance, it is debatable whether PiS and Fidesz do qualify as populist, and if they do, whether they were populists already in the 1990s. In the case of Lega Nord, we need to be aware of its shifting from regionalism to an all-Italian radical right ideology; there are also different views in the literature on whether to qualify the *polyvalent* M5S as left populist (Pirro 2018). However, while these parties might not qualify as populist on some indicators (Norris 2019), all of them clearly use a populist communication style (Block and Negrine 2017). To identify populist parties, we rely on the authoritative categorization put forward on *The PopuList* (Rooduijn et al. 2019). The following populist party types are included: *populist radical right*: Fidesz (Hungary), PiS (Poland), Lega (Italy); *populist market liberals*: Forza Italia (Italy); *populist regionalists*: Lega Nord (Italy); and *populist left-wing*: M5S (Italy). This selection makes sure that at least one party of each type is included while keeping the country as a constant (Italy), while the addition of Fidesz and PiS (which share the same ideology with Lega) are used to assess country-specific variation within the same group. These considerations are made in order to fulfil the needs of a plausibility probe for this exploratory paper (Table 2).

Scholars have recently started to pay more attention to the impact of populist actors on European politics as well as their *modus operandi* in the EP (Kantola and Miller 2021, Raunio and Wagner 2020, Buzogány and Četković 2021). The analysis of populist actors in the EP mostly concentrates on radical parties on both fringes of the political spectrum (Van Berlo and Naturski 2020). In addition to these fringe parties, our selection also includes 'respectable radicals' (McDonnell and Werner 2020), that is, populist parties that are members of mainstream political groups such as the European People's Party (EPP) (Forza Italia and Fidesz, until 2021) or European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) (PiS 2009–2019). Group membership allows these parties to actively participate in policymaking but also will likely soften their tone in the EP (Ripoll Servent and Panning 2019).

EP debates are often used to identify norm controversies in transnational settings and have also been frequently employed concerning the ENP (Van Berlo and Naturski 2020, Góra 2019b; Góra et al. 2020; Cianciara 2020; Nițoiu 2017). Following recent examples put forward in studies of populist parties in the EP (see Kantola and Lombardo 2020, van Berlo and Naturski 2020) our aim is to capture patterns of norm contestation through a qualitative analysis of selected speeches. Based on the conceptualisation in Table 1, we categorised statements along the three types of norms in the EU's democracy promotion discourse. This qualitative sampling aims to understand interpretations, ideas and values related to the democracy promotion norm rather than 'determining incidence and prevalence' (Kantola and Lombardo 2020, 5). Plenary debates were identified by searching for the titles of debates that have focused on the ENP in a wider sense across three EP terms (2004–2019). These debates have focused on programmatic aspects related to ENP, including its various reforms, reports by MEPs on specific questions of the policy, recurring debates on Annual Reports on Human Rights and Democracy or debates on the political situation in ENP countries. From this corpus, we extracted speeches held by MEPs of the five populist parties. Altogether, we found a surprisingly small

Table 2. Cases included

Populist ideology	Party (country)	Government participation after 2004	European party group affiliation	No of statements included (2004–2019)
<i>radical right</i>	PiS (Poland)	2005–2007 2015–	UEN 2004–2009 ECR 2009–2019	59
<i>radical right</i>	Fidesz (Hungary)	2010–	EPP 2004–2019	23
<i>regionalist/ radical right</i>	Lega (Nord) (Italy)	2001–2006 2008–2011 2018–2019	UEN 2004–2009 EFD 2009–2014 ENF 2014–2019 ID 2019–	9
<i>market liberal</i>	Forza Italia (Italy)	2001–2006 2008–2011	EPP	9
<i>left-wing</i>	M5S (Italy)	2018–	EFDD 2014–2019 NI 2019–	12

Source: Authors' compilation. Fidesz left EPP in 2021.

number of cases in which populist MEPs have addressed this issue. Our empirical material thus consists of 112 statements by populist MEPs in selected 48 plenary debates on the ENP between 2004–2019 (for the list of debates that have entered the selection procedure, see Annex 2, [Supplementary material](#)). The relevant debates were fully read and statements related to democracy promotion were coded. Coding of statements was carried out qualitatively by using anchors based on the analytical framework presented above (Mayring 2004). Due to the relatively low number of speeches by populist parties concerning democracy promotion, our qualitative research design does not allow us to analyse temporal trends but provides a first plausibility probe for the analytic framework we have outlined above.

4. Populist parties' contestation of external democratization

Our results can be summarized along the categories defined by the analytical framework in Table 3. We found the *fundamental norm* of EU democracy promotion to be rarely contested in the EP by populist parties. Only Lega came close to challenging the fundamental norm directly, by propagating a classically populist (and nativist) *Europe First* narrative, by providing rhetorical support for authoritarian great powers like Russia and strongly emphasizing the stability narrative. While the two other nativist radical right parties, PiS and Fidesz, sustain the *Europe First* narrative when it comes to migration, the main difference compared to Lega is that they regard the neighbourhood countries as being European, to which they feel connected through multiple historical, ethnic, cultural and strategic ties. When it comes to external democracy promotion's *organizing principles*, PiS and Fidesz widen and reframe the content of the EU's external democratisation agenda by adding conservative readings of concepts such as collective minority rights or reproductive rights of women. Lega contests *organizing principles* by voicing concerns about the readiness of Muslim-majority governments and societies to adopt democratic norms.

Table 3. Main frames used and the intensity of their usage

	PiS	Fidesz	Forza Italia!	Lega	M5S
Fundamental norms	Democratization uncontested, but growing attention to security and sovereignty over time	Democratization uncontested, sovereignty framed in the context of migration	Security	Security Europe first	NA
Organizing principles	Only European neighbours qualify for full democratization; Support for Christian minorities	Protection of ethnic kin, minority groups, and Christian groups in the Middle East	NA	Turkey vs Russia. Who should the EU prioritize?	NA
-legitimate participants	Civil society in Russia and Belarus	Minorities, churches, local communities	NA	Muslim-majority countries	NA
-means	More countermeasures towards Russia	Venice Commission	NA	Incentives too costly for the EU	Incentives too costly
Standardized procedures	NA	NA	NA	NA	Words to deeds

Source: Own compilation. NA: not applicable. Shading reflects the degree to which theoretical expectations about contestation of democracy promotion are in line with our empirics. White cells indicate alignment, darker ones indicate misalignment, and the lighter shading stands for an ambiguous judgement.

Finally, M5S emphasizes solidarity towards adjacent countries, but connects this with protectionist framings. M5S is also the party which most strongly engages with the *standardized procedures* by addressing technical aspects of democracy promotion programmes, mostly supporting but also criticizing the EU's lack of consistency. In what follows, we provide a detailed description of the three components of the democracy promotion norm.

4.1. Fundamental norms

Four out of the five populist parties we have analysed only rarely contested explicitly the fundamental norm of democracy promotion in the EP. Only Lega contested that norm indirectly through raising security concerns. However, the significance of democracy promotion is less relevant for populist parties, showing that even if not directly contested democracy promotion falls out as an agenda to be followed for these parties.

PiS's MEPs did not call into question during the analysed period democratization as a policy goal, even while the party domestically started contesting liberal elements of democratic systems (Cianciara 2021; Kotwas and Kubik 2019; Góra and Zielińska 2019). A strong focus on Ukraine, including its democratization, remained a central characteristic of the party's activities because a democratic and pro-western neighbour in the East was in line with Poland's security interests (see more in Góra 2019a). At the same time, external democratization was gradually losing importance for PiS representatives across the three EPs due to the worsening geopolitical context in both Southern and Eastern neighbourhoods. The role of EU security featured importantly in PiS's statements. It was initially associated with strengthening democracy in neighbouring regions along the lines that the more democratic, stable and prosperous the neighbouring countries are the better the overall security of the EU. A first change was detected during the Arab Spring when PiS MEPs started voicing concerns about the results of democratic transitions in Southern neighbourhood countries including, *inter alia*, the growing persecution of Christians. The second significant shift was linked to Russia's aggression in Ukraine in 2014, which revealed deep-seated fears over the EU's unity *versus* Russia. It also revealed that PiS MEPs perceived EU foreign policy as power politics in which the national interests of powerful member states were more important than the interest of the EU as a whole. Over time, PiS MEPs have started to emphasize the importance of the sovereignty of the partner countries, which was in line with their more general focus on sovereignty as a principle guiding European integration.

Fidesz has shifted gradually from being an avid supporter of EU integration and Atlanticism towards a hard Eurosceptic position. In his signature plebeian-style rhetoric, Viktor Orbán's inauguration speech in 2018 called external democratization an undue and 'impolite' interference into sovereignty, which Hungary cannot support based not only on its 'good manners' but also on its geopolitical interests (kormany.hu 2018). Given such negative domestic connotations of external democratization, it is rather surprising to see that in EP debates the ENP was mostly regarded in positive terms and that there was—at least initially—much support for the EU's external democratization agenda. For most of the analysed period, the emphasis was on EU-led transformative

action, which was praised as an anchor for democratization and policy reforms in the neighbourhood. Thus, democracy and rule of law as *fundamental norms* underpinning EU external democratization received strong rhetorical support. This was usually framed in reference to the Central and East European states' EU accession, which has provided the countries of the region a stable anchor and made them a bulwark against Russian security threats. However, while the sovereignty of the ENP countries was upheld in the context of Russia's aggression towards other post-Soviet states, after the 2015/16 migration crisis defending national sovereignty became increasingly framed as a way to defend Europe from illegal migration (Tóké 2018).

Forza Italia is the third populist party that can be categorised as a 'respectable radical'. Its discourse seems to have been influenced by Forza Italia being in government, and in particular by the party's determined search for recognition at the European level by presenting itself as a respected centrist, moderate and conservative party. Forza Italia's positions in EP debates on external democracy promotion reflect a combination of both tendencies. Forza MEPs were supportive of the ENP, but they also raised concerns over fundamental norms that are in tension with democracy promotion. They emphasized geopolitics and security concerns in most of their speeches and barely talked about democracy at all. This can be illustrated by the following typical quote, according to which greater coordination among EU members' foreign and security policy and the ENP was needed 'to implement more and stricter security controls and to be able to defend ourselves against terrorist and criminal attacks' (Salini 2015).¹

The contestation of the fundamental norm of democracy promotion is most visible in the case of another Italian populist party. While Lega MEPs did not openly challenge the fundamental norm of democracy promotion, they did so indirectly by raising competing approaches. One such recurring argumentation could be resumed as the '*Europe First*' narrative. Democracy promotion is seen in this light as a misuse of EU funds, and as proof that the EU does not care about its own citizens. This resonates also with Lega's position towards cosmopolitanism and is a particularly salient issue for Matteo Salvini, the Lega leader. Salvini's message combines migration-related rhetoric with inciting social fears in that he argues:

it is curious how we heard about [...] the rights of all others, the Roma, migrants, unaccompanied minors, while there are 25 million unemployed European citizens who are not far enough away to have guaranteed human rights and democratic spaces. (Salvini 2015)

A second line of contestation focuses on the dilemma between stability versus democracy. Stability is elevated above democracy as the key objective of the EU, and hence preference in funding should be given to those ENP countries that provide stability in the neighbourhood, occasionally with a stronger focus on the respect of sovereignty:

¹ Bibliographical details of quoted speeches in debates are provided in Annex 1.

We help those who bring stability. I have personally visited Morocco. I think it is an example of religious and ethnic coexistence absolutely interesting, we help this country to stabilize the area of Western Sahara. (Salvini 2015)

Finally, M5S espouses an eclectic variant of 'polyvalent populism' (Pirro 2018, 453) in which libertarian right and radical right elements are combined with left-leaning populist ones. M5S MEPs did not contest democracy promotion at the level of fundamental norms, not even by raising other ones that might be in tension with it. In general, M5S MEPs supported democracy promotion as such, and did not formulate a structured critique of the ways in which the EU does this in the framework of ENP. Their concerns were mainly ad-hoc and did not seem to be guided by any main theme.

4.2. Organizing principles

Organizing principles attracted uneven attention among the analysed parties. PiS and Fidesz engaged in moderate contestation of some norms revealing their conservative worldviews while Forza and M5S did not contest much in this category. Lega engaged with specific contestation concerning the recipients of democracy promotion.

PiS MEPs have contested the idea of a one-size-fits-all policy regarding the *political order* in the neighbourhood countries, democracy being a significant aspect of the policy. Discontent was mostly expressed in relation to the tools and instruments deployed to the benefit of Southern Mediterranean and Eastern European countries. The contestation strategy used was to define Eastern European countries, such as Ukraine and Georgia, as belonging to Europe culturally and hence qualifying for further democratization and EU membership. Changes in the geopolitical context over the last 15 years, and especially the situation in Ukraine after the 2014 Russian aggression, resulted in the vanishing of the membership option even if PiS MEPs were maintaining that the EU membership door should remain open for these countries. PiS MEPs were aiming over time to shift the meaning of democracy promotion to include a more conservative understanding by referring negatively to human rights promotion, women's reproductive rights or LGBT issues (Góra and Zielińska 2019). They engaged in debates on human rights by promoting a conservative perspective, even if this did not feature prominently. In addition, PiS MEPs often engaged in calls for the protection of Christian minority rights and perceived a link between democratization and the weakening of these rights, particularly in the Southern neighbourhood countries:

Unfortunately, the reality of the situation in Egypt and Iraq means that progress towards democracy is not synonymous with respect for the religious freedom of the Christian communities which have lived there for hundreds of years. The Copts in Egypt today feel under threat of violence from Islamic radicals and legal discrimination, the embodiment of which is the Sharia as the source of constitutional law. Christian Assyrians in Iraq have, for many years, been driven out of the country in the name of religious cleansing for very similar underlying reasons. We cannot remain silent on this matter (Szymański 2011).

Determining *legitimate participants* was of little importance for PiS MEPs. In the context of Belarus and Russia, they raised concerns about how the EU could advance its democratizing agenda in autocratic countries. They continued to stress support for civil society especially in Eastern EU neighbourhood countries. PiS MEPs were supporting most of the *means* of democracy promotion employed by the EU. They raised concerns over the EU's inability to counterbalance the aggressive Russian strategy to undermine East European countries' links with the EU. These voices were very clear especially in the months before the Ukraine crisis over the Association Agreement.

Regarding the *organizing principles* of the EU's external democratization agenda, Fidesz MEPs showed many similarities to the pattern identified above for PiS MEPs. What is unique to Fidesz MEPs, however, is the recurring emphasis on the collective rights of ethnic and religious minorities. This harkens back to the goal of elevating the protection of Hungarian minorities abroad to the EU level—a long-standing goal of all Hungarian governments. Over half of the speeches on Ukraine relate to the situation of Hungarian minorities there and are often very critical of Ukraine while also condemning Russian aggression. Support for minorities also transcends into other, more distant geographical regions and includes, for example, Kurdish and Christian minorities in the Middle East, Islamic minorities in Eastern Asia and minorities in refugee camps. Minority rights were defined as collective rights, thereby shifting and widening the meaning of this norm in the context of EU democracy promotion. As the EU has no full-fledged minority protection instruments, the Venice Commission was referred to as the primary *means* for upholding minority rights (Bocskor 2017). Consequently, ethnic and religious minorities, including churches and local communities, were regarded by Fidesz MEPs as being *legitimate participants* of democracy promotion activities, often framed in opposition to conventional policies carried out by the EU: 'We have to act, not talk, there is no need for democracy export, but a need to strengthen local communities' (Kósa 2017).

Lega's discourse on democracy promotion in the EP contested *organizing principles* along the three dimensions identified above. First, it challenged the legitimacy of certain countries as recipients of EU aid and criticized efforts at democracy promotion. Lega's foreign policy realism shaped this approach:

It is curious how this Parliament insists on bringing Turkey to Europe, which has been militarily occupying a Member State of the European Union for forty years and does not recognize the genocide of the Armenians. It is curious that for many of these MEPs, the enemy is Putin and Russia, against whom we are waging an economic and political war, without any kind of sense, while it would be more useful to have him at the table for cooperation. (Salvini 2015)

At other occasions, there were strong anti-Muslim undertones in these considerations. Lega MEPs saw the governments of Muslim-majority countries as illegitimate *participants* in political dialogue. Again, Matteo Salvini has made this case by using very explicit terms:

With regard to homosexual minorities, I recall that in nine Islamic countries there is the death penalty for the crime of homosexuality. Islamic countries with which many of the MEPs who sit here love to talk. (Salvini 2015)

A final concern raised by Lega MEPs about organizing principles has to do with *means*—with the cost-benefit ratio of the ENP. The ENP is deemed too costly and ineffective.

third countries which have benefited from substantial European subsidies, but which have since deliberately fail (sic) to fulfil the minimum demands that the EU has always made of them. (Bizotto 9/7/2015)

In the case of M5S only the *means* are questioned, and even these are not set in relation to the legitimate instruments of interference with the domestic politics of third countries, but rather regarding the costs that the incentives offered to these third countries might have in the EU. For instance, the potential impact of the ENP upon farmers in the EU is mentioned:

If the association agreement leads to the democratic development of the country, then we can only support it. But let us not forget that this will weigh further on our shoulders, because the agricultural products entering our territory will be duty-free (Moi 2014).

4.3. Standardized procedures

Finally, standardized procedures received very little attention and contestation altogether by the selected parties. PiS MEPs voiced numerous objections which focused on the practical implementation of democracy promotion within the ENP scheme, particularly addressing the efficiency of EU measures—but all within a typical ‘normal’ policy contestation. M5S would like to see stronger measures on democracy promotion, and less of a distance between words and deeds. This was the dominant theme in how M5S MEPs addressed democracy promotion and the ENP.

Therefore [...] I am afraid that the actions of the Union will be far removed from our purposes and will fade again in the hypocritical application we have seen so far. (Castaldo 2015)

This distance between words to deeds is not limited to actions by the EU. Still, it includes European multinational companies, the human rights record of which is raised time and again by M5S MEPs as proof of the EU's hypocrisy. There was also, to some extent, a concern over the securitization of the ENP, which can be relevant in terms of democracy promotion. However, this is mostly oriented towards the gap between securitization and a lack of capabilities in the security arena.

5. Conclusion

Political commentary often expects that populist parties' electoral successes will lead to a stronger grip on foreign policy (Balcer 2019). What seems to emerge as the smallest common denominator of populist parties' stances regarding foreign policy in the EU context is a stronger emphasis on state sovereignty (Chrysosgelos 2020a; Coman and Leconte 2019). However,

supporting similar findings by Falkner and Plattner (2020), our paper shows that this does not automatically lead to the emergence of a coherent discourse among populist parties in EP. Our results suggest instead that different domestic and geopolitical contexts—and the internal dynamics of the EP and within European party groups—make this difficult to achieve.

In the article we have focused on the contestation of EU external democracy promotion by five populist parties in EP parliamentary debates covering the ENP. We were interested in how EU external democracy promotion norms were contested by populist parties, assuming that specific ideologies of populism, including definitions of the pure people and the corrupt elite, but also specific geopolitical interests of populist parties will play a role (Verbeek and Zaslove 2017). Following Wiener's (2014) conceptualization of norm contestation, our analytical framework differentiated between three types of norms (fundamental norms, organizing principles and standardized procedures). We expected different types of populist parties to differ in their contestation of foreign policy norms.

As Table 3 summarizes, we found that the *fundamental norm* of EU democracy promotion was rarely contested in the EP by populist parties. Instead, populist parties offered competing fundamental norms—stability and security. The emphasis and the underlying principles differ strongly among populist parties. Whereas PiS and Fidesz use a strong democracy promotion rhetoric and regard the EU as a force for democratization, reforms, and stabilization in the EU's neighbourhood in a way reminiscent of their own path towards EU membership, the Italian populist parties Lega (Nord) and Forza Italia use a strongly security-oriented discourse that emphasizes border controls, migration policy, stability and economic development in the neighbourhood, rather than democracy as a prime aim. For the two parties from Central and Eastern Europe, supporting Ukraine and the other countries of the Eastern neighbourhood plays an important role, combined with an anti-Russian discourse. The same difference can be seen also in the use of a nativist *Europe First* narrative concerning migration policy to which Lega, PiS and Fidesz subscribe. The main difference between Lega on the one hand and PiS and Fidesz on the other is that the latter two regard the Eastern neighbourhood countries, to which they feel connected through multiple historical, ethnic, cultural and strategic ties, as being European. Lega, in turn, challenges the external democratization norm by providing rhetorical support for authoritarian great powers like Russia, which the other parties refrain from. When it comes to *organizing principles*, PiS and Fidesz try to reframe the external democratisation agenda by adding conservative readings of concepts such as 'collective minority rights' or 'reproductive rights' of women. Lega's contestation mainly consists of voicing concerns about the migration of Muslim groups to the EU. M5S emphasizes solidarity towards adjacent countries but connects this with protectionist framings. M5S is also the party which engages most strongly with *standardized procedures*, including details of technical aspects of democracy promotion programmes, mostly supporting but also criticizing the EU's lack of consistency.

Some of the differences found in this contribution relate, as assumed by Verbeek and Zaslove (2017), to specific ideologies of populism. Particularly M5S fits well the initial expectations as it expresses support for the fundamental norm. Also, Forza Italia's liberal market populism is less vehement in its

tone than Lega Nord, and later Lega's rhetoric. Lega, which transformed from a regionalist party to a populist radical right one, confirms the expectations raised for a radical right populism. The two Central and Eastern European parties, however, at least in their EP discourse, are rather supportive of EU democracy promotion, even if they strongly emphasize national interests. We also found that Fidesz and Forza Italia belonging to mainstream party groups in the EP had a dampening effect on contestation, supporting the literature on 'respectable radicals' (McDonnell and Werner 2020). With Fidesz having chosen to leave the mainstream EPP group in early 2021, we thus expect more contestation to be voiced in the future. Altogether, the differences *within* populist party types are rather important and show that populist parties are unlikely to emerge as a force blocking the EU's external democratization efforts.

While our analytical framework helps differentiate the norm hierarchy related to external democracy promotion, additional factors do also shape populist parties' contestation of EU policies and should be explored in further research. Our analysis suggests regional interests play a strong role in this regard. While PiS and Fidesz are particularly active in supporting proactive EU policies towards Eastern Europe, Italian populist parties frame the ENP mostly in terms of security and migration policy. This East-South dichotomy lies also at the ground of the EU's contested neighbourhood policy (Natorski 2007) and cannot be simply reduced to positions of populist parties as it is shared more widely by other parties in these countries. To be noted is also that our selection of ENP-related debates is hampered by a regional bias, which might be less salient if we would focus on EU external democratization beyond the neighbourhood area. An analysis of populist parties from other EU countries could serve well to control for this. Another important avenue for further research could be to compare the discursive constructions regarding democracy promotion between populist and non-populist parties within the same national EP delegation to account for how contagious such contestations are, and how the dynamics of domestic party systems determine foreign policy choices (Chrysogelos 2020b). Finally, analysing national-level debates would obviously add to such a relational perspective (see Góra 2019a, Cianciara 2021, Góra 2021) and allow taking 'audience effects' into account. Even if EP debates are the place to discuss EU policies, they do not seem to be the setting which populist parties use to express their contestation. Evidence from Poland suggests that populist parties frame foreign policy in a considerably different way at the national level (Cianciara 2021). To capture this kind of contestation, the norm-focused analytical framework we have presented in this article can be easily adjusted and used to include other forms of political discourse that go beyond parliamentary debates.

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