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*Populism and the decline of the liberal international order: a comparative analysis of disruptive strategies in the foreign policy of populist leaders*

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## Secção

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## **Populism and the decline of the liberal international order: a comparative analysis of disruptive strategies in the foreign policy of populist leaders**

## **Populismo e o declínio da ordem internacional liberal: uma análise comparativa das estratégias disruptivas na política externa de líderes populistas**

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**Abstract:** This article analyzes how populist leaders are reshaping the Liberal International Order (LIO) through their foreign policy strategies. The cases of the United States (Donald Trump's first term), Brazil (Jair Bolsonaro), Mexico (Andrés Manuel López Obrador), and Hungary (Viktor Orbán) are analyzed, integrating official discourse, strategic documents, and public statements. The theoretical framework articulates approaches that conceive populism as a political logic, communicational style, and ideology in dispute with transnational elites. Methodologically, a comparative case study is used, with content analysis of primary sources and thematic coding structured under emerging analytical categories. These findings indicate not a clean break with the LIO but a selective, instrumental reconfiguration from within. Consequently, the analysis reconsiders four traditional categories of foreign policy: (i) strategic rationality (from a utility-maximizing, long-horizon calculus to a performative, identity-driven calculus), (ii) actors (shifting authority from bureaucratic foreign services to personalist leadership), (iii) temporality (short domestic legitimization cycles offsetting long-term institutional commitments), and (iv) action frameworks (from rule-first multilateralism to selective forum-shopping). This re-specification helps explain why PFP strains, rather than exits, the LIO.

**Keywords:** Liberal International Order, Foreign Policy, Populism, Multilateralism, Political Leadership.

**Resumo:** Este artigo analisa como líderes populistas estão a remodelar a Ordem Liberal Internacional (LIO) através das suas estratégias de política externa. São analisados os casos dos Estados Unidos (primeiro mandato de Donald Trump), Brasil (Jair Bolsonaro), México (Andrés Manuel López Obrador) e Hungria (Viktor Orbán), integrando o discurso oficial, documentos estratégicos e declarações públicas. O quadro teórico articula abordagens que concebem o populismo como uma lógica política, um estilo comunicacional e uma ideologia em disputa com as elites transnacionais. Metodologicamente, é utilizado um estudo de caso

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comparativo, com análise de conteúdo de fontes primárias e codificação temática estruturada de categorias analíticas emergentes. Essas descobertas indicam não uma ruptura clara com a LIO, mas uma reconfiguração seletiva e instrumental a partir de dentro. Consequentemente, a análise reconsidera quatro categorias tradicionais da política externa: (i) racionalidade estratégica (de um cálculo de maximização da utilidade e horizonte longo para um cálculo performativo e orientado pela identidade), (ii) atores (transferência de autoridade dos serviços externos burocráticos para a liderança personalista), (iii) temporalidade (ciclos curtos de legitimação interna compensando compromissos institucionais de longo prazo) e (iv) estruturas de ação (de um multilateralismo que privilegia as regras para uma seleção seletiva de fóruns). Esta reespecificação ajuda a explicar por que as estirpes PFP, em vez de saírem, permanecem na LIO.

**Palavras-chave:** Ordem Internacional Liberal, Política Externa, Populismo, Multilateralismo, Liderança Política.

## Introduction

In recent years, the foreign policy of emerging powers and economies has deviated from the traditional principles of the liberal international order (LIO), characterized by multilateralism, commitment to international norms and institutions, and the defense of human rights.<sup>6</sup> Leaders such as Donald Trump, Jair Bolsonaro, Viktor Orbán, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, Rodrigo Duterte, among others, have been involved in episodes of rupture or distancing from multilateral organizations, contempt for international norms, extreme personalization of diplomacy, and the electoral use of foreign policy. These manifestations are not only a response to internal political circumstances, but also to a structural trend: the rise of populism as a logic of power that extends to the international sphere.<sup>7</sup>

The United States' withdrawal from the Paris Agreement and UNESCO during Donald Trump's first term, Bolsonaro's systematic opposition to the United Nations (UN) and the World Health Organization (WHO) are examples that illustrate a pattern of foreign behavior that prioritizes sovereignty, delegitimizes transnational elites, and promotes a reactive, confrontational, and ideologized foreign policy.<sup>8</sup>

This populism in foreign policy is an expression of situations such as the growing disconnect between globalist elites and broad sectors of the citizenry, generating unrest and fueling populist discourses that position the "people" as victims of an unjust

<sup>6</sup> IKENBERRY, G. John. *Liberal leviathan: The origins, crisis, and transformation of the American world order*. 2011.

<sup>7</sup> DESTRADI, Sandra; CADIER, David; PLAGEMANN, Johannes. Populism and foreign policy: a research agenda (Introduction). *Comparative European Politics*, 2021, vol. 19, no 6, p. 663. <https://doi.org/10.1093/fpa/oraa024>

<sup>8</sup> DESTRADI, Sandra, et al. Populists' Foreign Policy Rhetoric: More Confrontational, Less Consensual?. En *Political communication and performative leadership: Populism in international politics*. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2023. p. 279-298. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-41640-8\\_15](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-41640-8_15)

and corrupt international system.<sup>9</sup> Added to this is the crisis of representation in liberal democracies and the loss of trust in multilateral institutions, which have weakened the legitimacy of the liberal international order.

Populism mobilizes emotions through polarizing logic and narratives and emphasizes the existence of external enemies or threats, who serve as "scapegoats": migrants, international NGOs, diplomatic elites, among others.<sup>10</sup> This "us versus them" logic translates into foreign policy actions that break with the rationalist and normative patterns of the liberal international order.

In recent years, several studies have shown that populist leaders tend to use foreign policy as an extension of their internal struggle against elites and as a platform for reaffirming identity.<sup>11</sup> However, there is no systematic pattern in how these actions contribute to a structural transformation of international order.

The proliferation of populist leaders with disruptive foreign agendas could create a domino effect, with more countries adopting sovereignist views, reducing international cooperation, and increasing unilateralism. This would compromise the international system's ability to address global challenges such as climate change, organized crime, biodiversity loss, pandemics, and technological regulation.

Based on the above, this article seeks to answer the question: How are populist leaders reconfiguring the liberal international order through their foreign policy strategies? A systematic understanding of how populism affects foreign policy makes it possible to anticipate common patterns and design strategies for containment or adaptation at the multilateral level. From the academic field, it is possible to intervene through comparative research that highlights the discursive, institutional, and strategic mechanisms through which populism reconfigures international relations.

## 1. Theoretical references

### 1.1 The liberal international order: characteristics and emerging tensions

Since the end of World War II, the liberal international order (LIO) has been the

<sup>9</sup> MUDDE, Cas; KALTWASSER, Cristóbal Rovira. *Populism: A very short introduction*. Oxford University Press, 2017.

<sup>10</sup> OLIVAS OSUNA, José Javier; BURTON, Guy. Populism at the UN: comparing Netanyahu's and Abbas's speeches, 2010–19. *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 2024, p. 1-23. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13530194.2024.233988>

<sup>11</sup> DESTRADI, Sandra; CADIER, David; PLAGEMANN, Johannes. Populism and foreign policy: a research agenda (Introduction). *Comparative European Politics*, 2021, vol. 19, no 6, p. 663. <https://doi.org/10.1093/fpa/oraa024>

dominant framework for the organization of international relations, based on the principles of multilateralism, economic openness, the institutionalization of norms, and the promotion of democratic values and human rights.<sup>12</sup> This order has historically been led by the United States and supported by a network of institutions such as the United Nations (UN), the World Trade Organization (WTO), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank (WB), and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). During the Cold War, part of this order was limited to the Western bloc, as the Soviet Union and its allies operated under a separate ideological and economic framework. But after the end of the Cold War, the LIO expanded as former Soviet states, and other regions began to integrate into the global economy and adopt democratic practices.<sup>13</sup>

However, over the last decade, internal and external tensions have emerged that are eroding the legitimacy and functionality of the Liberal International Order. These tensions include growing public antipathy toward globalist elites, increasing social and economic inequalities, the perception of a loss of national sovereignty, the rise of powers proposing alternative orders,<sup>14</sup> and the perception that traditional multilateral organizations are incapable of effectively addressing issues such as economic inequality and climate change.<sup>15</sup>

In this context, populist leaders have emerged as key agents in the reconfiguration of the LIO, questioning its foundations and promoting sovereign, anti-globalist, or protectionist agendas. These tensions not only affect the functioning of the liberal order but also raise questions about its persistence, resilience, and adaptability.<sup>16</sup>

## 1.2 Populism as a style, ideology, and political logic in foreign policy

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<sup>12</sup> IKENBERRY, G. John. *Liberal Leviathan: The origins, crisis, and transformation of the American world order*. 2011.

<sup>13</sup> SAMANIEGO, Samuel Ashcallay. La crisis del orden internacional y el poder de Estados Unidos. *Revista Peruana de Derecho Internacional*, 2024, no 176, p. 99-136. <https://doi.org/10.38180/rpdi.v74i176.497>

<sup>14</sup> ACHARYA, Amitav. *The end of American world order*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018. ISBN 9781509536856.

<sup>15</sup> LUCARELLI, Sonia, et al. Resilient or Obsolete? Reflections on the Liberal World Order and Its Crisis. *Eirene e Atena. Studi di politica internazionale in onore di Umberto Gori [Eirene and Atena. Studies on international politics in honor of Umberto Gori]*, 2022, p. 169-82. <https://doi.org/10.36253/978-88-5518-595-0>

<sup>16</sup> YILMAZ, Ihsan; MORIESON, Nicholas. Challenging the Liberal Order: How Civilizational Authoritarian Populists Conduct Foreign Policy. En *Weaponizing Civilizationalism for Authoritarianism: How Turkey, India, Russia, and China Challenge Liberal Democracy*. Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore, 2025. p. 317-344.

Populism is a multidimensional category that has generated widespread debate in the social sciences due to its conceptual ambiguity and its ability to adapt to diverse ideological contexts. In general terms, populism can be understood as a form of politics that constructs a moral dichotomy between a "pure people" and a "corrupt elite," in which a charismatic leader presents himself as the exclusive interpreter of the popular will.<sup>17</sup> This binary logic is fundamental to understanding its disruptive potential, not only in domestic politics but also in the international projection of states.

From the field of international relations, populism has begun to be addressed as a phenomenon closely related to foreign policy. Although the construction of a solid analytical framework is still in its infancy, it is a line of research that has grown rapidly in recent years, with studies such as: Chryssogelos, Wajner & Giurlando, Löfflmann, Destradi argue that populism does not constitute a coherent foreign policy doctrine, but it can operate as a "discursive style" or "logic of action" that reconfigures traditional forms of diplomacy. This logic is characterized by the personalization of power, hostility toward multilateral institutions, and a tendency to instrumentalize foreign policy for domestic purposes.<sup>18</sup>

For their part, Wajner and Giurlando<sup>19</sup> identify three (3) main approaches to the study of populism and foreign policy: i) populism as an independent variable, research that examines how populism affects the international behavior of states; the role of sovereignty, the personalization of power, and confrontation with international elites; ii) populism as a dependent variable, research that seeks to understand how the international context—the crisis of multilateralism, citizen disaffection, the effects of globalization—favors the rise of populist leadership; iii) populism as a relational process, which emphasizes the performativity and transnational character of populism.

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<sup>17</sup> MUDDE, Cas; KALTWASSER, Cristóbal Rovira. *Populism: A very short introduction*. Oxford University Press, 2017.

<sup>18</sup> CHRYSSOGELOS, Angelos. Populism and international relations theories. En *Routledge Handbook of Populism and Foreign Policy*. Routledge, 2025. p. 83-103. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003414797-7>, CHRYSSOGELOS, Angelos. Populism and international relations theories. En *Routledge Handbook of Populism and Foreign Policy*. Routledge, 2025. p. 83-103. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003414797-7>, WAJNER, Daniel F.; GIURLANDO, Philip. Populist foreign policy: mapping the developing research program on populism in international relations. *International Studies Review*, 2024, vol. 26, no 1, p. viae012. <https://doi.org/10.1093/isr/viae012>, LÖFFLMANN, Georg. Introduction to special issue: The study of populism in international relations. *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 2022, vol. 24, no 3, p. 403-415. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13691481221103>, DESTRADI, Sandra; CADIER, David; PLAGEMANN, Johannes. *Ob.cit.*

<sup>19</sup> WAJNER, Daniel F.; GIURLANDO, Philip. Populist foreign policy: mapping the developing research program on populism in international relations. *International Studies Review*, 2024, vol. 26, no 1, p. viae012. <https://doi.org/10.1093/isr/viae012>

Case studies are a research method that has experienced the greatest growth concerning populism and foreign policy. These case studies are important because they allow us to observe the various ways in which populist leaders reconfigure the international practices of states. This line of research has become particularly relevant in contexts where populism has reached executive power, showing how the ideological, rhetorical, and strategic particularities of these governments impact their international integration.

In the case of Turkey, the leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has been widely analyzed as an expression of national-conservative populism with a revisionist foreign policy, characterized by a sovereign discourse, confrontational diplomacy, and a growing deinstitutionalization of ties with the West.<sup>20</sup> At the same time, the United States under Donald Trump has been the subject of multiple studies highlighting its break with liberal multilateralism, the personalization of diplomacy, and the use of foreign policy as an instrument of symbolic internal confrontation.<sup>21</sup>

In Latin America, approaches to populism in foreign policy have focused on the anti-imperialist, regionalist, or bilateral strategies of governments such as those of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela and Cristina Fernández de Kirchner in Argentina, which reconfigured international alliances on the basis of a global anti-elite discourse and a global southern rhetoric.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, the government of Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil has been examined as an expression of right-wing populism that combines moral ultra-conservatism with a confrontational approach to international institutions, promoting a personalist and selective foreign policy.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>20</sup> TAŞ, Hakkı. Continuity through change: populism and foreign policy in Turkey. *Third World Quarterly*, 2022, vol. 43, no 12, p. 2869-2887. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2022.2108392>

<sup>21</sup> LACATUS, Corina. Populism and President Trump's approach to foreign policy: An analysis of tweets and rally speeches. *Politics*, 2021, vol. 41, no 1, p. 31-47. <https://doi.org/10.1177/026339572093538>; CARO, Isaac; QUITRAL, Máximo; RIQUELME, Jorge. Populismo y política exterior: el caso de los Estados Unidos de Donald Trump. *Análisis Político*, 2022, vol. 35, no 104, p. 224-243. <https://doi.org/10.15446/anpol.v35n104.105180>; WOJCZEWSKI, Thorsten. Trump, populism, and American foreign policy. *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 2020a, vol. 16, no 3, p. 292-311. <https://doi.org/10.1093/fpa/orz021>

<sup>22</sup> WEHNER, Leslie E.; THIES, Cameron G. The nexus of populism and foreign policy: The case of Latin America. *International Relations*, 2021, vol. 35, no 2, p. 320-340. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0047117820944430>

<sup>23</sup> Idem, DE SÁ GUIMARÃES, Feliciano; DE OLIVEIRA E SILVA, Irma Dutra. Far-right populism and foreign policy identity: Jair Bolsonaro's ultra-conservatism and the new politics of alignment. *International Affairs*, 2021, vol. 97, no 2, p. 345-363. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iaaa220>, DE MORAES, Rodrigo Fracalossi. Demagoguery, populism, and foreign policy rhetoric: evidence from Jair Bolsonaro's tweets. *Contemporary Politics*, 2023, vol. 29, no 2, p. 249-275. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569775.2022.2126155>

In Asia, the governments of Narendra Modi in India<sup>24</sup> and Joko Widodo in Indonesia<sup>25</sup> have been the subject of analysis exploring how nationalist populism can be articulated with strategies of strategic autonomy, while instrumentalizing foreign policy for internal legitimization purposes. Finally, studies have also addressed the rise of populist parties and leaders in Europe: Hungary, Poland, and Italy, identifying patterns of rejection of multilateralism, discursive construction of the external enemy, and delegitimization of supranational institutions such as the EU and the UN.<sup>26</sup> In short, populism acts as a cross-cutting logic that can be used by both right-wing and left-wing governments, causing similar effects: deinstitutionalization, strategic bilateralism, and the construction of external enemies.<sup>27</sup> In this sense, populist foreign policy is not guided by classical strategic rationality, but by the need to construct a narrative consistent with the image of the leader and his or her confrontation with global elites.

A distinctive feature of populism in foreign policy is the extreme personalization of diplomacy, which replaces institutional channels with inter-presidential relations. This trend destabilizes traditional diplomacy based on predictability and institutionality, and reinforces a reactive, emotional, and less technocratic approach to international action.

Moreover, populism tends to use foreign policy as an extension of domestic conflict. International elites, multilateral organizations, trade agreements, foreign media, and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) are portrayed as being responsible for the nation's problems. This "external enemy" functions as a mechanism for symbolic mobilization and reinforcement of national sovereignty, as has been evident in Trump's rhetoric against China or Bolsonaro's criticism of the international

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<sup>24</sup> WOJCZEWSKI, Thorsten. Populism, Hindu nationalism, and foreign policy in India: the politics of representing "the people". *International Studies Review*, 2020b, vol. 22, no 3, p. 396-422. <https://doi.org/10.1093/isr/viz007>

<sup>25</sup> WICAKSANA, I. Gede Wahyu; WARDHANA, Agastya. Populism and foreign policy: The Indonesian case. *Asian Politics & Policy*, 2021, vol. 13, no 3, p. 408-425. <https://doi.org/10.1111/aspp.12594>

<sup>26</sup> ONDERCO, Michal. Populism and foreign policy: An assessment and a research agenda. *Journal of Regional Security*, 2020, vol. 15, no 2, p. 199-233. <https://doi.org/10.5937/jrs15-24300>, WOJCZEWSKI, Thorsten. Conspiracy theories, right-wing populism and foreign policy: the case of the Alternative for Germany. *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 2022, vol. 25, no 1, p. 130-158. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41268-021-00218-y>, DYDUCH, Joanna; MÜLLER, Patrick. Populism meets EU Foreign policy: the de-Europeanization of Poland's Foreign policy toward the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. *Journal of European Integration*, 2021, vol. 43, no 5, p. 569-586. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07036337.2021.1927010>

<sup>27</sup> CHRYSSOGELOS, Angelos. Populism in foreign policy. En Oxford research encyclopedia of politics. 2017. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.467>

community over the Amazon issue.

In sum, populist foreign policy (PFP) does not reject strategic reasoning *per se*; rather, it departs from classical strategic rationality—i.e., from utility optimization under relatively stable preferences, longer time horizons, and institutional path dependence. PFP is better understood as an identity-strategic rationality: it prioritizes performative congruence with the domestic “people–elite” antagonism and the short-term reproduction of loyalty, even at the expense of longer-term payoffs. Thus, PFP is strategic, but in an identity-performative sense distinct from the classical model.<sup>28</sup>

### **1.3 Populist foreign policy strategies against the liberal order**

Populist leaders tend to use certain common strategies that affect the stability and legitimacy of the liberal order: i) economic nationalism and protectionism; ii) anti-global elite rhetoric; iii) personalized diplomacy; iv) multilateral deinstitutionalization. These strategies do not respond to traditional foreign doctrines, but rather to a populist logic that sees foreign policy as an extension of the internal conflict between the people and the elite.

Economic nationalism and protectionism are one of the most visible strategies of populism in foreign policy. It refers to the set of discursive, normative, and symbolic strategies through which populist leaders defend national self-sufficiency, reject multilateral free trade, and prioritize the strengthening of domestic productive sectors as pillars of sovereignty. This logic comes into tension with the foundations of the liberal international order (LIO), which promotes economic openness, trade interdependence, and regulated cooperation. This rhetoric goes hand in hand with the populist narrative of defending the "forgotten workers" against globalist elites who have supposedly sacrificed national welfare in the name of globalization.<sup>29</sup> This protectionism is not based on traditional rational economic calculation, but on the need to reaffirm national sovereignty and gain internal legitimacy by appealing to an "us against them" logic.

Another key strategy is anti-global elite rhetoric, which consists of constructing a discourse that confronts, discredits, or denounces institutions that represent the liberal order: the United Nations, the WTO, the WHO, among others. In populist discourse, these institutions are portrayed as entities captured by transnational elites that impose rules contrary to national interests. This rhetoric seeks to legitimize

<sup>28</sup> DESTRADI, Sandra, et al., *ob.cit.*

<sup>29</sup> RODRIK, Dani. *Straight talk on trade: Ideas for a sane world economy*. 2018.

unilateral actions, institutional disobedience, and even withdrawal from these multilateral organizations. This discourse is articulated from a populist logic that seeks to position the leader as the defender of the "sovereign people" against international structures that supposedly restrict the national will.<sup>30</sup> This strategy allows populism to externalize responsibilities and turn foreign policy into an instrument of internal mobilization.

The third strategy identified is personalized diplomacy. It consists of weakening traditional diplomatic institutions by privileging direct relations between leaders. It reduces the role of foreign ministries, diplomatic corps, and multilateral norms in favor of direct, opaque, and highly volatile negotiations that privilege bilateral relations between heads of state based on ideological affinities, leadership styles, and informal ties.<sup>31</sup> Destradi<sup>32</sup> point out that personalized diplomacy responds to the populist need to project strength and control without bureaucratic mediation and reinforces the image of the leader as a strong negotiator.

The fourth strategy is selective multilateral disengagement, where it can be observed that, despite their hostility towards multilateralism, populist governments do not necessarily abandon global institutions entirely. Instead, they opt for a strategy of selective deinstitutionalization, participating opportunistically or instrumentally in certain forums while sabotaging others. This strategy reflects an "à la carte multilateralism" that blurs the norms of the liberal international order.

## 2. Methodology

As a methodological strategy, the article uses multiple case studies in an attempt to identify patterns and divergences in the foreign policy strategies of populist leaders and their impact on the liberal international order. In this sense, and returning to Wajner and Giurlando,<sup>33</sup> populism is assumed to be an independent variable with

<sup>30</sup> MUDDE, Cas; KALTWASSER, Cristóbal Rovira. Populism: A very short introduction. Oxford University Press, 2017; DESTRAIDI, Sandra; CADIER, David; PLAGEMANN, Johannes. Populism and foreign policy: a research agenda (Introduction). *Comparative European Politics*, 2021, vol. 19, no 6, p. 663. <https://doi.org/10.1093/fpa/oraa024>

<sup>31</sup> NAI, Alessandro; TOROS, Emre. The peculiar personality of strongmen: Comparing the Big Five and Dark Triad traits of autocrats and non-autocrats. *Political Research Exchange*, 2020, vol. 2, no 1, p. 1707697. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2474736X.2019.1707697>

<sup>32</sup> DESTRAIDI, Sandra; CADIER, David; PLAGEMANN, Johannes. *Ob.cit.*

<sup>33</sup> WAJNER, Daniel F.; GIURLANDO, Philip. Populist foreign policy: mapping the developing research program on populism in international relations. *International Studies Review*, 2024, vol. 26, no 1, p. viae012. <https://doi.org/10.1093/isr/viae012>

the capacity to alter the international behavior of states.

## 2.1 Case selection

A theoretical-intentional sampling of contrasting cases is used, which allows for the identification of recurring strategies and divergent contexts of populism in foreign policy. The selected cases meet the following criteria: leaderships that have been empirically defined as populist in the academic literature,<sup>34</sup> evidence of disruptive foreign policy strategies about the liberal international order, and regional and ideological variation to ensure analytical contrast. The selected cases are:

- Donald Trump, first administration (2017–2021); right-wing populism, the United States as a hegemonic power.
- Jair Bolsonaro (Brazil, 2019–2022); right-wing populism, Brazil as a sub-regional power.
- Viktor Orbán (Hungary, 2010–present); illiberal populism in Europe.
- Andrés Manuel López Obrador (Mexico, 2018–2024); left-wing populism, middle power.

## 2.2 Information gathering techniques

Primary and secondary sources were used, through three main techniques: i) content analysis of official speeches: speeches before multilateral organizations (UN, OAS, EU, etc.), public statements at international events or press conferences, institutional communications, and selected presidential tweets. ii) documentary analysis of foreign policies: official documents from foreign ministries and foreign affairs departments, national development plans and diplomatic agendas, multilateral communiqés, and resolutions. iii) Review of scientific literature and the international press: academic articles analyzing populism in foreign policy, reports from multilateral organizations, and leading press outlets.

## 2.3 Analysis strategy

A combination of thematic analysis and critical discourse analysis<sup>35</sup> is used, following

<sup>34</sup> MUDDE, Cas; KALTWASSER, Cristóbal Rovira. *Populism: A very short introduction*. Oxford University Press, 2017; DESTRADI, Sandra; CADIER, David; PLAGEMANN, Johannes. *Populism and foreign policy: a research agenda (Introduction)*. Comparative European Politics, 2021, vol. 19, no 6, p. 663. <https://doi.org/10.1093/fpa/oraa024>

<sup>35</sup> FAIRCLOUGH, Norman. *Critical discourse analysis*. En *The Routledge handbook of discourse analysis*. Routledge, 2023. p. 11-22.

four (4) steps:

- Deductive coding is based on the four strategies described above: economic nationalism, anti-global elite rhetoric, personalized diplomacy, and selective multilateral deinstitutionalization.
- Inductive coding to identify new categories emerging from the data.
- Cross-sectional comparative analysis to establish patterns, variations, and causal mechanisms.
- Methodological triangulation, crossing discursive, institutional, and contextual data to increase the reliability of the analysis.

### **3. Results**

#### **3.1 Economic nationalism/protectionism**

Trump and Bolsonaro employed this strategy as the guiding principle of their foreign policy. During his first term, Trump renegotiated NAFTA, which became the USMCA, and led a trade war against China under the narrative of protecting American jobs. Bolsonaro, to a lesser extent, adopted selective protectionist measures in the agricultural and mining sectors. For his part, Andrés Manuel López avoided signing new treaties and prioritized strengthening the Mexican domestic market, albeit without aggressive measures. Viktor Orbán, meanwhile, used economic nationalism to justify his departure from common European Union energy policies.

#### ***Donald Trump-United States***

Trump was the most paradigmatic case of this strategy. Since his 2016 presidential campaign, he articulated a narrative focused on the "betrayal" of free trade towards American workers. This narrative was institutionalized in the "America First" policy, under which NAFTA was renegotiated and became USMCA, tariffs were imposed on Chinese products, and the United States withdrew from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), a treaty actively led by the United States during the Barack Obama administration.

In his speech to the UN General Assembly in 2018, Trump stated: "We reject the ideology of globalism, and we embrace the doctrine of patriotism".<sup>36</sup> This statement encapsulated his vision of economic sovereignty as the guiding principle of foreign

<sup>36</sup> POLITICO STAFF. 2018 *UN speech transcript [Transcript]* [online]. 2015. Available from: <https://www.politico.com/story/2018/09/25/trump-un-speech-2018-full-text-transcript-840043> [Accessed: 3 June 2025].

policy. The National Security Strategy of the United States (2017) reinforces this orientation by declaring that the US must defend its economic independence against powers that distort international trade.<sup>37</sup>

#### ***Jair Bolsonaro (Brazil)***

He adopted a similar stance on defending the productive sector against global demands, especially environmental ones. In his speech to the UN in 2019, he stated that: "Brazil has been unfairly attacked by NGOs and foreign governments that do not recognize our sovereignty over the Amazon".<sup>38</sup>

This speech was articulated with domestic policies of environmental deregulation to benefit agribusiness, seen as a strategic sector. The National Defense Plan of Brazil (2020) reinforces this vision by linking national security with "technological and productive autonomy".<sup>39</sup>

#### ***Viktor Orbán (Hungary)***

The Prime Minister of Hungary adopted a structured approach, framed within his *Eastern Opening* policy, which involved reducing trade dependence on the European Union and strengthening ties with Russia, China, and Turkey. In his speech to the European Parliament in 2015, he defended Hungary's right to define its economic interests in the face of "uniformity imposed from Brussels".<sup>40</sup>

His strategy of trade diversification and defense of strategic national industries has been cited as an example of "authoritarian economic sovereignty," often described as a form of authoritarian-tinged economic sovereignty,<sup>41</sup> in which the state uses foreign policy to strengthen productive autonomy.

#### ***Andrés Manuel López Obrador (Mexico)***

Although he adopted aggressive protectionist measures, his foreign and

<sup>37</sup> THE WHITE HOUSE. *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* [online]. Office of the President, 2017. Available from: <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf> [Accessed: 28 May 2025].

<sup>38</sup> BOLSONARO, Jair. *UN Speech* [online]. ONU, 2019a. Available from: <https://www.gov.br/mre/en/content-centers/speeches-articles-and-interviews/president-of-the-federative-republic-of-brazil/speeches/> [Accessed: 21 May 2025].

<sup>39</sup> —. *President's Live Broadcast* [online]. 2019b. Available from: <https://www.youtube.com/c/PresidentedaRepublica/videos> [Accessed: 21 May 2025].

<sup>39</sup> (Brasil. Ministério da Defesa)

<sup>40</sup> HUNGARIAN GOVERNMENT. *Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's reply in Parliament [Transcript]* [online]. Prime Minister's Office, 2015. Available from: <https://2015-2019.kormany.hu/en/the-prime-minister/the-prime-minister-s-speeches/prime-minister-vikt> [Accessed: 3 June 2025].

<sup>41</sup> SATA, Robert. Performing crisis to create your enemy: Europe vs. the EU in Hungarian populist discourse. *Frontiers in Political Science*, 2023, vol. 5, p. 1032470. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpol.2023.1032470>, Müller, Dyduch & Gazsi, 2025)

economic policy reflects a consistent narrative of strengthening energy and food sovereignty. In multiple press conferences known as "La Mañanera," he justified fiscal and legal support for large national companies such as PEMEX and CFE as a way to regain state control over strategic sectors.<sup>42</sup>

Furthermore, in his speech at the 2021 CELAC Summit, he defended regional integration as an alternative to asymmetrical free trade agreements, stressing that: "Latin America and the Caribbean must build a new paradigm based on cooperation without subordination".<sup>43</sup>

Mexico's 2019 Foreign Policy Strategy emphasizes the principle of non-intervention and mutual respect as a framework for less dependent economic relations: "The cycle of oligarchic and neoliberal governments led to the dismantling of the historical principles of Mexican foreign policy [...] Submissive attitudes, inconsistency, and extreme pragmatism were, in foreign policy, part of the submissive, predatory, and corrupt management of the economy".<sup>44</sup>

### **3.2 Global anti-elite rhetoric**

This was a cross-cutting category with considerable presence in all four (4) case studies. Trump and Bolsonaro frequently discredited institutions such as the UN, the WHO, and the Paris Agreement, considering them to be controlled by "globalist elites" opposed to the national interest. Andrés Manuel López Obrador, without adopting openly confrontational rhetoric, was skeptical of international monitoring mechanisms such as the Organization of American States (OAS) and human rights bodies. Viktor Orbán, for his part, and from his role within the EU, denounced a "Brussels centralism" that threatens Hungarian sovereignty.<sup>45</sup>

#### ***Donald Trump (United States)***

Trump made denunciation of multilateral institutions a constant theme of his

<sup>42</sup> LÓPEZ OBRADOR, Andrés Manuel. *Morning press conferences* [online]. 2022. Available from: <https://lopezobrador.org.mx/temas/versiones/las-mananeras> [Accessed: 4 June 2025].

<sup>43</sup> LÓPEZ OBRADOR, Andrés Manuel. *Speech at the XXI CELAC Summit of Foreign Ministers and Representatives [Transcript]* [online]. 2021. Available from: <https://www.nodal.am/2021/07/disco-del-presidente-andres-manuel-lopez-obrador-en-la-> [Accessed: 6 June 2025].

<sup>44</sup> CONGRESS OF THE UNION. *National Development Plan 2019–2024* [online]. Mexico City: Government of Mexico, 2019. Available from: [https://www.gob.mx/cms/uploads/attachment/file/487316/PND\\_2019-2024.pdf](https://www.gob.mx/cms/uploads/attachment/file/487316/PND_2019-2024.pdf) [Accessed: 16 May 2025], p. 19, MEXICO. Ministry of Foreign Affairs. *National Development Plan 2019–2024 [Official Report]* [online]. Government of Mexico, 2019. Available from: <https://www.gob.mx/sre/documentos/plan-nacional-de-desarrollo-2019-2024> [Accessed: 4 June 2025].

<sup>45</sup> CHRYSSOGELOS, Angelos. Populism in foreign policy. En Oxford research encyclopedia of politics. 2017. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.467>

foreign policy. In his speech to the UN in 2018, he clearly stated: "We will never surrender America's sovereignty to an unelected, unaccountable, global bureaucracy."

<sup>46</sup>

This rhetoric was not just about economic issues; it also served to create a sense of victimhood among his supporters, positioning himself as the defender of US interests against a global elite that included China.<sup>47</sup> In the context of the pandemic, Trump publicly accused the World Health Organization (WHO) of being "controlled by China" and announced the United States' withdrawal from the organization. The official National Security Strategy (2017) states that international institutions and h s can be "instruments of revisionist powers" and that the US must "review its commitment to those agreements that undermine national interests".<sup>48</sup>

### ***Jair Bolsonaro (Brazil)***

Since his first speech at the UN in 2019, Bolsonaro has denounced an alleged international campaign against Brazilian sovereignty led by NGOs, global media, and foreign governments: "It is a fallacy to say that the Amazon is a heritage of humankind [...] It is a misconception to say that our forest is the lungs of the world."<sup>49</sup>

In the 2020 edition, his speech once again attacked international NGOs, accusing them of manipulating information about the Amazon fires for political purposes: [...] "Even so, we are victims of one of the most brutal disinformation campaigns about the Amazon and the Pantanal".<sup>50</sup>

In his populist anti-globalist rhetoric, Jair Bolsonaro repeatedly questioned the United Nations, pejoratively describing it as "a place where globalist laws are created" and referring to the UN Human Rights Council as "useless and a place full of communists".<sup>51</sup>

<sup>46</sup> POLITICO STAFF. *2018 UN speech transcript [Transcript]* [online]. 2015. Available from: <https://www.politico.com/story/2018/09/25/trump-un-speech-2018-full-text-transcript-840043> [Accessed: 3 June 2025].

<sup>47</sup> COULSON, Benjamin. "We Don't Win Anymore": Donald Trump, China, and the Politics of Victimhood Nationalism. *Polity*, 2022, vol. 54, no 4, p. 882-889. <https://doi.org/10.1086/721557>

<sup>48</sup> THE WHITE HOUSE. *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* [online]. Office of the President, 2017. Available from: <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf> [Accessed: 28 May 2025].

<sup>49</sup> BOLSONARO, Jair. *UN Speech* [online]. ONU, 2019a. Available from: <https://www.gov.br/mre/en/content-centers/speeches-articles-and-interviews/president-of-the-federative-republic-of-brazil/speeches/> [Accessed: 21 May 2025].

<sup>50</sup> (Brazil, Ministério das Relações Exteriores, 2020).

<sup>51</sup> WEHNER, Leslie E.; THIES, Cameron G. The nexus of populism and foreign policy: The case of Latin America. *International Relations*, 2021, vol. 35, no 2, p. 320-340. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0047117820944430>, BBC. "Local de reunião de comunistas": what Bolsonaro

Bolsonaro's discourse strategy was therefore based on delegitimizing the international system as an excuse to avoid environmental and human rights commitments, positioning Brazil as a "victim of a globalist narrative."

***Viktor Orbán (Hungary)***

Orbán's rhetoric is characterized by a strong anti-elite narrative, which positions him and his government as defenders of the Hungarian people against perceived threats from global elites, international organizations, and liberal ideologies. Euroscepticism and criticism of globalization have been central to this rhetoric.

Viktor Orbán has articulated a consistent narrative since 2010 based on defending Hungarian sovereignty against the dictates of Brussels. In his speeches to the European Parliament (2015, 2018), he denounced the European Union as a disconnected elite "trying to impose liberal values alien to the Christian traditions of Central Europe".<sup>52</sup> In his speeches, he also accuses the EU of promoting liberal values, multiculturalism, and bureaucratic excess, often contrasting "the people" with "the elites in Brussels," framing the EU as a threat to national autonomy.<sup>53</sup>

Orbán has pointed out that international NGOs linked to George Soros and EU bureaucrats are "internal and external enemies" of the Hungarian people. This narrative portrays Soros as the mastermind behind a "global network" aimed at undermining Hungarian values and interests. This rhetoric has legitimized judicial and press reforms that have been condemned by the European Parliament as regressive.

***Andrés Manuel López Obrador (Mexico)***

Although more moderate in tone, AMLO has also used rhetoric skeptical of multilateral elites. At the 2021 CELAC Summit, he proposed the "replacement" of the OAS with "a new autonomous body, not subordinate to any hegemony," arguing that the OAS has lost legitimacy due to its political bias.<sup>54</sup>

In his morning press conferences, he criticized organizations such as the UN and

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*and his allies have said about the UN* [online]. 23 September 2018. Available from: <https://www.bbc.com/portuguese/brasil-49796517> [Accessed: 1 June 2025].

<sup>52</sup> HUNGARIAN GOVERNMENT. *Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's reply in Parliament [Transcript]* [online]. Prime Minister's Office, 2015. Available from: <https://2015-2019.kormany.hu/en/the-prime-minister/the-prime-minister-s-speeches/prime-minister-vikt> [Accessed: 3 June 2025].

<sup>53</sup> SATA, Robert. Performing crisis to create your enemy: Europe vs. the EU in Hungarian populist discourse. *Frontiers in Political Science*, 2023, vol. 5, p. 1032470. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpos.2023.1032470>

<sup>54</sup> LÓPEZ OBRADOR, Andrés Manuel. *Speech at the XXI CELAC Summit of Foreign Ministers and Representatives [Transcript]* [online]. 2021. Available from: <https://www.nodal.am/2021/07/disco-los-presidente-andres-manuel-lopez-obrador-en-la-> [Accessed: 6 June 2025].

the OAS for failing to act firmly against violations of sovereignty and for "protecting corrupt political and media elites." Although Mexico has not formally withdrawn from these organizations, it has reduced its participation in multilateral forums.

### **3.3 Personalized diplomacy/bilateralism**

The four leaders prioritized interpersonal relationships between heads of state, reducing the role of technical diplomacy. Trump established media ties with leaders such as Kim Jong-un, Netanyahu, and Putin, minimizing the involvement of the State Department.<sup>55</sup> Jair Bolsonaro strengthened ties with Trump and Israel through a highly ideological, personality-driven diplomacy. Viktor Orbán has cultivated bilateral relations with Russia and China outside EU institutions. Andrés Manuel López, on the one hand, prioritized direct dialogue with Biden and, on the other, minimized Mexico's presence at multilateral summits.

#### ***Donald Trump (United States)***

Trump turned diplomacy into a personal exercise, sidelining the State Department and prioritizing relations with strong leaders such as Kim Jong-un, Vladimir Putin, and Benjamin Netanyahu. At the 2018 Singapore Summit, Trump declared, "We fell in love... he wrote me beautiful letters," in direct reference to Kim Jong-un, leader of North Korea.<sup>56</sup>

Trump also developed a very close relationship with Netanyahu, unilaterally recognizing Jerusalem as the capital of Israel in 2017. His policy of rapprochement was personally directed, outside the traditional channels of the State Department.

This personal diplomacy was reflected in the National Security Strategy (2017), which refers to the importance of "strong leadership" and "bilateral relationships based on mutual respect," emphasizing the role of the president as a direct negotiator of the national interest.<sup>57</sup> For Martynov<sup>58</sup> this strong personalist orientation in Donald Trump can be explained by his business career, where personal connections and direct

<sup>55</sup> DESTRADI, Sandra; CADIER, David; PLAGEMANN, Johannes. *Ob.cit.*

<sup>56</sup> RAMPTON, Roberta. "We fell in love" – Trump swoons over letters from North Korea's Kim [online]. *Reuters*, 2018. Available from: <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/we-fell-in-love-trump-swoons-over-letters-from-north-koreas-kim-idUSKCN1MA03L> [Accessed: 30 May 2025].

<sup>57</sup> THE WHITE HOUSE. *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* [online]. Office of the President, 2017. Available from: <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf> [Accessed: 28 May 2025].

<sup>58</sup> МАРТИНОВ, Андрій. Тенденції розвитку відносин між США і ФРН за президентства Дональда Трампа. *AMERICAN HISTORY & POLITICS*, 2020, р. 24. <https://doi.org/10.17721/2521-1706.2020.09.2>

dealings were paramount.

***Jair Bolsonaro (Brazil)***

Bolsonaro replicated this logic by cultivating personal ties with ideologically like-minded leaders, particularly Donald Trump and Benjamin Netanyahu. In 2019, Bolsonaro traveled to Israel and declared that "Brazil and Israel are brothers united by God," expressing religious and ideological affinity, but not necessarily strategic alignment.<sup>59</sup>

His relationship with Trump was also highly personal, and he was one of the few leaders to support the US in its stance against the WHO and the UN during the pandemic. Bolsonaro even publicly imitated the former US president's style and rhetoric.

During his weekly broadcasts, "Live do Presidente," Bolsonaro presented his foreign relations as personal decisions in defense of the people, often ignoring the Brazilian Foreign Ministry, known as Itamaraty.<sup>60</sup>

***Viktor Orbán (Hungary)***

Orbán has maintained a bilateralist strategy with leaders such as Putin, Erdogan, and Xi Jinping, prioritizing mutual interests and excluding multilateral bodies. Despite being a member of the EU, Hungary has signed strategic energy agreements with Russia (gas, nuclear energy) and has supported the Belt and Road Initiative with China, in a clear gesture of personal rapprochement with the leaders of these powers. In a 2019 interview, Orbán stated: "The Western liberal order no longer represents us; we will create our alliances."<sup>61</sup>

This stance is also reflected in Hungarian foreign policy, which has been criticized for hindering collective decisions within the EU, favoring selective relationships built through the personal power of the prime minister.

***Andrés Manuel López Obrador (Mexico)***

Although less explicit, Andrés Manuel López also prioritized bilateral relations

<sup>59</sup> KRESCH, Daniel. *Alongside Netanyahu, Bolsonaro visits the Wailing Wall* [online]. *Folha de S.Paulo*, 1 April 2019. Available from: <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/mundo/2019/04/ao-lado-de-netanyahu-bolsonaro-visita-o-muro-das-lamentacoes.shtml> [Accessed: 5 June 2025].

<sup>60</sup> BOLSONARO, Jayr. *President's Live Broadcast* [online]. 2019b. Available from: <https://www.youtube.com/c/PresidentedaRepública/videos> [Accessed: 21 May 2025].

<sup>61</sup> ORBÁN, Viktor. *Kossuth Rádió Interview* [online]. 2019. Available from: <https://kormany.hu/en/prime-minister-viktor-orban> [Accessed: 28 May 2025].

based on personal understandings. He maintained a respectful relationship with Trump during his term, avoiding confrontations on immigration and border issues. Despite his criticism of neoliberalism, the Mexican president did not interfere with the USMCA and publicly thanked Trump for his direct dealings with Mexico. His first international visit was to the White House in 2020, where he stated: "You have not sought to treat us as a colony, but rather, on the contrary, you have honored our status as an independent nation. That is why I am here. To express to the people of the US that their president has behaved toward us with kindness and respect. He has treated us as what we are, a dignified, free, democratic, and sovereign country and people".<sup>62</sup>

With Biden, the relationship was maintained through formal channels, but Andrea Manuel López continued to insist on her discursive autonomy, as demonstrated by her decision not to attend the 2022 Summit of the Americas in protest against the exclusion of Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela.

### **3.4 Selectivity / multilateral deinstitutionalization**

None of the cases analyzed involved complete withdrawal from the international system, but all showed selective behavior. Trump withdrew from UNESCO, the TPP, and the Paris Agreement, but maintained his presence in NATO. Bolsonaro questioned environmental agreements and partially suspended his participation in regional forums. Orbán continues to participate in the European Union but sabotages its internal reforms from within. Andrés Manuel López reduced his participation in regional organizations such as the OAS but maintained pragmatic ties with CELAC.

Populist strategies in foreign policy do not constitute a complete break with the liberal order, but rather a selective and instrumental reconfiguration. Foreign policy becomes an extension of the internal struggle against the elites, where strategic coherence gives way to narrative coherence.<sup>63</sup> In line with Destradi,<sup>64</sup> we conceptualize PFP as a performative style and logic of action in which identity—of both leader and “the people”—structures the selection of instruments and fora. This aligns with our claim that PFP follows an identity-strategic rationality distinct from classical strategic rationality.

We distinguish (a) temporary reconfigurations (e.g., rhetorical delegitimation,

<sup>62</sup> DEUTSCHE WELLE. *AMLO thanks Trump for not treating Mexico “like a colony”* [online]. 8 June 2020. Available from: <https://www.dw.com/es/amlo-agradece-a-trump-que-no-trate-a-m%C3%A9xico-como-colonia/a-54100604> [Accessed: 21 May 2025].

<sup>63</sup> DESTRADI, Sandra; CADIER, David; PLAGEMANN, Johannes. *Ob.cit.*

<sup>64</sup> *Idem.*

tactical vetoes, partial withdrawals that are easily reversible) from (b) lasting order change (e.g., institutional dismantling, legal redesigns that raise re-entry costs, durable parallel fora, or precedents that diffuse). We operationalize the distinction with four criteria: (1) legal anchoring (formal reforms, treaty denunciations, or institutional redesigns), (2) network effects (re-wiring of alliances, value chains, or financing), (3) diffusion (uptake by third countries), and (4) inter-electoral persistence (effects surviving at least one electoral cycle). Meeting  $\geq 2$  criteria indicates durable order change; otherwise, we code the outcome as temporary reconfiguration.

The analysis reveals that populism weakens the LIO not only through concrete decisions but also through the discursive delegitimization of its foundations. This pattern is verifiable in all the primary sources consulted and validates the thesis put forward in the theoretical framework: foreign populism operates as an adaptive, reactive political logic focused on the identity of the leader rather than on the structural interests of the state.

### ***Donald Trump (United States)***

Trump promoted an openly transactional view of multilateralism, focusing on immediate gains rather than long-term strategic alliances.<sup>65</sup> Although he participated in forums such as the G20 and the UN, he deinstitutionalized several dimensions of the LIO by withdrawing from key agreements:

- He abandoned the Paris Agreement (2017) because it harmed the US economy.
- He withdrew from the UN Human Rights Council (2018), arguing that there was a permanent bias against Israel.
- In 2017, he announced the withdrawal from UNESCO, again citing the existence of bias against Israel within the organization. The decision was also presented as part of a demand for broad institutional reforms, in line with the withdrawal from the Paris Agreement and the review of its commitment to multilateral organizations.<sup>66</sup>
- He denounced the "bias" of the World Trade Organization and blocked the functioning of the appeals body.

<sup>65</sup> МАРТИНОВ, Андрій. Тенденції розвитку відносин між США і ФРН за президентства Дональда Трампа. *AMERICAN HISTORY & POLITICS*, 2020, р. 24. <https://doi.org/10.17721/2521-1706.2020.09.2>

<sup>66</sup> BBC. "Local de reunião de comunistas": what Bolsonaro and his allies have said about the UN [online]. 23 September 2018. Available from: <https://www.bbc.com/portuguese/brasil-49796517> [Accessed: 1 June 2025].

- In his speech to the UN (2019), he reaffirmed this position: "The future does not belong to globalists. The future belongs to patriots. The future belongs to sovereign and independent nations that protect their citizens, respect their neighbors, and honor the differences that make each country special and unique. It is why we in the United States have embarked on an exciting program of national renewal. In everything we do, we are focused on empowering the dreams and aspirations of our citizens."<sup>67</sup>

Trump's logic was to build a selective multilateralism, where the US participates only if it has veto power or the ability to impose rules. This vision was set out in the National Security Strategy (2017), which states that the United States will cooperate only with "like-minded states" and that it "is not bound by obsolete multilateral agreements and institutions when the American people do not get a fair return".<sup>68</sup>

#### ***Jair Bolsonaro (Brazil)***

During his term in office, Bolsonaro adopted a critical and skeptical stance toward traditional multilateral mechanisms, particularly those he considered contrary to Brazil's sovereign interests. While his government did not formally abandon international forums, it did promote a strategy of selective participation subordinate to its domestic agenda, especially in areas such as human rights, the environment, and global health.

A significant example was his decision to weaken Brazil's presence in the UN Human Rights Council by rejecting several of its resolutions. In 2020, the Brazilian government voted against a resolution condemning global racial discrimination, arguing that it was an ideological imposition and a distortion of Brazilian values.<sup>69</sup>

Likewise, during the COVID-19 pandemic, Bolsonaro repeatedly expressed his distrust of the World Health Organization, questioning its recommendations and accusing it of acting with bias toward the sovereign decisions of states. Although Brazil

<sup>67</sup> TRUMP, Donald. *National Security Strategy of the United States* [online]. 2017. Available from: <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf> [Accessed: 29 May 2025].

—. *Speech at the United Nations General Assembly* [online]. 2018. Available from: <https://www.politico.com/story/2018/09/25/trump-un-speech-2018-full-text-transcript-840043> [Accessed: 27 May 2025].

<sup>68</sup> THE WHITE HOUSE. *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* [online]. Office of the President, 2017. Available from: <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf> [Accessed: 28 May 2025], p. 2, 38.

<sup>69</sup> HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH. *UN Human Rights Council condemned for politicizing Brazil's minority rights vote* [online]. 2020. Available from: <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2022/country-chapters/brazil> [Accessed: 30 May 2025].

did not withdraw from the organization, the Ministry of Health rejected several of its guidelines and maintained a health policy based on its criteria, which was criticized by multilateral organizations.<sup>70</sup>

These positions are reflected in the National Defense Plan (2020), which emphasizes that international relations should prioritize strategic national interests, including pragmatic bilateral alliances, over "automatic adherence to multilateral consensuses".<sup>71</sup>

Consequently, the Bolsonaro administration was characterized by selective and distrustful multilateral participation, prioritizing alliances with ideologically aligned governments, such as Israel, Hungary, and the US, while reducing its active involvement in spaces such as MERCOSUR, the Human Rights Council itself, and withdrawing from UNASUR, an institution that was born and advanced under Brazil's leadership in the first decade of the 21st century.

#### ***Viktor Orbán (Hungary)***

Orbán is one of the leaders most explicitly hostile to the multilateral governance of the European Union. Although he formally remains in the bloc, he has systematically exercised his veto power to block sanctions or common decisions, especially on migration, judicial, and human rights issues. In his speech on March 15, 2024, on the occasion of a Hungarian national holiday, Orbán lashed out at the European Union, comparing it to imperialist occupiers and declaring: "Brussels is not the first empire that has set its eyes on Hungary [...] The people of Europe today are afraid that Brussels will take away their freedom [...] We will march to Brussels and bring change to the European Union ourselves".<sup>72</sup>

The Hungarian Foreign Policy Program (2018) proposes a redefinition of European multilateralism: "less bureaucracy, more flexibility, more strategic bilateralism".<sup>73</sup> Orbán has promoted alliances such as the Visegrad Group (V4) and

<sup>70</sup> ORGANIZATION PANAMERICANA DE LA SALUD. *Brazil's COVID-19 response and PAHO perceptions* [online]. 2020. Available from: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/democraciaabierta/pan-american-health-organization-in-danger/> [Accessed: 30 May 2025].

<sup>71</sup> GOVERNMENT OF BRAZIL. *Brazil's National Defence Plan* [online]. 2020. Available from: [https://www.gov.br/defesa/pt-br/assuntos/copy\\_of\\_estado-e-defesa/pnd\\_end\\_congressonacional\\_22\\_07\\_2020.pdf/view](https://www.gov.br/defesa/pt-br/assuntos/copy_of_estado-e-defesa/pnd_end_congressonacional_22_07_2020.pdf/view) [Accessed: 2 June 2025].

<sup>72</sup> DEUTSCHE WELLE. *AMLO thanks Trump for not treating Mexico "like a colony"* [online]. 8 June 2020. Available from: <https://www.dw.com/es/amlo-agradece-a-trump-que-no-trate-a-m%C3%A9xico-como-colonia/a-54100604> [Accessed: 21 May 2025].

<sup>73</sup> HUNGARIAN GOVERNMENT. *Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's reply in Parliament [Transcript]* [online]. Prime Minister's Office, 2015. Available from: <https://2015-2019.kormany.hu/en/the-prime-minister/the-prime-minister-s-speeches/prime-minister-vikt> [Accessed: 3 June 2025].

energy agreements with Russia and China as alternatives to the centralized multilateralism of Brussels.

### ***Andrés Manuel López Obrador (Mexico)***

He has maintained an ambivalent relationship with multilateralism. Although Mexico continues to participate actively in the UN, CELAC, and the USM, its government has promoted a sovereign reinterpretation of international cooperation.

At the CELAC Summit (2021), Andrés Manuel López Obrador proposed replacing the OAS with a new regional body "without hegemony or interventionism".<sup>74</sup>

In interviews and morning press conferences, Andrés Manuel López Obrador questioned the usefulness of organizations such as the UN in enforcing resolutions or acting against global abuses of power. This has been interpreted as a form of discursive deinstitutionalization: a continuous criticism of the multilateral system, without formally abandoning it.

## **4. Discussion**

The results show how populist leaders in the foreign policy of the United States, Brazil, Mexico, and Hungary shape patterns of international action that actively strain the fundamental principles of the liberal international order, without necessarily breaking with it. This finding requires a problematization of the conventional analytical categories that have understood populism primarily as a domestic phenomenon or as an institutional anomaly. The comparative analysis developed here suggests that populism operates as a mode of international governance with its consistent rationalities. We describe PFP as a mode of international governance because it (i) re-prioritizes instruments (vetoes, partial withdrawals, conditionality tied to identity cues), (ii) re-orders fora (preference for bilateralism and ad-hoc coalitions over rule-dense multilateralism), and (iii) redefines metrics of success (domestic symbolic gains and media cycle control outweighing diffuse long-term benefits). Together, these features yield negative coordination (blocking, delaying, forum-shopping) that reshapes aggregate outcomes within the LIO.

We identify patterns not through coordinated action but through convergent mechanisms—economic nationalism, anti-globalist elite framing, personalist diplomacy, and selective multilateralism—rooted in the same identity-strategic

<sup>74</sup> LÓPEZ OBRADOR, Andrés Manuel. *Speech at the XXI CELAC Summit of Foreign Ministers and Representatives [Transcript]* [online]. 2021. Available from: <https://www.nodal.am/2021/07/disco-del-presidente-andres-manuel-lopez-obrador-en-la-> [Accessed: 6 June 2025].

rationality. This "family resemblance" produces observable regularities in discourse, instrument choice, and forum selection which, by accumulation, generate systemic friction for the LIO.

First, when contrasting the foreign policy strategies of Donald Trump, Jair Bolsonaro, Andrés Manuel López, and Viktor Orbán, a convergence in the adoption of four common strategies becomes evident: economic nationalism, anti-global elite rhetoric, personalized diplomacy, and multilateral selectivity/de-institutionalization. These are not mere isolated tactics, but practices consistent with the conceptual frameworks that define populism as a political logic<sup>75</sup> and as a performative style that mobilizes antagonisms between "the people" and "the elites" at all levels, including the international level (Jumle et al, 2025), (Löfflmann, 2022). Following work on contesting the LIO from within, PFP often re-interprets rules and instrumentalizes institutions rather than abandoning them outright, creating a performance–compliance decoupling. We locate the threshold between contestation and break when at least two of the following occur: (i) substitution of core norms by durable parallel arrangements; \*\*(ii) formal denunciation of treaties or exit from core bodies that raises re-entry barriers; and \*\*(iii) erosion of enforcement organs (e.g., appellate bodies) with effects that persist beyond a single term. Absent these thresholds, we classify cases as contestation rather than break.<sup>76</sup>

In the four cases analyzed, the category of economic nationalism is not limited to an economic stance but acts as a discursive component that reinforces the populist narrative. This strategy articulates: rejection of trade multilateralism, promotion of strategic national sectors, and the re-signification of economic sovereignty as a collective identity. This pattern is consistent with the theoretical framework proposed by Destradi,<sup>77</sup> who identify the use of foreign populism as an "identity framework for action" and not necessarily as an economic doctrine. Thus, populisms reconfigure the LIO not through total withdrawal, but through a sovereignist reinterpretation of its rules.

In all four cases, anti-global elite rhetoric plays a central role in building populist legitimacy: it allows unilateral or disruptive decisions to be justified to the international

<sup>75</sup> LACLAU, Ernesto. (2005). *La razón populista*. Fondo de Cultura Económica.; MOFFITT, Benjamin. *The global rise of populism: Performance, political style, and representation*. Stanford University Press, 2016. <https://doi.org/10.11126/stanford/9780804796132.001.0001>

<sup>76</sup> SÖDERBAUM Fredrik, SPANDLER Kiliam, PACCARDI Agnese. *Contestations of the Liberal International Order: A Populist Script of Regional Cooperation*. Cambridge University Press; 2021.

<sup>77</sup> DESTRADI, Sandra; CADIER, David; PLAGEMANN, Johannes. *Ob.cit.*

community, reinforces the dichotomy between the sovereign people and the transnational elite, which is essential to populist logic, and operates as a narrative of identity defense and national restoration.<sup>78</sup> This is consistent with Gratius & Rivero<sup>79</sup> on Viktor Orbán's discursive strategy, in which transnational actors, whom he identifies with capitalism and liberalism, undermine Hungary's sovereignty, including the European Union, which he identifies with neoliberalism. This rhetoric allows him to promote a strong state that restores national sovereignty with an emphasis on the economy.

This rhetorical strategy generates structural tensions with the LIO, as it undermines the legitimacy of its institutions and relativizes international norms. As pointed out by Destradi,<sup>80</sup> this is not marginal rhetoric, but rather constitutive of a new style of performative and emotional foreign policy.

Personalized diplomacy represents a break with professionalized, institutional, and multilateral diplomacy. In the four cases analyzed, this strategy fulfills three main functions: it reinforces the image of strong and decisive leadership, consistent with the populist logic of embodying the people; it reduces formal and intermediate channels of negotiation (foreign ministries, career diplomats, parliaments), centralizing decisions in the leader; and it allows pragmatic links with ideologically like-minded leaders, without the need for coherent long-term ideological justification. As Destradi<sup>81</sup> argue, this is a form of "personalization of foreign policy" that reconfigures international politics in emotional, identity-based, and performative terms.

The strategy of multilateral selectivity and deinstitutionalization represents a common pattern among populist leaders. Its logic is expressed in conditional participation in international institutions, only if they benefit immediate national interests, also through the weakening of universal norms in favor of flexible, bilateral, or ideologically aligned arrangements, and thirdly, through the strategic use of veto or withdrawal as a tool of symbolic power. This stance creates a risk of fragmentation of the LIO, as warned by Börzel and Zürn,<sup>82</sup> as it multiplies "gray areas" where multilateral

<sup>78</sup> MUDDE, Cas; KALTWASSER, Cristóbal Rovira. *Populism: A very short introduction*. Oxford University Press, 2017.

<sup>79</sup> GRATIUS, Susanne; RIVERO, Ángel. *Más allá de la izquierda y la derecha: populismo en Europa y América Latina/Beyond right and left: populism in Europe and Latin America*. *Revista CIDOB d'Afers Internacionals*, 2018, no 119, p. 35-62. <https://doi.org/10.24241/rcai.2018.119.2.35>

<sup>80</sup> DESTRADI, Sandra; CADIER, David; PLAGEMANN, Johannes. *Ob.cit.*

<sup>81</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>82</sup> BÖRZEL, Tanja and ZÜRN, Michael. *Contestations of the liberal international order: From liberal*

rules lose strength. At the discursive level, the idea that multilateralism can be ignored or unilaterally redesigned becomes normalized.

## Conclusions

This study demonstrates that populism, far from being a phenomenon limited to domestic politics, also manifests itself as a way of conducting foreign policy with concrete implications for the liberal international order. Through a comparative analysis of the Trump, Bolsonaro, Orbán, and López Obrador administrations, four recurring strategies were identified: economic nationalism, anti-global elite rhetoric, personalized diplomacy, and multilateral selectivity/de-institutionalization. These do not operate as isolated tactics, but as components of a populist logic that reconfigures the traditional frameworks of international action.

First, it is concluded that populism does not necessarily imply a break with the LIO, but rather an internal transformation of it through the selective, discursive, and strategic use of its mechanisms. The leaders analyzed instrumentalizing existing multilateral frameworks, not to strengthen the rules-based order, but to condition its application to sovereignist or internal legitimization objectives.

Second, the results show that contemporary populist leaders construct their foreign policy around a symbolic antithesis between "the people" and "the global elites," which translates into a binary international narrative. This approach justifies both the challenge to international organizations and the redefinition of alliances through ideological affinities or personal ties.

Third, the analysis reaffirms that populisms, although diverse in context and ideological orientation, share a common international grammar that is articulated in coherent practices and discourses. This reinforces the relevance of addressing populism not only as a political style but as a strategic rationality that directly affects the architecture of the global order.

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