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Populist Foreign Policy of Venezuela and Hungary: Post-Westernism and Its Limitations*

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Abstract

The global rise of populism has fuelled academic interest in how populism impacts international relations. The article argues that the post-Western international order as a context and its perceived opportunities strongly guide the foreign policy conduct of populist leaders regardless of their ideological background or geographical situation. The cases examined are Venezuela under Hugo Chávez (1999–2013) and Hungary under Viktor Orbán since 2010 (excluding his first term between 1998 and 2002). The research questions are as follows: (1) how does post-Westernism manifest itself in Chávista and Orbánist foreign policy and (2) what limitations do or did they face in terms of their post-Western foreign policies? The analysis is structured along three interrelated thematic lines of foreign policy making: populists' conflicts with traditional (Western) powers, populists' search for new partnerships in the non-Western world, and empowerment of regional institutions. Finally, the limitations of post-Westernism are explained on a comparative basis to highlight the contradictory features of populist foreign policy making in terms of loud short-term successes and silent long-term challenges.

Keywords: populism; post-Westernism; foreign policy; Hungary; Venezuela

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1. Introduction

The rise of populism is a worldwide phenomenon, reaching to all continents, and consequently having direct impacts on inter-state relations. The populist 'turn' is partly explained by transnational trends, such as accelerating globalization and strengthening global governance (Verbeek & Zaslove, 2017, p. 495), and also by the crisis of the Western-dominated liberal international order (LIO) (Ikenberry, 2018; Mearsheimer, 2019; Babic, 2020; Flockhart, 2020) and the declining political and economic influence of Western actors,

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primarily the United States (Cox, 2007; Brooks & Wohlforth, 2015) and the European Union (Smith, 2014; Van der Putten, 2009).

Populist foreign policy typically divides the world into ‘friends’ and ‘foes’, that is, actors who are with us, identify with our values and promote our goals (friends) and actors who are against us, critical of us and try to undermine our role and ambitions (foes). In practise, populists’ foes are often identified with Western actors. Thus, not surprisingly populist politicians regularly criticize the current Western-dominated liberal international order, its norms, principles and aspiration to re-set (or at least modify) the international agenda accordingly. In parallel, they are searching for new roles and opportunities in the emerging post-Western international order.

The research aim of this paper is a deeper understanding of the links between populism and post-Westernism, to explore the converging post-Western instruments of two prototype examples of populists in power, despite their ideological differences, and also to highlight the limitations of their post-Western attitude. The research questions are as follows: (1) how does post-Westernism manifest itself in Chávista and Orbánist foreign policy and (2) what limitations do or did they face in terms of their post-Western foreign policies?

The case selection rests on various factors. Although there appears to be consensus on the phenomenon referred to as ‘the global rise of populism’, there are not many populist leaders who were or have been in power for more than a decade and have had the opportunity to implement visible foreign policy changes to be analysed and evaluated in order to describe what 21st century populism means in terms of foreign policy making. Hugo Chávez and Viktor Orbán both meet these requirements, while they are quite far from each other in terms of ideology. Ideological differences seem to be useful here, as similarities or converging instruments in their foreign policies illustrate *populist* responses to the emerging post-Western world order and *populist* instruments of post-Western foreign policy making.

Venezuela and Hungary were ‘model countries’ in their regions (South America and Central Eastern Europe, respectively) in terms of democracy and economic development already before the 1990s. They both built strong political and economic links with Western actors – though Venezuela’s close ties with the United States go back to the Cold War era, Hungary’s EU membership (2004) has established strong institutional ties with Western Europe.

Hugo Chávez is a ‘textbook’ case of radical leftist populism (Destradi & Plagemann, 2019, p. 716), who served as the President of Venezuela from 1999 until 2013. He was an extremely charismatic leader, using strong anti-elite and anti-US rhetoric, fighting against global inequalities and for solidarity in the Global South.

Viktor Orbán is defined as a right-wing populist politician who has served as the Prime Minister of Hungary since 2010. He turned out to be a symbol of anti-pluralism with a strong anti-immigration stance in Europe, acting as a fierce opponent of ‘imperialist EU’ and liberal social values.

To explore the extent and subject of post-Westernism in Chávista and Orbánist foreign policy making, I apply and test the framework established by Destradi and Plagemann (2019) suggesting that populist leaders typically step back from ‘traditional partners’ in

their foreign policy, in this case from Western powers (the United States and the European Union, respectively), while they reach out to new partners (primarily adversaries of the traditional powers, in this case non-Western powers) adjusting to the power-shift in the international order. I complement the analysis with a third direction: reinforcement of regional ties, as an obvious similarity among the two cases.

My research is based on qualitative methods. Speeches, statements made on official visits, declarations and official agreements, and new projects on behalf of the leaders are analysed and, in both cases, supplemented by economic indicators (trade and FDI statistics).

The rest of the paper is structured as follows: the next chapter explores the links between populism and the post-Western international order, and then instruments fitting into the three directions of populist foreign policy making are explored in the cases of Venezuela and Hungary. Finally, the limitations of post-Westernism are explained on a comparative basis, focusing on external and internal factors and conclusions are drawn to answer the research questions.

2. Post-Western international order and populism: A conceptual framework

Currently, a shift away from the Western-dominated liberal world order to a post-Western one is occurring. While it is debated when the LIO emerged (after WWII or after the Cold War), there is a consensus that it was constructed by liberal Western powers and it was intended to bring peace and prosperity to the world. Mearsheimer claims that ‘the aim is to create a world order consisting exclusively of liberal democracies that are economically engaged with each other and bound together by sets of common rules. The underlying assumption is that such an order will be largely free of war and will generate prosperity for all of its member states’ (2019, p. 12). The shift towards a post-Western order implies that the West (both the United States and Western Europe) is in decline in terms of influence and power, while new power centres are emerging, primarily China and other members of the BRICS. The concept of the post-Western international order emerged in the 2000s, based on the idea that after the unipolar moment of the 1990s today’s new international order is shaped by the ‘inevitable and irreversible shift of power away from the United States and the West, although the post-Western world need not be about the decline of the West, but the ascendancy of everyone else’ (Serfaty, 2011, pp. 6–7). The shift is clear in both political and economic terms. While industrialized countries consistently accounted for at least two-thirds of global output during the Cold War, ‘Goldman Sachs predicts that the collective economic output of the top four developing countries will match that of the G7 countries by 2032’ (Flockhart et al., 2014, p. 5). Beyond that, ‘the Western model no longer has a monopoly on the aspirations and plans of nations seeking to better their economic and political futures’ (Flockhart et al., 2014, p. 8) for two reasons. Firstly, the introduction of the Western political and economic model did not meet the high expectations that accompanied it; Latin America and East Central Europe are the best examples. Secondly, new models of emerging markets have proved to be successful, especially in terms of economic

development without gradual political transformation. This raises scepticism concerning the idea of the universalization of liberal democracy. The global power shift is obviously taking place, but it must be emphasized that it is not happening overnight, thus the centres and characteristics of the emerging new order are yet to be seen.

Populists (politicians, leaders, parties, movements etc.) form a diverse group of actors across space and time, with different objectives, tools and results. In this study, we regard populism as a 'thin-centered 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). Such a dichotomy dividing the world and its actors is a central feature and starting point of populist politics, at the domestic and international levels alike. From this perspective, populist foreign policy is driven by the struggle against the 'international elite', understood as state and non-state actors who constitute the threatening 'Other' at the international level, while reaching out to like-minded actors who promote their vision and support their objectives.

How is populism linked to the post-Western international order: how do populists perceive the post-Western international order and how is the new order shaped by populists? On the one hand, the global rise of populism is a symptom of the crisis of the LIO established and dominated by the West. The rise of populist governments goes hand in hand with democratic setbacks; populist anti-pluralist policies typically clash with Western liberalism.

On the other hand, populists also anticipate and reinforce the rise of the post-Western world order, perceived as a new era with new rules. 'One of the consequences of waning unipolarity is the expansion of autonomous space in the foreign affairs of regional and middle powers; new-found autonomy allows these actors to reduce their dependence on the western-led hierarchical order' (Kutlay & Önis, 2021, p. 1088). Populist leaders – in India, Turkey, Venezuela, Bolivia, Hungary, Poland, the Philippines etc. – perceive the emergence of a post-Western order as a 'moment of justice', as an opportunity to finally gain autonomy and independence by distancing themselves from the actors and institutions of the West and balancing external relations through diversification of foreign links with new, non-Western actors and also with other populists in their regions and/or beyond. Furthermore, they expect to be able to shape the new rules as a result of their 'new-found autonomy' and have a word in the evolution of future institutions.

Traditionally, populists often identified the 'international elite' with Western actors and scapegoated them for political, economic and social crises in their home countries. During the 20th century, 'classical populists' in Latin America after the Great Depression (1929–33) identified the US and foreign capital as 'foes' responsible for their dependency. Since the end of the Cold War, the West (and categories such as 'Western powers', 'Western values', 'Western liberalism', 'Western institutions', the United States, the European Union, 'imperialists' and 'globalization') is a typical and usual 'Other' for populists. While European populists during the 1990s labelled the 'United States' and 'globalization'/'Americanization' as threats (Özdamar & Ceydilek, 2020), Latin American pink tide leaders defined the United States and neoliberalism as enemies (Salgado & Saldrin, 2021), while in recent years European right-wing populists have followed strengthening Euroscepticism (Pirro,

Taggart & van Kessel, 2018). Turkey under Recep Tayyip Erdogan implemented an anti-Western foreign policy (Kaliber & Kaliber, 2019, p. 1), while Donald Trump's election was described as 'a symbolic ending of the liberal American and Western order established after 1945' (Bryk, 2019, p. 14).

The concept of post-Westernism, as the sum of the pursuits to actively contribute to a new post-Western international order and to anticipate the evolving distribution of political and economic power in the world, is the key to understanding the aspirations and practices of Chávez and Orbán in foreign policy. Both leaders identify the 'international elites' with Western actors (the US and the EU, respectively) and both actively attempt(ed) to find an alternative to the Western model of the 1990s, while drawing on emerging non-Western powers. Their joint ambition is to live with the 'moment of autonomy' and reinforce their position in the evolving order.

Meanwhile, when analysing the substance of post-Westernism in populist foreign policy, I also follow the argument of Kutlay and Önis (2021, p. 1091) suggesting that the short-term benefits of 'independent action' (such as higher visibility, rising international influence) might lead to foreign policy lines detrimental to the country's long term national interest and also to new forms of dependence. Therefore, the limitations of post-Westernism are also analysed in the article, highlighting the contradictory features of populist foreign policies in terms of loud short-term success and silent long-term challenges.

3. Tensions with the West: Scapegoating and aspirations for 'autonomy'

Defining Western actors as the 'international Other' by Chávez and Orbán was motivated by domestic and international factors alike. Firstly, Western criticism of domestic politics (moves towards authoritarian rule) in both cases was perceived as threats to their domestic position, especially when the opposition (the 'corrupt elite') maintained or even reinforced ties with Western actors. Chávez and Orbán both evaluated Western criticism – by states, institutions, NGOs or individuals – as foreign intervention based on the false assumption that these countries should be 'taught' democracy. Secondly, at the international level – in accordance with domestic changes – the perceived decline of Western power resulted in a prompt reply: turning away from the 'old order' determined by the 'old elite' (domestic opposition) and breaking out of the subordinate 'student status' of the 1990s by offering an alternative to the Western model of development. The 'Venezuelan model' consisted of state redistribution reinforcing social programmes and the introduction of 'participatory democracy', while elements of the 'Hungarian model' are unorthodox economic measures and 'illiberal democracy'.

The 'West' mainly meant the United States for Chávez, and the key foreign policy change he introduced is described by Serbin (2017) as follows:

The aspiration to make the new Bolivarian Venezuela not only a regionally relevant actor but also an international player, through the development of a regional and international

support network and a series of alliances and partnerships... (he) envisioned international affairs in terms of confrontation with the United States ... and the transformation of the international system to multipolarity after the end of the Cold War (pp. 234–235).

The election of Hugo Chávez brought an obvious and sudden shift in US-Venezuela relations. Among the pink tide leaders, Chávez was one of the harshest critics of Washington, and he followed an explicitly hostile attitude towards US President George W. Bush – famously calling him the ‘devil’, a ‘donkey’ and a ‘terrorist’ (Aponte-Moreno & Lattig, 2012, p. 36). Chávismo reinforced the West-Rest dichotomy, identifying himself with the ‘Rest’, which he presented as a homogeneous bloc against US exploitation in the world. Fitting into anti-imperialist traditions in Latin America, he scapegoated the US (and other industrialized countries) for the underdevelopment of the Rest and introduced ambitious social programmes to fulfil campaign promises like cutting poverty and social inequality. His ‘social diplomacy’ (Corrales, 2009, p. 109) and its measurable achievements (social indicators improved considerably under Chávez) gave the new model of Venezuela credibility in the regional and international arenas alike, despite Western criticisms for its unsustainability.

The election of Barack Obama brought a surprising change in Chávez’s rhetoric: the new US president was welcomed by the Venezuelan government as an anti-establishment figure. But despite Chávez’s friendlier rhetoric, conflicts persisted: while Obama brought rapprochement with Cuba (an essential regional ally of Chávez), he continued Bush’s policy of isolation towards Venezuela, while financing and supporting the Venezuelan opposition in its unifying efforts (Buxton, 2018, p. 18). Chávez kept accusing the United States of applying double standards in terms of democracy, meddling in the domestic affairs of Venezuela and trying to overthrow him (Gill, 2019, p. 296). On populist grounds, Chávez’s model of ‘participatory democracy’ turned out to be a competing concept of ‘representative democracy’ (identified with the US and the domestic opposition), contrasting individual, civil and political rights vs. collective social and economic rights. The mutually exclusive interpretation of the two models polarized Venezuela’s society; the result was a ‘polarized democracy that became increasingly authoritarian’ (García-Guadilla & Mallen, 2019, p. 62).

Although the primary ‘international Other’ was obviously the United States, the Chávez era brought a cooling of the relationship with Europe, although the level of tension with the EU was lower, allowing for permanent communication with the Venezuelan government (Dominguez, 2015, p. 154). The main points of conflict were Chávez’s regular postcolonial allegations of intervention in domestic affairs by the EU and especially Spain (Dominguez, 2015, p. 154); criticism of EU immigration policies (Cala, 2013), and Spanish allegations that Venezuela supported FARC and ETA under Chávez (Sánchez, 2010).

As to Hungary, Orbán identifies EU bureaucrats with the ‘international Other’ describing the EU – but not the member states – as corrupt and imperialist (Morgan, 2020, p. 1424), labelling ‘Brussels’ as an enemy of the Hungarian people and Central Eastern Europe. Consequently, unlike Chávez, Orbán criticizes an institution Hungary is a member of, regularly participates in, and thus the ‘rupture with the West’ has been more gradual and slower.

After the landslide victory of Fidesz in 2010, the new government introduced various legislative acts, among them a new constitution to reinforce its power. As a consequence, separation of power, independence of media, and the impartiality of the civil service were undermined (Rupnik, 2018, p. 25). The EU soon responded with criticism of these authoritarian moves; in 2012, the Barroso Commission initiated legal proceedings against Hungary in three areas: independence of the central bank, independence of the data protection authority, and non-discrimination of judges (Bayer, 2020). These tensions deepened when in 2014 Orbán declared he would build illiberal democracy in Hungary, and then in 2021 he evaluated liberal democracies as ‘liberal non-democracies’ (MTI-Hungary Today, 2021a), rejecting the Western model of democracy and – similarly to Chávez – inventing a ‘real democracy’ (illiberal democracy) superior to the original model. Until now, the issue of democracy and the rule of law has been a serious point of tension between the EU and Hungary, leading to hot debates on binding the rule of law to granting EU funds to member states.

On populist grounds, Hungary’s ‘post-Westernism’ in relation to the EU sets up a Western liberalism versus illiberalism dichotomy, polarizing the debate on liberal social values (in terms of rights and freedom) and calling for a return to traditional Christian values. Orbán also polarizes the debate on the future of Europe, dividing the scenarios into two groups: he stands as a leader of those who insist on a Europe of nation states and who are against a ‘European empire’ that places political, economic and social constraints on its members.

Hungary is not planning to leave the European Union (public opinion strongly approves EU membership), and Viktor Orbán himself emphasizes that ‘it is better for us in the Union’ (Stavski & Wintzenburg, 2021). Instead, he plans to carry out changes from within, implementing a ‘cultural counter-revolution’ as Orbán and Kaczyński declared in 2016 (Krekó & Enyedi, 2018) aspiring to shape the future of the EU and redefine Hungary’s position as an initiator of changes. Orbán suggests that the multiple EU crises and declining economic power proves that ‘Brussels’ is on the wrong course; as he put it in 2021: ‘The EU will not fix itself. We will have to help get it back on the right path’ (Kovács, 2021). Currently, these ambitions are highly limited due to the lack of allies within the EU.

Within the EU, an essential instrument to express divergent opinions is ‘vetoing’ foreign policy decisions. Hungary’s ‘new found autonomy’ has led to an increasing number of vetoes with other member states, but also to ‘solo vetoes’ in recent years. For example, Hungary vetoed the text of the Marrakesh Political Declaration on migration and development (2018), the EU’s negotiation mandate for the post-Cotonou negotiation (2018) (Szent-Iványi & Kugiel, 2020, p. 132), and also blocked sanctions against Russia, condemnation of China, and the EU statements on Hong Kong (2021) and the Middle East (2021) (EUraktiv, 2021), based on the argument that the planned documents were ideologically driven and non-objective. Hungary’s ‘own way’ in the European Union is also illustrated by the fact that it is the sole EU member state that authorized Russian and Chinese vaccines against the coronavirus not approved by the European Medicines Agency (EMA). In June 2021, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán (who publicly took the Sinopharm vaccine himself) contrasted Hungary’s vaccine abundance with the general vaccine scarcity in the EU (MTI-Hungary Today, 2021b). The war in Ukraine further deepened the isolation of

the Hungarian government within the EU, illustrating the diverging views on the role of Western and non-Western actors in the world.

Relations with the US also form part of post-Westernism in Hungarian foreign policy; the Orbán era can be divided into various periods in terms of US-Hungary relations based on the approach of each US president to Hungary. President Barack Obama (2009–2017) and his Secretary of State Hillary Clinton joined the EU in raising concerns about democracy in Hungary. Despite criticisms similar to those of the EU, the Hungarian government 'was trying to improve its relations with the USA' but did not take concrete steps to bring changes in terms of governance (Kurucz, 2020, p. 101). During the Obama years, Hungary primarily focused on the EU in its post-Western rhetoric and had more direct clashes with Brussels than Washington.

The arrival of President Donald Trump in the White House brought changes in US-Hungary relations; ideological similarities opened new opportunities in the bilateral links. Orbán's visit to the White House (2019) illustrated that Trump did not use the democracy lens on Hungary, while he endorsed the Orbán government's steps on border security (Kurucz, 2020, p. 106).

The Biden administration returned to Obama's insistence on the need to return to liberal democracy, while Viktor Orbán has built strong ties with conservative pro-Trump US Republican circles. Consequently, US-Hungary relations have not been as tense as today since the Cold War.

4. Rapprochement with non-Western allies: Similar actors, similar motives

Chávez and Orbán both found new 'identity' for their countries and defined who they represent(ed) in contrast with their predecessors. While Hugo Chávez declared solidarity with South America and the Global South, and with all the exploited nations on Earth, Viktor Orbán declared solidarity with Central Eastern Europe and with the Christian world. Despite different self-identification based on their thick ideology, their primary non-Western allies are identical: China and Russia, elemental actors of the post-Western international order. Furthermore, both leaders reinforced relations with Central Asian and Middle Eastern – mainly authoritarian – countries. A primary motive was to diversify economic links away from the West and ease dependence on Western markets by adjusting to world economic trends. Beyond that, their political motives were twofold: to increase their bargaining power against traditional partners and balance Western criticism of their authoritarian moves in domestic politics.

While turning away from the United States, Chávez initiated intense diplomatic efforts to become an integral part of the emerging anti-US alliance in the context of the War on Terror. He was motivated by various interests; he intended to build an alliance of countries committed to social development and social solidarity, he wanted to weaken Western (especially US) influence in Venezuela (and in the world), and also attempted to diversify its oil exports and find new investors to be less dependent on the United States.

China was an easy choice to reach these objectives at the beginning of the 2000s. Beijing is obviously a key actor in the changing international order and its rise is often directly linked to the declining power of the US. Not surprisingly, the political cooperation between China and Venezuela focused on multipolarity and South-South cooperation. Chávez visited China six times as president, but his attempts to build an 'ideological alliance' with China against US-led imperialism met rigorous Chinese pragmatism. Beijing was reluctant to build closer political ties and confront the United States (Domínguez, 2006, pp. 41–43) and insisted on pragmatic trade links with Venezuela during the Chávez era (Ratliff, 2006, pp. 75–77). Since 'in the "new" developing world, China is looking for trade partners, not revolutionary allies' (Wang, 2015, p. 936), evolving links between Beijing and Caracas were based on economic cooperation. In more specific terms, oil and loans were the most essential elements of cooperation: the strategy of 'going out' of Chinese oil companies was supported by joint ventures with the Venezuelan state oil company (PDVSA) to explore and develop the Orinoco belt; while in the framework of the Joint Fund (set up in 2007) an enormous amount of loans was granted to Venezuela. By 2015, Venezuela borrowed more from China alone (USD 65 billion) than Brazil, Argentina, and Mexico combined (USD 21.8 billion) (Briceño-Ruiz & Molena Medina, 2020, p. 160).

The strategic partnership between Russia and Venezuela began at the beginning of the Chávez era and intensified after 2004. Hugo Chávez 'diplomatically supported Russia in key conflicts, including the Georgian war (2008), the 2014 annexation of Crimea, and the Syrian conflict' (Rendon & Fernandez, 2020, p. 3) – confronting the position of Western powers. Shared anti-American interests and opposition to a unipolar world drove the relations, and Vladimir Putin was less hesitant than China to confront the United States by intensifying relations with Venezuela. The relations between Venezuela and Russia consisted of two components under Chávez: energy cooperation and military links (Katz, 2006, p. 6), with the latter being especially worrying for US conservatives. In the second half of the Chávez era, relations shifted towards stronger political cooperation, especially after Putin's Munich speech in 2007 (Rouvinski, 2019, p. 5), which was a direct criticism of the US-led unipolar international order ('one master') and unilateral foreign policy acts by the United States, in accordance with Chávez's ideas.

Conflicts in the Middle East had traditionally been distant from Venezuela (and Latin America in general), but Chávez's active international diplomacy reached the Middle East region, forging strong alliances based on anti-imperialism and criticism of US foreign policy. Despite the fact that the 'Arab Spring' protests were against social inequality and low standard of living, Chávez chose to maintain friendly relations with Libya's Muammar Qaddafi (whom he labelled a 'martyr' after his death) and Syria's Bashar Al Assad (Vélez, 2016, p. 170) to reinforce and widen an international anti-US alliance. He insisted that Western powers supported the Syrian opposition to punish Syria for its 'antiimperialist stance' (Vélez, 2016, p. 167) and Venezuela joined the coalition formed by Russia, China and Iran supporting the Assad regime. Thus, post-Westernism and anti-US sentiments overrode the leftwing ideals of social solidarity and the fight against exploitation.

President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's Iran was also an ally of Chávez's Venezuela after 2005: beyond bilateral links (official visits, cooperation agreement etc.) Venezuela served as a 'gateway' to Latin America; Iran built good relations with Bolivia, Ecuador, Cuba

and Nicaragua based on anti-Americanism (Botta, 2009, pp. 43–44). Chávez – next to Brazilian President Lula da Silva – loudly defended Iran's right to develop nuclear energy (Shifter, 2006, p. 55) and criticized the sanctions against Tehran. Furthermore, Iran and Venezuela formed an axis within OPEC, primarily to contain Saudi Arabian (perceived as an ally of Washington) influence in the organization.

As for Hungary, new partnerships with emerging regions were initiated by its 'Global opening' declared in 2010 and the 'Eastern opening' project formally launched in 2012; the declared objective of the latter was to send one-third of Hungarian exports outside the EU (Rácz, 2019). This meant the subordination of foreign policy objectives to foreign trade interests on pragmatic grounds and resulted in a newly established Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade. The top priorities of Hungarian diplomacy became attracting investments and increasing foreign trade. This pragmatic shift brought 'excessive purges in the diplomatic corps (...), with around 400 seasoned diplomats, including Fidesz's own long-serving foreign policy experts with strong Euro-Atlantic credentials forced to leave' (Varga & Buzogány, 2020, p. 13).

The year 2015 brought the 'Opening to the South' project that complements the Eastern Opening. Although no countries of the 'East' and 'South' have been officially specified by the Hungarian government, in practise the 'openings' focused on non-EU countries located beyond Europe and North America (Rácz, 2019), resulting in a 'series of visits and agreements with primarily Asian countries, including some of the actors most criticized by the EU' (Szalai, 2017, p. 358) in the post-Soviet region.

In practise, the attempts at diversification of Hungary's foreign relations focus on Russia in terms of politics and on China in terms of trade. Although Orbán was a harsh critic of his pre-2010 predecessors, especially of Ferenc Gyurcsány's Socialist government (2004–2009), for visiting and building any links with Moscow, when in power, he deepened Russia-Hungary relations. Although there is a history of Russian dominance in the region, and in particular the subordination of Hungary to the Soviet Union and the country's non-autonomous foreign policy during the Cold War are living memories and symbolize the loss of sovereignty in Hungary, since 2014 Hungary and Russia have reached closer cooperation with meetings between Putin and Orbán on a yearly basis. Hungary is a constant critic of the sanctions imposed on Russia, while 'it seems Hungary helped the former Macedonian Prime Minister and Russian ally to avoid prison and arrive in Hungary where the authorities granted him political asylum' (Tarrósy & Vörös, 2020, p. 121), while Hungary has been blocking NATO-Ukraine Commission meetings since March 2020 until the minority rights of 150,000 ethnic Hungarians living in Ukraine are restored (MTI-Hungary Today, 2020a). However, in April 2023 the NATO-Ukraine Commission was convened despite Hungarian opposition, illustrating Hungary's isolation regarding this issue.

In the context of the war in Ukraine, after Orbán's February 2022 visit to Moscow he introduced the 'Hungarian model' with respect to Russia: maintaining excellent relations with Moscow while being an EU and NATO member (Pelva, 2022); offering a perfect example of 'balancing' the ambitions of populist leaders, while also distancing Hungary from the joint commitment of European countries to solidarity with Ukraine and condemnation of Russia on moral grounds.

In terms of economic cooperation, the Paks II nuclear energy project was announced in 2014 and has gained special relevance since then in the context of the War in Ukraine and the energy crisis. The negotiations that led to the project were kept secret, raising serious doubts regarding transparency, while ‘the overall value of the project exceeds 12% of the current Hungarian GDP’ (Deák & Weiner, 2019, p. 10), raising concerns regarding economic sovereignty.

Similarly as with Russia, despite Orbán’s anti-China sentiments during his first term (1998–2002), China was an obvious target of the ‘East Opening’ based on previous bilateral links and the fact that ‘Hungary plays a prominent role in the relations of the region (CEE) with China, especially if we focus on investments or trade relations, not to mention the country as the most popular regional destination for Chinese immigrants’ (Tarrósy & Vörös, 2020, p. 116). Hungary was the first EU country to join the Belt and Road Initiative, while the Hungarian government has avoided criticizing Chinese behaviour in the South China Sea. FIDESZ attempts to serve as a key actor in deepening the relations between China and Central Eastern Europe: in 2017, the China-CEE Institute of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences was established in Budapest, while it was announced in 2020 that Fudan University would establish a campus in Budapest by 2024 (Matura, 2022). The Hungarian government’s strong pro-Russia and pro-China rhetoric reinforces its distinct (though more and more isolated) foreign policy direction in the EU and faces harsh criticism from Western actors who define Hungary as ‘Trojan horse’ of Moscow and Beijing (Turcsányi, 2014; Orenstein & Kelemen, 2017; Buzogány, 2017).

Orbán’s diversification of foreign relations, interestingly in a similar way to Venezuela, also reached the Middle East as a relatively unknown region for Hungarian diplomacy, though with different target countries. Stronger ties have been built with Israel, primarily on the grounds of rapprochement between Hungary and the United States during the Trump administration (2017–2021) and good personal relations between Viktor Orbán and Benjamin Netanyahu. Beyond that, based on pragmatism, Egypt is labelled as a strategic partner in combating the root causes of migration (Escartin, 2020, p. 1206), and Turkey.

President Erdogan is a populist ally of Viktor Orbán with ideological similarities. Orbán has made various gestures towards Turkey in recent years; for example, he referred to the Turkish occupation of Hungary as ‘a time of heroes’(!) and also promoted the theory of Hungary’s Turkic roots, stating that Hungarians are ‘Kipchak Turks’ (a Turkic tribe of nomadic pastoralists and warriors), and that Hungary is ‘Christian Turkish lands’ (Buyuk, 2019), basically overriding the academic consensus on Hungarians’ origins. The Hungarian objectives in relation to Turkey are to increase economic benefits and again to make Hungary ‘distinct’ in EU politics. Hungary blocked the adoption of a joint statement of EU members condemning Turkish intervention in Syria in October 2019, considering Turkey’s action useful for stopping a further wave of refugees (The Polish Institute of International Affairs, PISM, 2019, p. 1), while in NATO Hungary and Turkey oppose Swedish membership together.

5. Regional activism for a stronger voice

Venezuela and Hungary are far from being global players, and thus 'regional activism' was pursued by both leaders to amplify their voice and live with their newly found autonomy. For Chávez, the rise of the pink tide in South America, complemented with Cuba and later Nicaragua, brought a supportive environment for post-Westernism. Regarding Hungary, the reactivation of the Visegrad group was a major factor contributing to Orbán's voice being heard in the EU and beyond. However, lacking a regional environment similarly supportive to that enjoyed by Chávez, Orbán is eager to mobilize all (state and non-state) actors open towards post-Westernism in Europe.

The pink tide in South America introduced a 'post-hegemony' era, referring to a new narrative of US decline and weakening hegemony (Riggirozzi & Tussie, 2012; Acharya, 2009; Legler, 2013) or 'post-liberal regionalism', where liberalization in trade and investments was no longer a central pillar of international relations (Da Motta Veiga & Rios, 2007; Sanahuja, 2010), while existing regional institutions, like Mercosur, were renewed and new forums, such as UNASUR (Union of South American Nations, 2008) and CELAC (Community of Latin American and Caribbean States, 2010) were created.

In line with these trends, Chávez 'made regional integration the centrepiece of his foreign policy' (Chodor & McCarthy-Jones, 2013, p. 215), and Venezuela's regional post-imperialist stance rested on multiple bases under Chávez: ALBA (searching for an alternative to free trade), Mercosur (justification of Venezuelan democracy) and UNASUR (as an alternative to OAS as a South American political organization) served as the main pillars, complemented by proposals such as the creation of a Bank of the South (Banco del Sur) to replace the IMF, the launch of TeleSur to carry anti-US messaging across Latin America, and of Petrosur as a regional petro-alliance (Sagarzazu & Thies, 2019, p. 207). Active regionalism was driven by the objective of building South America's 'own' structures in order to keep US influence out, creating 'Latin American' mechanisms to settle political disputes and support economic development. These dynamic developments of the 2000s apparently reinforced Chávez's position in South America, while new fora for South American cooperation institutionalized post-Westernism throughout the continent. But the newly-created regional organizations lost impetus after the ebbing of the pink tide (around 2015) and have not been able to survive the emerging political and ideological differences among Latin American leaders, though they efficiently undermined the previous dominant role of OAS in the Americas.

At the regional level, the Hungarian government has been active in finding allies in Central Eastern Europe, primarily to legitimize Orbán's intensifying struggles against 'Brussels'. The Visegrad Group (V4), established in 1991, experienced a 'renaissance' during the refugee crisis in 2015 as its member states stood up against the 'quota system' (aiming for responsibility and burden-sharing among EU members) (Zaun, 2018, p. 44) and Viktor Orbán had a central role in cementing the cooperation between the four countries. The V4 proved to be a useful tool for Hungary to increase its bargaining power in the European Union; Visegrad members set aside their disagreements on other issues and succeeded in appearing as a unified, coherent actor (Cabada & Waisová, 2018), especially

with regard to the refugee crisis in 2015. They insisted on their rights to sovereignty and rejected the humanitarian approach of the EU.

Regarding EU-V4 relations, Orbán's rhetoric focused on core-periphery imbalances and autonomy to act, raising the question of autonomy beyond the state level, referring to Central European autonomy. As he put it: 'the West had lost its appeal to Central Europeans (...) it must be made clear that Central Europe must be shaped by Central Europeans' (MTI-Hungary Today, 2020b). The growing unity of the Visegrad Group declined after the EU-Turkey agreement in 2016, and the Central European 'no' to EU 'dominance' diminished into a bilateral alliance between Hungary and Poland. In 2022, the war in Ukraine brought tension among the V4 member states, raising doubts about the unity and future of Visegrad Four.

Beyond the Visegrad countries, Orbán has attempted to find further allies within and beyond the EU, reinforcing the polarization in Europe and supporting post-Westernism. In July 2021 sixteen right-wing European parties signed a declaration targeting reform of the European Union; as Orbán explained, 'this declaration concerns the future of the EU, the protection of nations, of families, and of traditional Christian values' (MTI-Hungary Today, 2021c). The formation of a unified populist Eurosceptic bloc of parties would reinforce post-Westernism within the EU, as the actors involved are highly critical of Brussels, its centralized structure and the EU migration policy, but on the other hand they are highly divided over leadership and also about external relations, e.g. relations with Russia.

Beyond the European Union, neighbouring Serbia is an important ally of Hungary, sharing the sense of the necessity to 'rebuild' and 'protect Central Europe' (Stojanovic, 2021). Hungary is an essential supporter of Serbian EU membership and the EU enlargement agenda in general, counting on Serbia and further new members as potential partners in the future within the EU weakening the power of the Western 'elite', though this is not a probable scenario in the foreseeable future.

6. Limitations

When evaluating populist foreign policy, the extent of *real change* beyond rhetoric is often questioned (Drezner, 2017). In these two cases, Venezuela maintained oil exports to the United States up until the Trump sanctions, and the Hungarian government has no intention of withdrawing from the European Union and has voted on many EU decisions, among them sanctions on Russia. These inconsistencies are consequences of the 'gap' between the acutely dichotomized ('friends'/'foes') foreign policy approach and political/economic reality.

Despite short term foreign policy success in terms of political influence and visibility, in the longer run, Venezuela and Hungary face internal and external limitations in terms of their post-Western foreign policy: internal limitations derive from their domestic political polarization, while external limitations are consequences of their status in the world economy and the fluid regional political context.

The highly polarized domestic political climate in both cases serves as a barrier to post-Western foreign policy making. According to populist governments, their political opposition serves the interests of 'foes' at the national and international levels alike. This interpretation narrows the foreign policy options following the dichotomy of pro-Western and post-Western actions, consequently pushing the domestic opposition towards a pro-US, pro-EU stance in foreign affairs. This narrative might indirectly reinforce the links between Western actors and the domestic opposition, while also pushing Chávez and Orbán towards non-Western allies, not necessarily as a rational choice based on national interests, but driven by the populist logic of polarization and rejecting Western criticism of domestic authoritarian steps.

In Venezuela, the domestic opposition has been financially supported by the United States for decades now, while in the post-Chávez era, opposition leader Juan Guaidó has been the recognized leader of Venezuela by the United States since 2019. Hungarian opposition parties and civil society actors attempt to gain support in the European Parliament (Jenne & Mudde, 2012, p. 147), while Péter Márki-Zay, the candidate for prime minister of the Hungarian joint opposition for the 2022 elections, visited Brussels in November 2021 and stated: 'We will be loyal members of the EU and NATO, not traitors' (MTI-Hungary Today, 2021d). Despite US financial support he suffered serious defeat at the elections, but the objective to 'return' to the EU is shared by the majority of opposition parties in Hungary.

Externally, their countries' semiperiphery status in the world is an essential limitation on the post-Western foreign policy implemented by Chávez and Orbán. Primarily, economic dependency on traditional Western partners is an obvious barrier of post-Western foreign policy. The oil trade between the US and Venezuela proved to be a serious burden on Chávista post-Western foreign policy as it resulted in gaps between foreign policy rhetoric and practice. The United States had historically been the main destination for Venezuela's crude oil shipments, and at its peak in 2007, US imports of Venezuela's crude oil averaged 1.1 million barrels per day (US Energy Information Association, EIA, 2020). Although after 2010, Venezuelan oil production and export began to decline, the United States remained the largest purchaser of Venezuelan oil (with imports valued at \$11.7 billion in 2017) (Camilleri, 2018, p. 191). Hugo Chávez attempted to diversify oil exports, but with little success; the severe economic sanctions introduced by Donald Trump in 2019 had a harsh and immediate impact on the Venezuelan economy and deepened the humanitarian crisis.

Regarding Chinese relations, despite an impressive increase in bilateral trade (in 1999 Sino-Venezuelan trade was worth only US\$200 million, but nine years later it increased fifty times, to US\$10 billion) (Paz, 2013, p. 223), trade relations did not reach beyond the energy sector of Venezuela. This led to strong criticism from Latin American neo-dependency theorists labelling China-Venezuela relations as 'neoastractivist' and raising serious concerns about economic sovereignty and the long-term benefits for Venezuela (Yin-Hang et al., 2019, p. 127). During the Chávez era, the share of oil in the total of Venezuelan exports increased from 68.7% (1998) to 96%(!) in 2014 (Yin-Hang et al., 2019, p. 134), which led to extreme vulnerability of the Venezuelan economy. Today China, India and Turkey are the main trading partners of Venezuela, while the Venezuelan economy('s survival) is highly dependent on Chinese and Russian loans and food imports

from these countries (Ferchen, 2020, p. 12). Altogether, under deteriorating external circumstances (declining oil prices and US sanctions), the Chávista economic model led to a disastrous economic and humanitarian crisis after the death of Chávez. China has helped to preserve the Chávista project (Briceño-Ruiz & Molina Medina, 2020, p. 162), but Venezuela's dependence on commodities and external loans has increased.

Regarding Hungary, the opening to the global South had the declared objective of pragmatically finding new markets in the world, adjusting to the reality that 'We are sailing under a Western flag, though an Eastern wind is blowing in the world economy' (Magyari, 2010), as Viktor Orbán explained. But the 'openings' towards the East and South have not met the original expectations of trade diversification: 18.2% of total Hungarian exports targeted non-EU countries in 2018, while this share was higher, close to 22% in 2010 (Rácz, 2019).

The Eastern opening failed to fulfil Hungarian expectations regarding the potential of Chinese investment (Matura, 2020, p. 130), and bilateral trade remains low: in 2010, China's share of Hungarian exports was 1.61%, while in 2020 it was still below 2%. China has a share of approximately 6% of Hungary's imports, while the EU's share is greater than 70% (KSH, 2022). Hungary plays an important role in the construction of the BRI project with the Budapest-Belgrade railway line (first agreed in 2013), but the benefits of the project for Hungary are difficult to quantify (Matura, 2020, pp. 123–124). Geographical distance and economic imbalances in Sino-Hungarian relations are barriers to closer cooperation, particularly to such cooperation which is fruitful for Hungary.

A further external limitation of post-Westernism is the regional political climate. Regional political support highly determines the foreign policy prospects for both countries. Chávez enjoyed widespread regional support at the governmental level, through a joint South American attempt to emerge as a new actor in the post-Western international order. However, the decline of the pink tide (Mitchell, 2016) after Chávez's death considerably polarized the regional context and seriously limited the prospects of a unified post-Western South America, while it reinforced Venezuela's dependence on external actors.

Similarly, the regional political context and next elections in Central Eastern Europe (and also in other EU members) will highly determine the prospects of post-Western Hungarian foreign policy. Political polarization in these countries – similarly to South America – might lead to the rise of new populist leaders, but also to 'returns' to the West. Since 2015, Poland appears to have been a solid partner of Hungary in the region, while Slovenia's Prime Minister Janez Jana was a short-lived ally between 2020 and 2022. The lack of unity of the Central Eastern Europeans or the Visegrad Group in relations with the EU, and now especially with Russia, is pushing Orbán towards a broader radical right-wing alliance within the European Union at the party level that is even more diverse than the Visegrad cooperation.

It remains to be seen how a Western European populist leader's victory would impact Orbán's foreign policy. Despite common values and/or ideas, a Western European right-wing populist leader *in power* would presumably have a dominant position in a future European right-wing populist alliance, who might take the 'lead' away from Central Eastern Europe (Hungary and Poland). Furthermore, beyond a joint conservative stance on liberal social values (especially in terms of migration or gender issues), post-Westernism in terms of scapegoating the EU for domestic challenges and in terms of relations with

Russia and China appears to divide European populists. For example, although Viktor Orbán welcomed Giorgia Meloni as the new prime minister of Italy and mutual statements on cooperation were made, no stronger ties have evolved between Hungary and Italy since her election.

7. Conclusion

Hugo Chávez and Viktor Orbán implemented visible foreign policy changes following a strong populist discourse, highly critical of the West. Meanwhile, resulting from their different patterns of relationship with Western actors, their interpretations of the 'West' and post-Westernism differ.

Chávez identified 'foes' with the United States on strong anti-imperial grounds, and his post-Western foreign policy ambitions primarily targeted a *post-hegemony* world. He strongly criticized the centuries-long exploitation of the developing world (the Rest) on a (post-)colonial basis. Consequently, he developed a wide alliance of actors for whom undermining the world order based on US hegemony was appealing. Orbán's post-Western foreign policy rather targets a *post-liberal* order freed from the 'mainstream' liberal elite's rule; he returns to and accentuates traditional values and the role of religion in setting social norms. He identifies the supranational EU and globalists as 'foes' and attempts to build relations with EU and non-EU states critical of Brussels' (and Western) paternalistic and indoctrination approach.

Despite these different roots, the two leaders' foreign policies are driven by the same motives: stronger political autonomy and economic diversification. Their foreign policy instruments also overlap and follow the 'typical' populist behaviour described by Destra-di, Cadier, & Plagemann (2021) as a more confrontational foreign policy approach towards traditional allies and diversification of foreign relations. This post-Western shift is complemented by attempts to build active regional alliances to increase their bargaining power against their 'foes'.

How does post-Westernism manifest itself in their foreign policy practices? First of all, they join and reinforce existing critical voices towards the US and the EU. As previous allies and followers of the Western model of political and economic development, they draw attention to the challenges of the universal applicability of the 'market democracy' model and scapegoat Western actors for international inequalities and/or their own domestic challenges. This justifies the post-Western order by suggesting that their model is more equal and balanced. Secondly, they offer an alternative to the Western model and attempt to spread it to prove that they are autonomous actors capable of finding their own development path. In terms of political systems, the Chávista and Orbánist model insists on the term 'democracy', but they differentiate their regimes with adjectives (participatory, illiberal) from liberal democracies, undermining the role of the West as a model to be followed. Thirdly, based on a populist discourse that divides the world into 'friends' and 'foes', they automatically grow closer to emerging non-Western actors (primarily China, Russia and Middle Eastern countries) showing that they are appealing partners who do

not intervene in their domestic affairs. Despite their ideological differences, Chávez and Orbán found similar actors (Russia, China and Middle Eastern countries) to diversify their foreign relations, urging a ‘power shift’ from Western to non-Western actors.

Beyond their active, confrontational diplomacy and reinforced influence in inter-state relations, the long-term risks and limitations of this strategy must be mentioned, too. The Chávista and Orbánist models are efficient in keeping the leaders in power (in Venezuela, after Chávez’s death, his ‘chosen’ successor succeeded him in power), while weakening the checks and balances of government. But in terms of development and diversification, the results are less obvious. The crisis in Venezuela, although it erupted after Chávez’s death, has been evaluated as a consequence of economic mismanagement and neglect of deteriorating external circumstances during the Chávez era. Today, Venezuela is rather a deterrent example of state intervention in the economy and an obvious failure in the search for an alternative. Hungary, in terms of foreign trade and investments, is still highly dependent on EU countries (primarily Germany), while in terms of its budget, on EU funds.

The results of the search for autonomy in the emerging post-Western world have also been questioned. Venezuela obviously ‘switched’ dependency from the US to China and Russia, and as a result its room for manoeuvre in international affairs has narrowed considerably since the Chávez era. Viktor Orbán has successfully built his image in the international media as the ‘bad boy’ in the EU, but Hungary is still a full member of the European Union and is currently being pressured to implement changes to reinforce transparency in exchange for EU funds, while Orbán publicly admits Hungary’s dependence on Russian energy resources and hasn’t done much to change it. As for China, Hungary is clearly too small an actor to receive considerable attention (and economic cooperation). Furthermore, the threat of isolation in their regions (South America and Central Eastern Europe) weakens their position towards traditional Western allies.

The post-Western foreign policy of these two leaders reinforces criticism of the Western-dominated world and questions the idea that ‘market democracy’ reforms bring freedom and prosperity to all countries on Earth. On the other hand, an evaluation of the results draws attention to the risks of a populist foreign policy (that polarizes domestic and foreign actors into friends and foes) resulting from the challenges of achieving autonomy by diversification, and from the nature of great powers, whether they be Western or non-Western actors, who set their own rules and dominate bilateral relations.

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