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Populist sovereignty and international cooperation: the case of Brazil and Hungary

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ABSTRACT

Sovereignty becomes an essential concept when populist participation in international politics is examined. The research questions of this article are as follows: Which topics do right-wing populist leaders (Jair Bolsonaro and Viktor Orbán) connect to state sovereignty in International Organisations (IOs)? How do they act in IOs to defend the sovereignty of their countries if they perceive it – or their domestic power base – to be threatened? The article examines the behaviour of Brazil and Hungary in the United Nations, the European Union (Hungary) and the Organisation of American States (Brazil). The results illustrate that instead of quitting IOs, the populist leaders examined prefer to find like-minded allies among member states, while they also use harsh rhetoric and/or abstention/the power of veto in an attempt to reshape the direction of IOs when they see their countries' sovereignty and/or their domestic power as threatened.

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Introduction

The populist Zeitgeist declared by Cas Mudde in 2004 has proven to be a cross-regional phenomenon in the last two decades as populist leaders have been elected all around the world with the most prominent examples being Boris Johnson (UK), Viktor Orbán (Hungary) Andrej Babiš (Czech Republic), Janez Janša (Slovenia), Donald Trump (US), Jair Bolsonaro (Brazil), Narendra Modi (India) and Rodrigo Duterte (Philippines). Researchers have described these leaders as (neo)nationalist, authoritarian, paternalist and/or right-wing populist, among other things, but there is a consensus that they are all populist leaders. IR scholars have theorised and explored the foreign policy consequences of nationalism, but we know less about the foreign policy impacts of populism (Jenne, 2021, pp. 323–324). The rising number of populists in power has brought a new research agenda: the implications of the rise of populism for international politics (Destradi et al., 2021, p. 664). This article is a contribution to this topic.

Populist leaders tend to promise to implement domestic (political, economic and social) changes which repudiate the order previously established by the domestic elite,

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while also questioning the norms and institutions of the extant international order established by the international elite. Nevertheless, populists lack a coherent foreign policy doctrine or grand strategy (Jenne, 2021, p. 324). It is therefore worth examining various cases on a cross-regional basis so as to obtain a deeper understanding of how populists think about foreign relations and what characterises their diplomatic practices. As Laclau (2005) writes, for populists ‘the people’ is an empty signifier in the sense that it can be identified with various social groups depending on the definition of the ‘international other’ in different political contexts. Although often nationalists, populists sometimes identify ‘the people’ (us) with groups beyond national boundaries on regional, religious, or ideological grounds (e.g. Central Europeans, Muslims, anti-globalists, anti-communists, etc.) and the perception of the threats these various in-groups face has a direct impact on their foreign policy making. Furthermore, because populism is a ‘thin ideology’, populists often borrow objectives, principles and/or instruments from other ideologies, e. g. nationalism, conservatism, developmentalism, or anti-colonialism. The use of sovereignty as a shield to defend the domestic political system or the interests of a political group is not a new phenomenon. Nor is it exclusively populist. It was ‘invented’ before the recent populist wave and applied by both populist and non-populist leaders alike.

So, why connect sovereignty and populism? As Destradi et al. write, ‘sovereignty is probably the term that most accurately captures the populist logic of international affairs’ (Destradi et al., 2021, p. 674). Similar to nationalists, the defence of sovereignty is a key expression (and promise) of most populist leaders, be they right-wing or left-wing, or from great powers, middle powers, or smaller states. For right-wing populists, sovereignty is primarily defined as control over state borders and the national territory as well as preserving cultural identity. Meanwhile for left-wing populists, defending sovereignty is rather about control over economic policy to protect the national economy against the negative consequences of globalisation and to eradicate global inequalities.

How does the populist role of ‘sovereignty defenders’ influence international cooperation? How do populist leaders act in international organisations? Originally, scholars assumed that populists tended to follow protectionist and isolationist foreign policies (Jenne, 2021, p. 324); that they consequently posed a threat to international cooperation; and that by following a strong sovereigntist approach, they impede the efficiency of and harm the image of international organisations (Adler-Nissen, 2021; Colgan & Keohane, 2017; De Spiegeleire et al., 2017), especially in the case of supranational bodies like the UN or the EU. Brexit is an often referred-to example, as are Donald Trump’s withdrawal from the Paris Agreement and UNESCO.

However, more recently, critical studies have shown that the picture is more blurred. Populists do not necessarily pursue economic protectionism (e.g. there have been neoliberal populists in Latin America), nor are they consistently isolationist (examples are Orbán or Erdogan). Populist leaders as a group are quite heterogeneous and disagree over numerous issues, such as trade, migration, or international conflicts (Stengel et al, 2019, p. 3). Furthermore, although populists regularly criticise international organisations, in many instances they are engaged in international cooperation (Söderbaum et al., 2021, p. 1). In addition, they join, reactivate, or even create new forums and institutions – examples are new regional forums in Latin America in the pink tide era (ALBA, UNASUR), Erdogan’s stronger role in the Organisation of Turkic States, the ‘renaissance’ of the Visegrad group under Orbán and Bolsonaro’s strong ambition to join the OECD.

These examples illustrate that there is no 'populist foreign policy', while a selective, 'ad hoc' approach to sovereignty is typical for populist leaders: sovereignty is used as a 'shield' when the imputed obligations of membership are perceived as a threat or a burden, while it is open to stronger cooperation if it reinforces its position against the 'international other' and protects the 'people'.

The aim of this research is to reflect on the academic debate about how populist leaders approach international organisations and how selectively and on what bases they 'defend' their sovereignty. In a broader sense, it also reflects on the question of how populism relates to the crisis of the Liberal International Order (LIO) through examining their behaviour in international organisations. States are members of multiple international organisations with multiple fields of activities; hence, a systematic analysis of populist behaviour in IOs is beyond this research. My more modest aim is to identify and analyse those instances where populists are in direct conflict with certain international organisations over sovereignty issues with a view to gaining a deeper understanding of the selective use of state sovereignty as a shield against perceived attacks. My two research questions are as follows: what topics do populist leaders (Jair Bolsonaro and Viktor Orbán) connect to state sovereignty in IOs? How do they act – what methods do they use – in IOs to defend the sovereignty of their home country? Case selection rests on various factors. Both cases examined are semi-peripheral countries in the sense that they occupy an 'in-between' position between the industrialised Western economies and the developing world in terms of economic and social development. They both have strong bonds with IOs established and dominated by Western states (Brazil is a founding member of OAS (Organisation of American States); Hungary is a NATO and EU member). Both countries' populist leaders project an image of themselves as strong men, whose foreign policy often focuses on sovereignty, strong nation states and a stronger role in international affairs, while in recent years, they have had highly visible conflicts with international organisations.

In this article, Brazil's and Hungary's membership is examined in various IOs, primarily in the UN, the EU and the OAS. Although the United Nations is a universal organisation, while the EU and the OAS are regional ones, they are essential institutions of the LIO and have been highly criticised by various populist (as well as non-populist) leaders. Jair Bolsonaro has brought a new approach to Brazilian multilateralism in general, transformed Brazil's role in the UN and confronted the EU on environmental issues, while Orbán was a strong critic of the Global Compact for Migration (UN) and has positioned himself in the European Union as a leader of a 'cultural counter-revolution' (Krekó & Enyedi, 2018, p. 45). I explore specific actions and/or lack of actions to draw some conclusions about how populist governments interpret 'the defence of sovereignty' and in what cases they apply it. However, case selection imposes a limitation on the findings, since populist leaders identify 'us' and 'them' on various grounds, they perceive threats to sovereignty differently, and they take different approaches to international cooperation. Further research on populist leaders in power is required to support the provisional conclusions.

I examine the behaviour of Brazil and Hungary from three different perspectives. The first concerns global challenges such as migration, climate change or pandemics. Rhetorically, they are typically connected to territorial sovereignty, while they also raise populist concerns over global governance. The second concerns democracy and human rights,

where populist actions are examined as attempts to counteract efforts by IOs to reinforce democracy, rule of law and the protection of human rights in member states, most often justified with the principle of non-intervention on behalf of populists. Finally, the third concerns the two populist leaders' reactions to an armed intervention in another state (the Russian invasion of Ukraine), which is *prima facie* a violation of the principle of sovereign equality of states.

After a brief analysis of the speeches and critical comments of the populist leaders on the examined international institutions, concrete actions (like marginalising/weakening the organisation by leaving, withdrawing from certain bodies or vetoing decisions, shaping the given IO by agenda-setting, blocking or supporting enlargement, remaining a passive member and strengthening alternative institutions) are reviewed to map their behaviour concerning conflictual issues, topics are highlighted where veto or withdrawal occurs, and also attempts at agenda setting. To collect data on rhetoric and voting patterns, I use the official sites of the organisations (reports, resolutions, decisions, etc.) and governments examined. To complement the comments and concrete actions of the leaders I have also used secondary sources from the academic literature to understand the motivations and consequences of their behaviour.

The remainder of the article proceeds as follows. The next section sets up a conceptual framework explaining the links between populism, sovereignty and international organisations, and explaining the concept of 'populist sovereigntism' as a factor driving populist leaders' conflict with IOs. It is followed by thematic chapters that illustrate Bolsonaro's and Orban's conflicts with IOs and how they use the issue of sovereignty in a way that resonates with Third Worldist, neo-colonialist rhetoric, while they define themselves as saviours of the Western Christian world.

Populism, sovereigntism and international organisations: a conceptual framework

The foreign policy of populist leaders – often as a continuation of their domestic policy – is best understood through the lens of how they perceive states and non-state actors (including international organisations), whether these actors constitute friends or foes for them. Therefore, I cite the definition of Mudde who writes that populism is a 'thin-centred ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' and 'the corrupt elite', and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people' (Mudde, 2004, p. 543).

Sovereignty is an essential organising principle in international relations, it is 'an old, but changing and constantly evolving concept' (Basile & Mazzoleni, 2020, p. 152). Westphalian sovereignty consists of two essential elements: territoriality and the exclusion of external actors from domestic authority structures (Krasner, 1999). In practise, a sovereignty norm set has emerged in interstate relations consisting of territorial integrity, sovereign equality and non-interference in domestic issues (Coe, 2015, p. 275) – these are the aspects examined in the next chapter of the article on a thematic basis. The sovereignty norm set assumes that the international system consists of sovereign states. Consequently, state sovereignty is indivisible, meaning that a 'state is either sovereign, or it is not a state' (Lake, 2003, p. 305).

Resulting from accelerating globalisation, strengthening interdependence of sovereign states and the emergence of transnational movements and communities have given rise to the notion that sovereignty is eroding, harmed, or weakened (Cohen, 2001; Morais, 1996; Sassen, 1996). Obviously, since the end of the Cold War, 'interference practises' such as sanctions, fact-finding missions, election observations, or peacekeeping have been both legitimised and institutionalised (Coe, 2015, p. 276). Membership of international organisations and being signatories of international treaties are also evaluated as placing limitations on state sovereignty, a shift from the Westphalian paradigm.

Still, populists tend to aspire to return to this original idea of sovereignty focussing on the above-mentioned set of sovereignty norms: territorial integrity, sovereign equality and non-interference in domestic issues. As Zilla points out, for populists, 'state sovereignty is the most important means of protecting the nation from external influences and attempts at control, for example by supranational bodies, governmental organisations, non-governmental organisations, or international regimes' (Zilla, 2022). De-territorialisation, multi-level governance and rising transnational flows – especially international migration – have resulted in a strong demand to 'take back control' over borders and state territory and return to the 'original', pre-globalisation version of state sovereignty, primarily in the sense of stronger domestic authority.

This demand is interpreted as populist 'sovereignism, that is, the return to the traditional understanding that sovereignty is based on mutually exclusive territories and the retrenchment to the national dimension' (Basile & Mazzoleni, 2020, p. 154). Other authors emphasise that 'some populists appear to have revived much older 'organic' and 'extra-legal' understandings of sovereignty. A distinguishing feature of these older understandings is their illiberalism' (Paris, 2022, p. 529), contrasting with concepts like global governance, international burden-sharing, or international responsibility that various IOs rest on. Although populists form a heterogeneous group of parties, movements, leaders and governments, the concept of sovereignism appears to 'tie this plurality of populisms together and transcend context-based differences' (Basile & Mazzoleni, 2020, p. 155), thus, it brings us closer to understand common traits of populists regardless of their regional situations or ideological affections.

Why do populists so often get involved in conflicts with IOs? Although joining or leaving an international organisation are essential acts of sovereignty (Nagy, 1996, p. 239), IOs are often said to represent a threat to state sovereignty resulting from the duties and obligations they constitute for their members. Due to populist sovereignism, there is also an increasing dissatisfaction and lack of trust towards supranational actors and institutions in general, which are seen as distant and incapable of effectively addressing the main challenges posed by multi-level governance and the new global order. Beyond this, what further factors contribute to populist revulsion towards international organisations?

Firstly, international organisations are described as fora of the global/international liberal elites (Söderbaum et al., 2021, p. 12), a typical 'international other'. In the eyes of populists, highly educated, liberal globalists established and dominate IOs established by Western powers (most typical ones are the UN, EU and NATO) who neither understand nor represent 'the people'. Furthermore, the domestic elite is often described by populists as servants of Western interests, who accept liberal social values that are not accepted in the home society – leading to the dominance of a minority over the majority.

Second, an essential feature of populism is its anti-pluralism, while Western-led liberal institutions are based on pluralism that promotes ‘cooperation, accommodation and reconciliation’. In contrast, ‘the populist mind has difficulty recognising that the interests of foreign nations are legitimate or that there is any inherent virtue to an international order that respects differences among nations’ (Posner, 2017, p. 797). Furthermore, IOs represent and support oppressed groups such as minorities, refugees, LGBTQ people, indigenous population, drug addicts, etc. – who are often illustrated by populists as impediments of national and/or cultural homogeneity, consequently marginalised or rejected by the populist state.

Third, populist regimes often rely on a strong, charismatic leader. Being the ultimate representative of popular will, no other actor is accepted as more legitimate. Consequently, a populist leader should not be burdened in its authority to act in accordance with the interests of the people. Beyond this distrust towards international actors (organisations, treaties, courts, etc.) it could also lead to distrust towards scientific results communicated via international fora (e.g. during COVID pandemic) and regular reports published by international actors with recommendations for states (especially, if they are critical towards populist governments’ authoritarian setbacks).

Fourthly, populist leaders in power often bring policy changes leading to diverging preferences among member states. Collective policy decisions are then perceived to run counter to the interests of the given state (Von Borzyskowski & Vabulas, 2019, p. 337); consequently, membership is perceived as a burden, since collective decisions serve only the interests of other members. As Lake describes it, the new sovereigntists – and among them, populists – ‘criticise “delegation” but are more concerned with collective decisions, i.e. sovereign sovereignty, which then supersede domestic laws’ (Lake, 2003, p. 234). It means that control over domestic policies and laws is a primary objective for populists, and membership in IOs is often perceived as a burden on this domestic authority.

Altogether, conflicts between populist governments and IOs are multifaceted, but populist sovereigntism and the desire to return to the world before IOs with supranational ambitions are often behind these conflicts. Populist sovereigntism aims to return to the ‘original’ form of state sovereignty, but on a selective basis, primarily with respect to issues that are perceived to threaten their declared political objectives or domestic authority. In the next sections, I will explore the topics and situations that Bolsonaro and Orbán perceive as threats to sovereignty and also examine the concrete actions they take to protect their sovereignty and to shape IOs in accordance with their pragmatic interests and/or ideological background.

Global challenges and populist sovereigntism

Global challenges (like poverty, migration, transnational organised crime or climate change) became a stressing issue during the 1970s, leading to an ongoing debate about their root causes, the responsibilities of various actors and the question of whether local, national or global responses were appropriate. Based on populist sovereigntism, for populists, the ‘international other’ that threatens the ‘original’ state sovereignty is often identified as ‘globalists’: state and non-state actors that call attention to the severity of global challenges as well as calling for strengthened global governance to address global challenges adequately. The anti-migration stance is typical of right-

wing populists, who emphasise the protection of state boundaries and territorial integrity; Donald Trump has called climate change mythical and non-existent, while Jair Bolsonaro denied the severity of the COVID pandemic. However, the basis of scepticism towards global governance is not necessarily an insistence on state sovereignty, and the populist approach taken by such leaders depends on the various political groups they represent, and what they perceive to be threats. For example, Viktor Orbán has adopted strongly anti-immigrant rhetoric based on populist sovereigntist stance since 2015, while he followed WHO guidelines and cooperated with neighbouring countries during the COVID-19 pandemic. The next section analyses what global challenges Bolsonaro and Orbán perceive as threats to state sovereignty and how populist sovereigntism impacts their actions.

Brazil and the Amazon

Brazilian foreign policy is traditionally committed to multilateralism and non-interference. Brazil was a founding member of the United Nations and has been an active UN member state since 1945. Beyond peacekeeping and regular non-permanent membership in the UNSC, Brazil has been a strong actor in the global fight against climate change. In 1992 the Earth Summit was convened in Rio de Janeiro (also called the Rio Summit), as was Rio + 20 (United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development) twenty years later. Brazil has actively participated in international mitigation efforts under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNCCC), as well as in other policy forums such as the G8 + 5 Climate Change Dialogue (Octaviano et al., 2016, p. 600). By the 2000s Brazil turned out to be a strong advocate and central figure of multilateral environmental diplomacy, primarily within the UN framework.

The UN served as an essential forum where Workers' Party-led governments (2003–2016) sought to reinforce Brazil's role as an autonomous (sovereign) power. Meanwhile, Lula da Silva – a strong advocate of the Global South – was an active critique of international institutions (as well as the UN) for institutionalising global inequalities, and his presidency brought Brazilian activism in the UN. First, it targeted reform of the UN Security Council. Brazil, also as a G4 member, called for a widening of the body to be more representative and 'be more highly regarded by countries in the South' (Zilla, 2022, p. 22) as Brazilian diplomacy explained. Second, turning back to dependency theory and NIEO, he was highly critical of the 'prevailing rules of global trade and the international financial system' (Zilla, 2022, p. 19) and called for a stronger voice of the G20, especially in the context of the 2008 global financial crisis. Thirdly, the North–South divide also influenced the Lula government's choice not to condemn (primarily Southern) states for their human rights abuses on the grounds of non-interference in domestic affairs, although later, under Dilma Rousseff (2011–2016), Brazil voted regularly for critical scrutiny of Syria, Iran, Belarus and Sri Lanka at the UN Human Rights Council (Piconne, 2015). Fourth, Lula recognised Brazil's opportunities in terms of environmental diplomacy. He introduced a National Climate Change Plan that included an 80% cut in Amazon deforestation by 2020. He declared Brazil to be a responsible actor in terms of environmental issues (UN GA, 2009). Later, Brazilian diplomats were active in bridging poor and rich countries during the forging of the Paris agreement (2015).

Although Brazilian foreign policy had been considered relatively stable with a strong emphasis on continuity, the election of Jair Bolsonaro brought an obvious change,

especially in foreign policy rhetoric and attitude towards international cooperation. Beyond his strong sovereignty notion, Bolsonaro's foreign policy is strongly rooted in anti-globalism (Casarões & Fledes, 2019), a particular conception of Western ideology that opposes nationalist-conservative to globalist-multilateral policies (Magalhães & Thomaz, 2022, p. 61). Although 'anti-globalism (in the sense of rejecting multilateral and liberal values associated with the LIO) has never been part of Brazil's diplomatic repertoire', the Bolsonaro administration successfully merged it with longstanding anti-Communist sentiments in Brazil (Casarões & Barros Leal Farias, 2022, p. 3) and made it a norm.

In his campaign, Bolsonaro described the United Nations as a place 'full of communists' and announced that 'If I am president, I will leave the UN. That institution is of no use, he said (Telesur, 2018). Already before Bolsonaro's inauguration, Brazil withdrew its bid to host the UN Climate Change Conference in 2019, which finally took place at Copenhagen. In the presidential seat, Bolsonaro appointed Ernesto Araújo as Minister of Foreign Affairs, who previously declared that climate change was a 'communist plot' (*The Guardian*, 2018), while globalism – he explained – was a process of 'cultural Marxism' (El País, 2018) advocating human rights (especially women's rights, LGBT rights), secularism and environmentalism. One of his first actions was to withdraw Brazil from the Global Compact for Migration.

Under Bolsonaro, environmental issues proved to be one of the most sensitive topics concerning international cooperation. Brazil has been facing the 'environmental dilemma' for decades now, meaning the 'major conflict between carbon mitigation policies and the national development agenda, based on the expansion of the extractive industries' (Castro et al., 2014, p. 229). The Bolsonaro government introduced a new development programme, prioritising the expansion of the agribusiness frontier over the country's forests and natural ecosystems, accompanied by unrestrained extractivism even within environmentally protected areas or indigenous reserves (Veltmeyer, 2023, pp. 9-11). In 2019, forest fires in the Amazon brought Brazil to international attention and attracted both national and international condemnation of Bolsonaro's environmental policy and increased deforestation rates as compared to the record of previous administrations.

The Brazilian government's response to criticisms of its environmental policy was based on Brazil's sovereign right to develop the Amazon, although it should be noted that highlighting Brazilian sovereignty over the Amazon did not start with Bolsonaro. 'Brazil has long resisted any form of international monitoring of Amazon deforestation and rejects what it calls the "internationalisation" of the Amazon', Riethof (2015, p. 94) observes, strictly insisting on the territorial integrity of Brazil. Bolsonaro continued this argument, hitting a more confrontational tone, stating that 'Brazil is like a virgin that every pervert from the outside lusts for' as cited in Raftopoulos and Morley (2020) and denied the Amazon's central role in the global fight against climate change. He added a globalist vs. anti-globalist angle to the debate following Donald Trump's approach, raising scepticism with respect to climate change in general, accusing 'globalists' of threatening Brazil's territorial sovereignty and right to development.

In the United Nations, Bolsonaro's speech at the UNGA in 2019 focused on the issue of the Amazon defending his policy, where he 'reaffirmed Brazil's sovereignty over the Amazon that 'is not devastated or consumed by fire' (Bolsonaro speech). Furthermore, in 2019, Bolsonaro threatened to leave the Paris agreement, which according to him 'supposedly stripped Brazil of its sovereignty over the Amazon River basin region' (Casarões &

Flemes, 2019) and was a constant reference of Bolsonaro's critics, but finally he did not leave the agreement, unlike President Trump.

When defending Brazil's sovereignty, in addition to his commitment to territorial integrity and denial of the Amazon's role in the global struggle against climate change, Bolsonaro also referred to post-colonialism as a threat to sovereignty. Relations between Brazil and the EU also deteriorated over environmental issues despite a promising start. In June 2019 Mercosur and the EU reached a political agreement for a comprehensive trade agreement that could have been a breakthrough in the then 20-year negotiation process. But as a parallel development, Bolsonaro had noisy conflicts with European governments and NGOs defending the environment and the rights of indigenous people (Raf-topoulos & Morley, 2020, p. 2). Relations between Brazil and France especially deteriorated. Bolsonaro accused French president Emmanuel Macron of treating the Amazon like a colony and called the idea of an international alliance to 'save' the Amazon an attack on Brazilian sovereignty. He undermined European ambitions by rejecting any form of an international response to the deforestation of the Amazon, further condemning them as colonialists threatening both the territorial integrity of Brazil and its inalienable right to pursue development. The ratification process of the EU-Mercosur trade deal was expected to be difficult anyway, but these developments stalled it.

However, after the clashes over the Amazon in 2019, Bolsonaro's tone regarding environmental policy became more modest; the administration introduced the Amazon Plan 2021/2022, which aims to mitigate deforestation in five of the nine states within the 'Legal Amazon' (Gov.br, 2021). Although the goals set were criticised as being too modest by experts and NGOs (CNN, 2021), the plan recognises the importance of deforestation and admits the need for mitigation. Bolsonaro returned to Lula's argument calling on developed countries to support developing states financially to manage climate change (UN GA, 2021), while he removed the question of territorial sovereignty from his rhetoric.

Despite such repositioning, his strong populist sovereigntist approach to international cooperation in the field of climate change, rejection of involvement in global environmental policy, continues to determine his international image, deepening the gap between 'globalists' and 'anti-globalists'.

Hungary and the refugee crisis

In the case of Hungary, international migration is the primary global problem that the Orbán government perceives as a threat to state sovereignty, especially in terms of territorial integrity and cultural homogeneity. Unlike Brazil, which was well acquainted with the dilemma of development versus environment, Hungary was relatively inexperienced in international migration matters when the refugee crisis, rooted in the civil war in Syria, erupted in 2015. The Hungarian government gave a clearly rejective response to attempts of international cooperation to help refugees at the universal and regional levels alike.

In the United Nations, the General Assembly (GA) adopted the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration in 2018, the very first international cooperation framework on the issue of migration. Only five countries voted against, the US, Israel and three Visegrad countries (Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic). The Hungarian representative to the GA stated that migration was a 'dangerous phenomenon' and 'Hungary reserves the sovereign right to decide on migration' (UN, 2018).

The 'polycrisis' of the EU (Zeitlin & Nicoli, 2020) and above all, its 'refugee crisis' element resulted in tangible and visible conflicts between the EU and Hungary (and other Eastern member states). Since then, prime minister Viktor Orbán has become a 'symbol' of resistance to 'imperialist'/'neo-colonialist' EU (and EU bureaucrats) forcing their globalist ideas and political will on member states. He contrasts his struggle for 'spiritual sovereignty' with liberalism (Paris, 2022, p. 541), while he also describes liberal and Christian freedom as two opposite poles:

love of country instead of internationalism; marriage and family instead of popularising same-sex relationships; protecting our children instead of drug liberalisation; Hungarian children instead of immigrants; Christian culture instead of a multicultural confusion; order and security instead of violence and terrorism; [and the] unification of the nation. (Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's speech at the 28th congress of Fidesz–Hungarian Civic Union 29 Sept. 2019, *Euronews*, 2019)

As mentioned above, the refugee crisis in 2015 brought about a sudden and loud conflict between the European Union and Hungary. Orbán linked Hungary's sovereignty to migration on three bases. Firstly, Hungary's territorial sovereignty was to be protected by strict control over who crosses the borders. Based on populist sovereigntism, this is an obvious return to the Westphalian interpretation of state sovereignty. Second, also on populist grounds, anti-pluralism dictated the defence of a Christian and culturally homogeneous Europe against Muslim immigrants. Orbán's statements suggested that it is Hungary's sovereign right to ensure that the country remains ethnically Hungarian and Christian and that it will not become a society of migrants like Western European countries. To understand his approach to sovereignty, it should be highlighted that in the context of the refugee crisis, Orbán 'extrapolated his organic vision of sovereignty to Europe as a whole, arguing that the EU must "regain its sovereignty" by maintaining its putatively Christian political identity and civilisational unity' (Paris, 2022, p. 542) – obviously shifting the 'unit of sovereignty' above the national state level and raising an alternative to the EU motto 'unity in diversity'.

Third, preserving sovereignty also meant not being dictated by Brussels. Orbán found old-new allies in fellow member states of the Visegrad Group (Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia) and in 2016 they jointly presented the idea of 'flexible solidarity' at the European Council in Bratislava. It meant that 'the distribution of refugees would be purely voluntary, allowing Member States to refrain from receiving any additional refugees and contributing financial support and expertise instead' (Zaun, 2018, p. 45). Their proposal rejected the idea of the refugee quota system proposed by the core members, although it obviously would not have had an impact on the ethnic composition of these countries (Hungary should have received 1294 refugees under the EU quota) (Lattmann, 2005). They rejected the idea of 'international burden sharing' as 'imposed' on them on behalf of the EU, criticising globalist EU bureaucrats to support international migration. Overall, beyond rhetoric, this was the strongest anti-migration action on behalf of the Orbán government at the EU level, preventing the adoption of the 'quota system'.

Democracy/human rights and populist sovereigntism

Populists often face domestic and international criticism for their authoritarian political steps. International criticisms towards domestic issues (democratic institutions, good

governance, rule of law, etc.) and human rights violations are often formulated on behalf of IOs established by Western countries. In a manner similar to other authoritarian regimes, state sovereignty is often used as a ‘shield’ on behalf of populist leaders. They explain that political governance is a domestic issue under full control of national governments, and criticisms are interventions into domestic affairs based on postcolonialism – resembling the arguments of authoritarian leaders in the Global South. In addition, populists often evaluate these criticisms as politically driven attacks by the ‘liberal elite’ (‘international other’) that supports their domestic opposition.

Brazil’s sovereign rights vs. human rights

In 2019, Jair Bolsonaro strongly criticised Michelle Bachelet (ex-president of Chile), then United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights when she raised concerns over democratic setback, police violence and discrimination against indigenous communities in Brazil (Reuters, 2019). Bolsonaro compared Bachelet to French president Emmanuel Macron in terms of intervention into domestic affairs, linking both environmental issues and democracy to state sovereignty, suggesting that the cases are intertwined. In 2022, Bolsonaro also rejected UN Human Rights Council findings that the prosecution of Brazil’s former President, Luiz da Silva, violated his right to a fair trial, his right to privacy and his political rights (*UN News*, 2022a).

The OAS human rights agency, the InterAmerican Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), also had conflicts with Brazil in the Bolsonaro era with respect to gender issues and impunity culture in Brazil (Reuters, 2018). The latter is a historical challenge for Brazil (and Latin America), while Bolsonaro’s elections resulted in an obvious shift towards social conservatism, consequently weakening the protection of women and LGBTQ rights. In 2021 IACHR also published a report on the worsening human rights situation in Brazil after the elections of 2018, while the OAS Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression raised concerns over Bolsonaro’s anti-press rhetoric and a policy of public harassment (Reuters, 2018). Various NGOs, human rights advocates joined these criticisms, even national attempts were made to regulate fake news, but Bolsonaro neglected the accusations: ‘Who never told a little lie to his girlfriend? If you didn’t, the night wouldn’t end well’, and admitted that ‘Fake news is part of our lives’ (Palau, 2021).

Despite Bolsonaro’s harsh reactions to criticisms of Brazilian domestic governance at the universal and regional levels alike, Brazil did not join the ‘Southern’ bloc (with countries like India, Pakistan, China) – which mainly abstain – in the UN Human Rights Council when voting on other states’ human rights records. Brazil has been an active member of the Latin American group in the Council since its establishment (2005) and Bolsonaro’s election did not interrupt Brazilian activism in the Council.

Bolsonaro fulfilled his promise that Brazil would vote in line with Israel and the US (*The Times of Israel*, 2019) – although the US withdrew from the UNHRC in June 2018. Putting emphasis on the fact that Israel is a sovereign state, Brazil switched from voting or abstaining on resolutions condemning Israel’s behaviour in the occupied Palestinian territories and raising concerns about the human rights situation in these territories (2019–2020) to voting against or abstaining on resolutions by Israel / Palestine (2021–2022) (UNHRC, 2022). However, Brazil voted in favour of numerous resolutions that raised concerns over human rights situation and/or condemned other states for their human rights records: Venezuela, Nicaragua and Yemen (2019), Syria, Belarus and Eritrea (2020),

Afghanistan, Nicaragua (2021) and Ukraine (2022), and it also voted in favour of the resolution against the death penalty (2021). Meanwhile, Brazil abstained when a resolution was adopted about the situation of human rights in the Philippines, Iran, South Sudan as well as on the right to development (typically favoured by developing countries and objected by developed countries) (UNHRC, 2022). The latter seems to be in contradiction to Bolsonaro's rhetoric about territorial sovereignty over the Amazon region in the name of development.

Furthermore, under Bolsonaro, Brazil found new allies in authoritarian Muslim majority states who aim to protect family values and voted with them with regards to issues like combating child marriage, right to sexual and reproductive health and sexual education (Bartiliotti Picanco & Prusa, 2019). Bolsonaro also supported the idea, similarly to the Orbán-government, to take the expression 'gender' out of international documents, while they both signed the Geneva Consensus Declaration, initiated by the Trump administration in the hope to launch a global alliance to remove 'sexual and reproductive rights' from the agendas of multilateral agencies like the UN, OAS and EU.

The Brazilian approach to human rights in the UN and the OAS illustrates the selective use of the 'sovereignty shield': Brazil condemned various countries for their human rights record, not worrying about 'intervention into domestic affairs' while, in protection of Christian values, it voted with obviously authoritarian allies in case of UNHRC resolutions on gender rights. Meanwhile, he neglected and/or rejected criticisms of the human rights abuses of his own governments (especially minority rights) as postcolonial interventions into domestic affairs.

Hungary's illiberal democracy

Together with Poland, Hungary was a front-runner in the democratic transition that took place in Central Europe at the end of the Cold War. However, a decade after EU accession, the Orbán government started to transform 'Hungary into a semi-authoritarian regime that limits freedom of speech and assembly, curtails media pluralism and undermines protection of minorities' (Bugarcic & Kuhelj, 2019, p. 25). Viktor Orbán declared in 2014 that 'a democracy is not necessarily liberal. Something that is not liberal might be a democracy' (Orbán, 2014). Since then, the concept of an 'illiberal state' has been a recurring self-definition of Hungary in Orbán's rhetoric. The necessity to leave the path of liberal democracy was partly explained by religious reasons. As Orbán said: 'liberal democracy was viable until it left its Christian foundations (...) devalued religious affection and qualified national belongings as useless' (Hungarian Government, 2019). The attribute 'illiberal' indicates the demand to return to the Christian roots of European societies and build the political system on the original (pre-globalisation) idea of the European nation-state defined as homogeneous in terms of religion, culture and ethnicity. According to the rhetoric of the Hungarian government, as European democracies do not comply with these attributes, they are no more attractive, while the 'stars of international analyses are Singapore, China, India, Turkey, Russia' (quoted by Scheppele, 2019, p. 321).

According to Bozóki and Hegedűs, EU membership, the competencies of EU institutions and the scope of EU law have all played an essential role in the development of the Orbán government's unique characteristics, defined as 'an externally constrained hybrid regime' (Bozóki & Hegedűs, 2018, p. 1173). They argue that the EU has had a dual role: on the one hand, the European Commission was not prepared or equipped

to put pressure on the Hungarian government to return to the model of liberal democracy, while on the other hand, the EU (with the support of the Council of Europe (CoE)) and the judgments of the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) contributed to secure personal freedom (Bozóki & Hegedűs, 2018, p. 1175) and after all has served as a constrain on authoritarian measures.

The 'rule of law' debate became more intense after 2015, especially since the conservative PiS won the elections in Poland and 'followed' the authoritarian steps taken by the Orbán government. The vote on the EU budget for the period 2021–2027 brought a tangible conflict in November 2020 between the EU and the Hungary-Poland axis on the mechanism. As the EU's long-term budget (and coronavirus economic recovery fund) requires a unanimous vote, Hungary and Poland threatened to veto if the rule-of-law mechanism is tied to budget decisions (access to funds) as proposed. Finally, a compromise was reached in December 2020, as Orbán put it: 'common sense prevailed; we defended Hungary's sovereignty and Hungarian money' (About Hungary, 2020), suggesting that the rule-of-law mechanism was irrational and an external attack on Hungary's sovereignty. However, the rule of law mechanism remained and started to work as a preventive tool in 2021 (Politico, 2020). The European Union was not prepared to 'regulate' member states in terms of the rule of law, as it is based on the idea that common values are shared by all members. The mechanism is a new instrument, a direct response to Hungary's 'illiberal turn'.

Viktor Orbán accuses the EU of intervening in domestic affairs, claiming that 'Hungary's sovereignty was being undermined by foreign ideas, effectively casting his domestic critics as dangerous outsiders who are hostile to Hungarian sovereignty' (Paris, 2022, p. 544). On the other hand, like Brazil, Hungary uses the sovereignty card selectively. The Orbán government, along with developed countries, adopted UNHRC resolutions condemning other countries for their human rights records, for example, Myanmar (2017), Belarus (2017), Nicaragua (2019), Syria (2019), or Iran (2019). In the UN, Hungary also voted against the Venezuelan resolution on the right to development (2017); it also voted against the death penalty (2017) following European traditions.

However, recently in the European Union, the Orbán government has blocked statements from the European Council condemning new allies of Hungary, such as China or Turkey for their human rights records, but voted on sanctions against Venezuela to 'encourage democratic shared solutions' (European Council, 2022a) and restrictive measures against Lebanon (European Council, 2022b) or sanctions against Myanmar / Burma (European Council, 2022c) for human rights violations. Vetoing is not a new tool to influence EU foreign policy, various countries have used it in the past, but Hungarian vetoes have proliferated since 2018 and have extended to various topics. This also has contributed to suggestions on the part of European leaders and the European Parliament that if a coherent EU foreign policy is to be implemented, unanimity should be replaced with weighted majority in the European Council. Beyond that, the question of unanimity is also raised to reinforce EU capacities to stop the 'illiberal turn' in Eastern Europe (especially in Hungary and Poland) and to respond to the idea that 'the European Union is unlikely to preserve liberalism and thwart increasing authoritarianism in member states for the foreseeable future' (Appel, 2019, pp. 255–256).

The selective approach to state sovereignty is also reflected in other actions. In 2010, Orbán extended Hungarian citizenship and non-resident voting rights to

ethnic Hungarians living in other countries, which was ‘the most important diaspora policy innovation of the Orbán government’ (Pogonyi, 2017, p. 243) and self-evidently a gesture towards the ethnically Hungarian population outside Hungary’s borders, while at the same time reinforcing his electoral support at home. Furthermore, prime minister Orbán regularly attends the Bálványos Free Summer University and Youth Camp in Transylvania where he gives a highly publicised political speech on Hungary’s regional and global position, showing less concern for the sovereignty of a neighbouring country.

Regarding instruments that might shape the future of the European Union, support of EU enlargement towards the Western Balkans is a primary one. Hungary gives the EU Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement for the period of 2019–2024. The paradox of the strong commitment of the Hungarian government to enlargement while regularly criticising the EU on other fronts is explained by two essential factors. Like Britain, which was committed to the enlargement process during the 1990s when it was still an EU member, Hungary also expects that a higher number of member states would hinder the deepening of the integration (Schimmelfennig, 2001, p. 53). Orbán has attempted to find allies who share his vision, mainly among the leaders of Euro-sceptic parties, but to this day, no permanent alliance in the EU has been established, chiefly due to conflicts over other issues. On the other hand, supporting EU enlargement appears to be a useful foreign policy tool for Hungary to reinforce bilateral relations with like-minded leaders of Western Balkan states (the president of Serbia and former leader of Macedonia), who share Orbán’s ideas on illiberal democracy (Huszka, 2020, p. 82).

Another root of the conflict with the EU is the growing social conservatism on the part of the Hungarian government. Based on Christian values, the ‘protection of families’ is a declared objective, strongly intertwined in law-making with the protection of children from LGBTQ ideas and sex education in schools (Gera, 2023). In EU-Hungary debates, the argument to protect children contrasts with the idea of non-discrimination against minorities, while a majority of EU member states (mostly Western and North European countries) criticise the Hungarian Act LXXIX (2021) on taking more severe action against paedophile offenders and amending certain Acts for the protection of children before the EU Court of Justice.

The Hungary-EU debate is primarily the result of Hungary’s democratic setbacks and growing social conservatism in Hungarian law-making. Based on populist sovereigntism, the Orbán government blames the EU for leaving the Christian path promoted by the founders of European integration and calls to return to what are referred to as the EU’s ‘origins’. He neglects the fact that European values like freedom, solidarity and human rights have determined the evolution of European integration since the 1950s and instead describes these values as politically driven instruments to weaken his political in-groups and domestic power.

War in Ukraine and populist sovereigntism

According to international law, the war initiated by Russia in Ukraine (February 2022) was an obvious attack against the sovereignty (in a Westphalian sense) of a neighbouring country with the use of force. Western countries reacted by imposing sanctions on Russia and by supporting Ukraine. Brazil and Hungary have been sharing a ‘neutral’ or ‘balanced’

approach in the sense that they both criticise sanctions as a useless tool and emphasise the responsibility of Western actors with respect to the continuation of the war.

Bolsonaro and Russia: Christian alliance in defence of the Amazon

In 2019, the Brazilian foreign minister suggested that Brazil needed a 'spiritual rebirth' alliance with the world's main Christian powers, the US and Russia, so that they could together fight the hatred of God, or 'theophobia' in Western societies' (Casarões & Farias, 2022, p. 17). Bolsonaro's 'solidarity' visit to Moscow in February 2022 symbolised the 'autonomy to act' of the Brazilian president, in a step that was highly criticised by the Biden administration. Bolsonaro has stressed that his position on the situation in Ukraine is neutral and 'balanced' and has referred to Russia as an ally, as Vladimir Putin supports Brazilian sovereignty over the Amazon. As he said: Russia 'is with us on the sovereignty issue, which some people do not care about' (CNN, 2022) – obviously referring to Western critics of his environmental policy.

In the UN family, the UNSC, the UNGA and the UNHRC are the bodies that have adopted resolutions concerning the war in Ukraine. Currently, Brazil is a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council. In February 2022, Russia vetoed a draft resolution calling to end the Ukraine crisis, while Brazil voted in favour with Western members. China, India and the United Arab Emirates abstained (UN Press Releases, 2022a). Two days later, the UNSC adopted Resolution 2623 calling for an emergency special session of the General Assembly, with the very same voting patterns. In March, the UNSC failed to adopt a text demanding civilian protection and unhindered humanitarian access in Ukraine tabled by Russia – in this case, Brazil abstained with 12 other members, whose delegates argued that it would have justified Russian aggression against Ukraine (UN Press Releases, 2022b).

In the General Assembly of the United Nations, Brazil and also Hungary voted for a resolution demanding an end to the Russian offensive in Ukraine (2nd March 2022) and reaffirming Ukraine's sovereignty (UN News, 2022b). In April 2022 UNGA also adopted a resolution to suspend Russian membership in the UNHRC, where Hungary voted in favour, while Brazil abstained (with 57 other countries) (UNHRC, 2022). In the UN Human Rights Council, in March 2022 Brazil voted for the resolution on the human rights situation in Ukraine stemming from the Russian aggression. Then, a special session was convened in May 2022, where Brazil also voted in favour of a resolution on the deteriorating human rights situation in Ukraine.

At the regional level, the OAS adopted a resolution in March 2022 condemning Russia's war against Ukraine and supporting the full restoration of Ukraine's territorial integrity. Only five American states abstained, among them Brazil (Mercopress, 2001). Mercosur was also divided over the war in Ukraine and finally declined the request of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky to address the Mercosur summit in July 2022.

As mentioned above, Bolsonaro referred to Russia as an ally 'with respect to sovereignty'. He highly appreciated Putin's support for the Amazon issue and was more reluctant to support Ukraine, even though it had suffered an armed invasion. The Brazilian government's 'balancing/neutral approach' under Bolsonaro meant that while in the UNGA Brazil condemned Russian actions in Ukraine when the war started, Bolsonaro was later critical to 'punishing' instruments such as sanctions imposed on behalf of the United States (Biden administration) and the EU.

Orbán and Russia: economic pragmatism?

The war in Ukraine has made it much more difficult for Hungary, as an EU member, to maintain strong ties with Moscow. In terms of rhetoric, the response of the Hungarian government has been very similar to that of Bolsonaro: while Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity are supported, a 'balanced / neutral' position must be followed, economic relations with Russia are necessary and sanctions are useless to end the conflict.

However, as a member state of the European Union, Hungary has had to vote about EU sanctions imposed on Russia since February 2022. The EU has added six packages of sanctions against Russia to those that had already been introduced after the 2014 annexation of Crimea. During the negotiations, the Hungarian government wanted to avoid sanctions in the energy sector due to its dependence on oil and gas from Russian imports. Hungary was charged with holding the EU hostage (*The Guardian*, 2022) by blocking the last package of sanctions. Finally, the Hungarian government signed the sanctions – the most dependent economies, like Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republic were offered a delay to join the EU embargo until 2024. Although Hungary attempted to build a Central European bloc of countries that rejects EU sanctions, it was unable to repeat the 2015 'Visegrad success' of joint action and remained alone.

However, the domestic rhetoric of Prime Minister Orbán accuses Brussels and the domestic opposition (jointly defined as the 'international other' in this case) of trying to get Hungary involved in the war. Also, his rhetoric has shifted to directly linking 'sanctions' imposed on Russia to the 'energy crisis' and to increasing inflation in Hungary, neglecting the fact that sanctions are a response to Russian aggression against Ukraine's sovereignty. He defines himself as a lonely advocate for peace in the EU, proposing that immediate peace negotiations are needed instead of sanctions (Orbán, 2022). Along similar lines to the refugee crisis in 2015, he proposes an alternative way to solve the crisis, but it is not in line with the fundamentals of EU international cooperation. In this case, he remains isolated with his 'staying out of the conflict' approach. Regarding sovereignty, it should be highlighted that despite attempts to strengthen Hungary's sovereignty in the international arena, the Orbán government treats Hungary's dependence on Russian resources as natural and unavoidable, using it as an argument against sanctions imposed on Russia; cutting off Russian oil and gas imports would 'kill Hungary', said Orbán (Politico, 2023).

Altogether, the Bolsonaro and Orbán administrations both maintained friendly bilateral ties with Russia after February 2022, and both were critical of Western sanctions. However, in the UN, they voted with Western countries that were critical towards Russia. Hungarian hesitancy and efforts to 'soften' EU sanctions have undermined the unity of the EU's condemnation of Russia and could have direct impacts on the future EU decision-making process. Hungary is described as the Trojan horse of Russia in the EU (Orenstein & Kelemen, 2017), while it has primarily non-EU allies (such as Bolsonaro, Trump, or Serbia) with a similar approach to the war in Ukraine.

Conclusion

Although populists are critical towards international organisations, accusing IOs of posing challenges to state sovereignty, their actual behaviour is more 'selective'. Despite the fact that Brazil and Hungary have been involved in conflict with IOs, neither is willing to pay

the costs of leaving the UN, the OAS or the EU, respectively. Rather, they apply various strategies to weaken and/or shape the given organisation, counterbalance the criticisms towards their domestic governance or foreign policy actions, and limit the constraints membership means for them.

Although both leaders examined are described as nationalist (Ricci & Venturelli, 2023; Toomey, 2018), their interpretation of sovereignty does not necessarily rest on a national basis. Beyond protecting Brazil's and Hungary's sovereignty, they also put emphasis on the defence of the Western Christian world (both), anti-globalist conservatives (both), traditional families (both) and Central Europe (in case of Hungary) in various multilateral fora. Bolsonaro and Orbán share the perspective that sovereignty justifies government actions to prevent external actors from criticising them. Also, based on Christianity, they both attempt to build socially conservative societies marginalising socially 'progressive' ambitions. Sovereignty means for them the right to determine essential values for the society.

Bolsonaro follows the Trumpist interpretation of sovereignty in terms of being suspicious towards certain Western-based IOs as representatives of left-wing globalists (most typically the UN and the EU). Also, he shares Trump's scepticism concerning the severity of global challenges like climate change or the COVID-19 pandemic and perceives international cooperation with regards to them as threats to their sovereignty. Beyond that, for Bolsonaro, sovereignty also means prioritising national business interests, with various consequences for international cooperation. While he had strong ambitions to join OECD, he withdrew from multilateral environmental diplomacy to preserve the sovereign right to guarantee opportunities for actors in the business sector.

For Orbán, sovereignty means 'taking back the control', mainly from the European Union (Euroscepticism), proposing the idea of strong European nation-states instead of a European superstate. Furthermore, maintaining cultural homogeneity is an essential value, and national sovereignty means that state authorities are responsible for protecting it. Beyond that, for Orbán sovereign equality of states justifies the ambition to shift Hungary's position from a small country that historically 'followed' others to be a regional player on its own, a potential model for other countries.

Bolsonaro and Orbán connect state sovereignty to quite similar topics. Firstly, on strong anti-globalist grounds, they reject the attempt of IOs to find common solutions to global challenges and reinforce global governance. They define global challenges (especially migration and climate change) and feminism/gender rights as issues supported by 'globalists', the Western liberal elite, defined as the 'international other' who threaten their state sovereignty and impose solutions on states against their will. Climate change, COVID-19 (Brazil), international migration/transnational communities (Hungary) and protecting rights of minorities (Brazil and Hungary) are typical issues where they refer to their territorial sovereignty and insist on their own (national) solutions. They tend to avoid international responsibility and burden-sharing as guiding principles, reject participation in common projects by withdrawal or blocking the target global standards on climate change or international migration; while on other topics (e.g. economic development, regional inequalities, poverty, or drug trade) they allow IOs to distribute funds and launch programmes in their countries.

A second typical root cause of the conflict between populists and IOs lies in domestic governance. Like authoritarian regimes, right-wing populists tend to be highly sensitive to criticisms regarding their own democratic governance, rule of law and human rights

records. In these cases, state sovereignty is understood as non-interference in domestic issues, emphasising that domestic governance is under state authority. Furthermore, as elected leaders, they constitute the 'popular will' and govern in a way preferred by the society. This is especially a strong argument in the case of Hungary: since 2010 Viktor Orbán has been re-elected three times. Critical IOs (and NGOs) are thus accused of being politically biased and supporting the opposition only for partisan political reasons, while the model of Western democracy is portrayed as an outdated, failed model. On the other hand, neither Bolsonaro nor Orbán is so strict on sovereignty when it comes to criticising other countries and their democratic shortcomings or human rights situation. Both leaders appear to raise the sovereignty issue inconsistently, in a way that serves their foreign policy interests as they perceive them: condemning non-allies and being less strict on allies. This is valid for most of the states, but as populists typically and loudly criticise Western powers and institutions of postcolonial attacks on state sovereignty and of double standards, applying similar measures towards other countries seems controversial.

Examining Brazil's and Hungary's response to the Ukraine war, we can conclude that on pragmatic grounds, bilateral links with Moscow have not deteriorated, even though Russia has directly violated the sovereignty of Ukraine. In bilateral links, strategic and economic interests overwrite Bolsonaro's and Orbán's adherence to sovereignty and non-interference. However, despite their 'neutral'/'balancing' rhetoric and shared view on the inefficiency of sanctions imposed on Russia, in their 'voting patterns' Brazil and Hungary eventually stand for Ukraine's sovereignty, so their rhetoric and their actions are not in alignment. However, the war in Ukraine has further estranged Brazil and Hungary from the Western world and its institutions.

Meanwhile, both leaders have sought to build a broad international alliance against the 'international other' to protect their version of sovereignty. Jair Bolsonaro's essential allies were Trump and Putin, based on Christianity and social conservatism, while Orbán attempted to build stronger links with Visegrad countries, Serbia and Turkey. Furthermore, both have turned to Muslim countries as potential allies in their fight against 'gender issues' to protect family values and conservative societies.

Bolsonaro started his presidency with loud and extreme criticism of the UN, calling it useless, and threatening to withdraw. However, his actions later differed from his rhetoric. He has withdrawn from Brazil's central role in climate change negotiations and has found new allies on human rights issues, but he has not quit the UN or withdrawn from any of its bodies. Loss of major allies, threats of international isolation and domestic challenges have forced him to adopt a more modest tone. Originally, 'joining' the US to marginalise the UN seemed to appeal to Bolsonaro, but when Trump lost the election in 2021, he remained alone (and consequently weaker) in his attempts to undermine the universal organisation by portraying it as ideologically biased and unnecessary.

Compared to Brazil's role in the UN, Hungary has demonstrated more activism in the EU, and Orbán's behaviour has obviously had a stronger impact on the European Union. His goal is to switch the status of Hungary from a 'student' of Western powers to a 'trend-setter' in Europe and beyond. He has never 'threatened' to leave the EU, he rather attempts to 'adjust' it to 'Hungarian interests', to prevent EU actions that are against his foreign policy interests, and to find supporters of the idea of building strong nation states in Europe. He seems to have found allies in Central Europe at the time of the

refugee crisis in 2015, but since then he has been struggling to avoid isolation in the EU, especially in the context of the war in Ukraine. His primary tools are ‘vetoing’ and threatening to veto to reach modifications of the texts adopted by various EU bodies or exemptions for Hungary. He has been successful in forcing ‘Brussels’ to modify statements and declarations, but his sovereigntist project obviously goes against the fundamentals of the EU. In response to what they see as a threat, the ‘core’ countries and the European Parliament have sought to change the voting regulations. Currently, he seems to fight ‘alone’ within the EU with respect to Russia and the conditionality mechanism. Altogether, both leaders have failed to build a broad alliance within the IOs they have conflicts with and thereby change the course of procedure, decisions, declarations, etc.

From the standpoint of the Liberal International Order and its institutions, the populist leaders examined in this article undermine international cooperation in the sense that they polarise the debate between globalists–anti-globalists with regard to global problems and global governance in the UN, deepening the gap between supporters of strong nation states and supporters of a European superstate in the EU. The global rise of populism hinders the development of multi-layered governance as it divides the actors involved into two groups and reduces the opportunities for cooperation among them. This tendency reduces the chance to find ‘in-between’ solutions and compromises, as it attempts to homogenise ‘blocs’ built on different values and ideas that contribute to the growing conflict between the West and the Rest.

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Bernadett Lehoczki graduated as an economist (2003) and earned her Ph.D. at Corvinus University of Budapest (2009). She wrote her dissertation on relations between China and Latin America, focussing on diversification opportunities in the Latin American region. Her research has mainly focussed on Latin America’s place in the international system, regionalism in Latin America and inter-regional links beyond the core regions. Most recently she has started to focus on a comparative analysis of Latin America and Central Eastern Europe.

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