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Research article

Thematic section
Populists in International Institutions

Populist (Dis)Engagement with International Parliamentary Institutions: Central Europeans in the European Parliament and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe

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Abstract

How do populist politicians behave in international parliamentary institutions (IPIs)? Although there is a rapidly growing literature on the foreign policy of populist executive actors, the manifestation of populism as a thin-centred ideology in an international parliamentary setting is not yet understood. This paper aims to alleviate this knowledge gap by analysing how Central European populist parties engaged with the European Parliament (EP) and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of

Europe (PACE) from 2019 to 2024, focusing on the highly politicised issues of the rule of law and democracy, immigration and the Russia-Ukraine War. Using a mixed-methods approach combining statistical analysis with qualitative case studies, we offer two main findings. First, the salience of IPI strongly indicates populists' tendency to disengage from the institution. Second, compared to other ideological positions, being a member of a far-right party has a significant positive effect on voting against resolutions and abstaining or not voting.

Keywords: *populism, engagement, Central Europe, European Parliament, Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe*

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Introduction

This article examines the behaviour of populist parties in international organisations (IOs) and analyses whether the disengagement strategies employed by prominent populist leaders apply more broadly among populist politicians (Pacciardi, Spandler & Söderbaum 2024). While most research on the international politics of populism focuses on the executive branch (Cadier, Chryssogelos & Destradi 2025; Destradi & Plagemann 2019), this paper looks at international parliamentary institutions (IPIs) to determine whether and in what ways the parliamentary environment influences populist actors' (dis)engagement.

The paper samples populist parties from five Central European countries (Czechia, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia) based on The PopuList 3.0 (Rooduijn et al. 2024) and analyses the behaviour of their representatives in 2019–2024 in two IPIs: the European Parliament (EP), which has legislative powers and whose members are directly elected, and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), which is a consultative body whose members are delegated by national assemblies. It uses a combination of statistical analysis and qualitative mini case studies to unpack how and why populists engage with IPIs.

The study finds that populist politicians were quite engaged with the EP, while they barely interacted with PACE. The results also reveal that in the EP, being a member of a party in the national government significantly lowers the likelihood of voting against or not voting on resolutions. At the same time, it substantially increases the chances of abstentions. Being right-wing negatively correlates with abstentions, while being far-right positively correlates with 'nay' votes and non-voting. In the case of PACE, the paper finds no significant correlations due to the very low participation in voting procedures. Finally, our case studies suggest that only representatives of far-right populist parties were engaged in forms of disengagement beyond criticism, removing themselves from the work of the organisation without formally leaving.

The paper develops as follows. The first section begins with a brief overview of existing research on populism and IOs, followed by an elaboration of the stages of disengagement developed by Pacciardi, Spandler and Söderbaum (2024) and a short presentation of existing research on IPs. The second section introduces the paper's mixed-methods approach, combining statistical analyses with qualitative mini-case studies. The third and fourth sections present the articles' quantitative and qualitative findings, respectively. The final section discusses the results in light of the disengagement strategy and concludes with the main takeaways.

Populism and international organisations

Populism can be understood in different ways: as a political strategy (Weyland 2017), as a style of political communication (Moffitt 2016), as a discourse (Wojczewski 2020) or as an ideology (Mudde 2004). The ideology framework has most commonly been used to distinguish populism as a thin-centred ideology that separates the pure people from corrupt elites, from thick ideologies (Mudde 2004), such as the hard right (Mudde 2019), and to integrate populism studies into foreign policy analysis (Destradi & Plagemann 2019; Verbeek & Zaslove 2015).

While the influence of populists on foreign policy has long been researched, their entry into governing coalitions and the executive branch, as well as the crises of the liberal international order (Colgan & Keohane 2017; Ikenberry 2018), have led to an upsurge in research. At the same time, the literature distinguishes between populism and thick ideologies (Chryssogelos 2017), highlighting that the impact of 'international anti-elitism' has been shaped by thick ideologies (Verbeek & Zaslove 2017), the importance of the international agenda in domestic politics and the systemic conditions that determine opportunity costs (Destradi & Plagemann 2019).

Research on the impact of populism on IOs has emerged more recently. It started from the initial research on the impact of international organisations on state regulatory capacity and legitimacy (Chryssogelos 2020) and moved from policy areas with weak international regimes (such as migration) to those where international organisations play a stronger role (such as trade) (Löflmann 2022). However, the behaviour of populist governments in relation to international institutions as such is still poorly understood (Pacciardi, Spandler & Söderbaum 2024). Research is strongly influenced by the assumption that populism plays a disruptive role due to the contradiction between the 'sovereignty of the people' and the authority of IOs (Metawe 2024). This is consistent with the view that populism is inherently harmful to the liberal state polity (Müller 2016), as opposed to its potentially positive role for democratic processes (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2012). A notable example is the work of Wajner, Destradi and Zürn (2024), which looks at the impact of 'authoritarian populism' on international institutions. Their focus on 'illiberal executives' and the empirical findings reflect difficulties in the

literature on populist foreign policy, such as the distinction between populism and thick ideologies and a selective approach by populists, demonstrating the importance of national context and systemic constraints. This suggests a need to improve the understanding of the specific role of populism by analysing incentives and constraints for ‘international anti-elitism’ in different venues and taking into account executive and representative politics.

Pacciardi, Spandler and Söderbaum (2024) further developed the ‘disengagement’ hypothesis by identifying disengagement practices that show an unwillingness to maintain established forms of cooperation. Their framework, which combines ideational, strategic and stylistic dimensions of populism, comprises four stages, ranging from rhetoric to complete disengagement: (1) criticism (public expression of discontent, demand for reform, etc., as a low-cost and low-risk strategy, but which can also lead to further steps), (2) blackmail (threat of refusal of funding or termination of cooperation – as a sign that one is still interested in cooperation, but under different conditions), (3) obstruction (creating the impression that the institution is no longer functioning, but only targeting certain procedures) and (4) exit (which can sometimes be reversed, depending on the institutional rules).

Their empirical analysis based on the behaviour of Donald Trump and Viktor Orbán has shown that not all disengagement is aimed at weakening international institutions and that disengagement rarely leads to a complete exit. A people-centred view of sovereignty is used as strategy and rhetoric, but unilateralism and outright withdrawal are rare. Moreover, institutions with more authority do not mean more confrontation, as one would expect – rather, this depends on their size, visibility, dependencies, etc. This is because populists navigate between the conflicting imperatives of radicalism and pragmatism – they need to be perceived as different and doing something for the people, but face resource dependency and exit costs, national institutional constraints, public opinion and so on. Hence, the strategy of breaking diplomatic conventions and using bullying to get concessions from international actors (institutional reforms, symbolic recognition or additional funding) might be sufficient from a domestic perspective.

While many of the aforementioned strategies are not new, the difference between populists and non-populists is that the former apply the four-step repertoire less linearly and more flexibly due to specific incentive structures. For example, criticism and blackmail are often used to continue supporting the institutions while obtaining certain concessions. Obstruction has been used in some cases, but not to the point of radical withdrawal. Withdrawal has only been sought when other disengagement strategies did not yield concessions, and even then, only at low cost, such as with existing individual UN agencies (Pacciardi, Spandler & Söderbaum 2024).

In parallel with this work on the populist contestation of IOs, recent scholarship has also shown that populist leadership is not necessarily antithetical to inter-

national cooperation. A long-term analysis of voting patterns at the United Nations General Assembly suggests that populists are not against multilateral institutions *per se*; rather, they are against institutions propagating liberal principles (Destradi & Vüllers 2024). Similarly, case studies from Greece (Syriza) and the UK (Brexit) indicate that populists can justify entering international agreements and making compromises by discursively reframing the deals as popular victories over corrupt domestic elites and/or as omnibus solutions to several problems, as well as by differently communicating to various audiences (Chrysosgelos & Meibauer 2025).

Drawing on a variety of examples from Europe and Latin America, Wajner (2025) posits that populists follow one of four main strategic approaches to regional cooperation (e.g. the EU) based on how they (de-)legitimise regionalism and how much effort they devote to it. We can tie the two approaches based on the delegitimisation of regionalism (a-regionalism and anti-regionalism) to the types of populist disengagement identified by Pacciardi et al. (2024): A-regionalism makes a limited effort to undermine regionalism and thus only makes use of criticism, whereas anti-regionalism is a more active approach which employs the tools of extortion, obstruction and exit as well. In contrast, the legitimisation-based approaches (pro-regionalism and para-regionalism) indicate how populists can engage with regional organisations. For Wajner (2025), populist pro-regionalism is identical to the ‘traditional regionalist game’ (ibid.: 12), where populist leaders are in favour of continued membership and participation, but they do not devote much effort to further the development of the regionalist project. Conversely, populist para-regionalism involves the active creation and promotion of regional networks and organisations as alternatives to existing institutions. These populist-promoted organisations tend to be less formalised and operate on an *ad hoc* basis, giving populist leaders flexibility while also ‘presenting a façade of unity and success abroad to bolster their legitimacy at home’ (ibid.: 14).

However, this research, as well as virtually all of the populist foreign policy literature, focuses on the behaviour of political leaders from the executive branch while ignoring the behaviour of populist parliamentarians. Although foreign policy is primarily the domain of the executive branch, legislatures play a growing role in shaping the political context in which governments operate due to the continuous internationalisation of previously domestic policy domains (energy, environment, immigration, trade), the growing politicisation of international affairs and the ability of political parties to form transnational networks (Raunio & Wagner 2024). Parliamentary diplomacy is particularly developed in Europe, where several IOs have IPIs to discuss international issues among a more representative sample of their member states’ political elite than just the government representatives (see chapters in Stavridis & Jančić 2017).

In fact, we witness a global proliferation of IPIs as IOs seek to increase their democratic legitimacy (Rocabert et al. 2019) and the compliance of member states

with commonly agreed standards (Cofelice 2018), and national lawmakers' involvement with international affairs as globalisation erodes the traditional separation between international and local/national concerns (Šabič 2008). IPIs extend the control function of national lawmakers to the international arena, which incentivises opposition MPs in parliamentary regimes and all MPs from presidential regimes to engage with IPIs to better scrutinise the international activities of their governments (Lipps 2021). The high share of foreigners and location along national borders were also shown to motivate district MPs to engage with IPIs (Malang 2019).

In the meantime, research on how politicians engage with these organisations is still nascent. In the context of PACE, Lipps and Jacob (2024) analysed the voting patterns of illiberal parties, showing that they are willing to contest liberal policies and that being in government in liberal regimes moderates their contestation. This paper aims to follow this line of research with a focus on populist parties. Drawing on the previously discussed insights of the populist foreign policy literature, we pose the following two research questions:

1. How does populists' (dis)engagement with IOs manifest in the case of IPIs?
2. What factors influence populist (dis)engagement with IPIs?

Methodology

This paper adopts a comparative mixed-methods design seeking to analyse the voting behaviour of populist parliamentarians in two institutions: the EP and PACE. These institutions provide different degrees of control over the IOs they belong to, which influences their politicisation. The EP is one of the seven institutions of the European Union (EU), composed of directly elected representatives and exercises legislative and budgetary functions (Art. 14 in EU 2012). PACE is one of the two organs of the Council of Europe (CoE), is composed of representatives of national parliaments and serves as the deliberative organ of the IO (Art. 22–25 in CoE 2015). Cofelice (2018) analyses IPIs based on their powers across five functions, based on which the EP can be considered as a highly empowered IPI with significant powers across several categories, whereas PACE is only moderately empowered (Table 1). Moreover, the EP not only has more significant powers within the EU than PACE has within the CoE, but the EU itself is a more powerful IO than the CoE. Finally, the EP is a directly elected body with regular elections every five years, whereas PACE is composed of delegations from national parliaments.

The timeframe of the analysis was adjusted to the 9th parliamentary term of the EP (2019–2024). We limit our attention to three issues, which were both highly salient and discussed in both institutions: democracy and the rule of law, immigration and the Russia-Ukraine War. Resolutions corresponding to these topics were selected manually (Appendix A1). We sampled representatives of Central European parties, which were categorised as populist by The PopuList

Table 1: The different functions of the EP and PACE

Functions	EP	PACE
consultative	Must be consulted in over 30 cases	Must be consulted on member state admission and suspension
legislative	Co-legislator status for 95% of EU primary legislation	Informal influence over 1/3 of CoE conventions via standard setting
budgetary	Near parity with the EU Council on EU budget	Consulted on the part of the CoE budget dealing with PACE
oversight	Can force the resignation of the European Commission with a motion of censure	Debates the report and activities of the Committee of Ministers
appointment	Passes votes of confidence in incoming European Commission Presidents and Commissions	Appoints key leaders in administrative and judicial bodies

Source: Adapted from Cofelice (2018)

3.0 for the study period (Rooduijn et al. 2024) and were represented and active in either or both of the institutions. Data include the official voting records of all MEPs elected from a sampled party's list, as well as of all PACE delegates and substitutes.

The first part of the paper provides a quantitative overview of how populist parties from five countries have voted on resolutions. The selection includes parties with different underlying thick ideologies and time in government (Table 2). The analysis includes the presentation of mean voting attitudes and the assessment of the impact of political context (national party on government, belonging to a right-wing party and a far-right party) with two Bayesian multinomial logistic regression models, one for the EP and one for PACE, using the brms R package (Bürkner 2017). The full script and model diagnostics are available in Appendix A2. Parties marked with an asterisk (*) had only substitutes in PACE when voting on a topic's resolutions took place, so their DNV (did not vote) values may indicate a lack of voting opportunity.

Second, we selected three parties for closer analysis in order to better understand the underlying causality through the context and motivation of their voting behaviour: Fidesz (HU), SDS (SI) and SMER-SD (SK). Fidesz has been the most important right-wing party in Hungary since 1998. It self-identifies as an illiberal Christian democratic and national conservative party and has been considered populist since 2002 and far-right since 2010 by The PopuList (Rooduijn et al. 2024). Since 2010, Fidesz has been the dominant party in Hungarian politics, and Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has become a model for populist and illiberal politicians worldwide. The party impaired the rule of law and democracy and has used hostile rhetoric against international organisations for alleged hostile politi-

Table 2: Analysed parties and their attributes of parties in 2019–2024 with categorisation based on PopuList 3.0

country	party name	party acronym	ideology	in government
CZ	ANO 2011	ANO	centrist	2013–2021
	Freedom and Direct Democracy	SPD	far right	–
HU	Fidesz – Hungarian Civic Alliance	Fidesz	far right	2010–onwards
	Christian Democratic People's Party	KDNP	far right	2010–onwards
	Movement for a Better Hungary	Jobbik	centre right	–
	Our Homeland Movement	Mi Hazánk	far right	–
PL	Law and Justice	PiS	far right	2015–2023
	United Poland	SP	far right	2015–2023
SI	Slovenian Democratic Party	SDS	far right	2020–2022
	The Left	Levica	far left	2022–onwards
SK	Slovak National Party	SNS	far right	2023–onwards
	Direction –Social Democracy	SMER-SD	centre left	2016–2020 2023–onwards
	Ordinary People and Independent Personalities	OLANO	centre right	2020–2023

Source: Authors

cal interference with domestic affairs and applying double standards (cf. Csehi & Zgut 2021). Fidesz has also been critical of liberal migration policies (Melegh et al. 2021) and kept its support for Ukraine to the bare minimum while maintaining good economic and political ties with Russia (Marton & Szalai 2025). Fidesz was a member of the European People's Party (EPP) until 2021 (suspended from 2019), after which it joined the European Conservatives Group and Democratic Alliance in PACE and remained non-affiliated in the EP.

The Slovenian Democratic Party (SDS) is Slovenia's most important right-wing party, considered populist since 2000 and far right since 2015 by The PopuList (Rooduijn et al. 2024). Originally a social democratic and later a liberal reformist party, SDS adopted a more national conservative programme in the 2010s, when party leader Janez Janša aligned himself with Viktor Orbán and Donald Trump (Lovec & Bojinović 2019; Lovec, Kočan & Mahmutović 2022). Parallel to the growing criticism of the impairment of the rule of law and democracy in Slovenia, SDS began using hostile rhetoric against IOs for 'political bias', 'double standards' and 'undermining national sovereignty' (Mahmutović & Lovec 2024). The party has also been critical of liberal migration policies but strongly supported Ukraine (Lovec 2025). SDS is a member of the EPP in both the EP and PACE.

Direction – Social Democracy (SMER-SD) is a nominally social democratic party with strong conservative and statist elements (Marušíak 2021). It is con-

sidered populist by The PopuList (Rooduijn et al. 2024). The party's ideology and foreign policy are pragmatic and have changed several times based on the domestic and international political context (Marušiak 2021). The party has been anti-immigration since 2015, but does not strongly oppose liberal migration policies at the EU level as long as its sole red line – no mandatory relocation – is respected (Holányi 2025). While in power, SMER-SD became more pro-EU in 2017–2020, expressing its ambition to have Slovakia join the 'core EU' (Mravcová & Havlík 2022), but took a more sovereigntist and critical stance after 2020. This included criticism of anti-Russian sanctions and support for post-war economic relations with Russia (Bundzíková & Janšta 2024). SMER-SD was a member of the Socialists and Democrats (S&D) Group in the EP (suspended in October 2023¹) and the Socialists, Democrats and Greens Group in PACE.

Quantitative results

The mean votes of populist parliamentarians on the three selected issues show two distinct patterns (Tables 3–5). First, populist MEPs participated in voting procedures more often than PACE delegates. DNV can be considered relatively rare among MEPs, and they also tended to cast decisive votes. The outlier is SMER-SD, for whom DNV was the most frequent voting behaviour on resolutions related to the rule of law or the Russia-Ukraine War. In contrast, the lack of participation in voting procedures is the dominant behaviour for all sampled party delegates in PACE. The exception is Our Homeland Movement, whose delegate, the party leader László Toroczkai, showed up for 2/3 of the votes on migration, marking the only instance in the sample where DNV does not account for the absolute majority of cases. Delegates of ANO were also somewhat engaged with PACE on the Russia-Ukraine War, as they showed up to vote for resolutions in 43% of cases.

Second, the voting patterns of the three chosen topics show important differences, which suggests that there is no overarching populist trend. On the rule of law (Table 3), the split was mainly between pro-government parties opposing these resolutions, criticising developments in their countries (Fidesz, KDNP, PiS, SP) and the rest leaning towards support (ANO, Jobbik, SMER-SD, OĽANO). SPD was the only party in the sample which strongly opposed the rule of law resolutions without being criticised by them. SDS was divided on the issue as their MEPs voted based on individual preferences, with one MEP leaning supportive and two MEPs leaning opposing in the form of against votes and abstentions.

1 Interestingly, suspended Fidesz MEPs were registered as EPP members in official voting registers whereas suspended SMER-SD MEPs were registered as non-incrits. Róbert Hajšel, who was elected from the SMER-SD list but was not a member of the party, was not suspended.

Table 3: The mean vote of parliamentarians in the EP and PACE on rule of law resolutions by national party affiliation

country	party	EP				PACE			
		for	against	abst.	DNV	for	against	abst.	DNV
CZ	ANO	51.85%	5.56%	38.89%	3.70%	15.79%	0.00%	0.00%	84.21%
	SPD	0.00%	94.44%	0.00%	5.56%	-	-	-	-
HU	Fidesz	1.85%	89.81%	0.00%	8.33%	4.55%	15.91%	0.00%	79.55%
	KDNP	0.00%	77.78%	22.22%	0.00%	0.00%	13.33%	0.00%	86.67%
	Jobbik	66.67%	11.11%	11.11%	11.11%	25.00%	0.00%	0.00%	75.00%
	Mi Hazánk	-	-	-	-	0.00%	40.00%	0.00%	60.00%
PL	PiS	0.00%	85.98%	9.81%	4.21%	1.82%	9.09%	0.00%	89.09%
	SP	0.00%	83.33%	11.11%	5.56%	-	-	-	-
SI	SDS	25.93%	37.04%	33.33%	3.70%	0.00%	20.00%	0.00%	80.00%
	Levica	-	-	-	-	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	100.00%
SK	SNS	-	-	-	-	0.00%	33.33%	0.00%	66.67%
	SMER-SD	40.74%	11.11%	3.70%	44.44%	0.00%	33.33%	0.00%	66.67%
	OĽANO	66.67%	0.00%	22.22%	11.11%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	100.00%

Source: Authors

Table 4: The mean vote of parliamentarians in the EP and PACE on migration resolutions by national party affiliation

country	party	EP				PACE			
		for	against	abst.	DNV	for	against	abst.	DNV
CZ	ANO	35.19%	50.00%	14.81%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	100.00%
	SPD	0.00%	88.89%	5.56%	5.56%	-	-	-	-
HU	Fidesz	0.00%	83.33%	0.00%	16.67%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	100.00%
	KDNP	11.11%	88.89%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	100.00%
	Jobbik*	0.00%	88.89%	11.11%	0.00%	-	-	-	-
	Mi Hazánk	-	-	-	-	0.00%	66.67%	0.00%	33.33%
PL	PiS	0.00%	83.33%	0.00%	16.67%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	100.00%
	SP	0.00%	100.00%	0.00%	0.00%	-	-	-	-
SI	SDS*	48.15%	51.85%	0.00%	0.00%	-	-	-	-
	Levica	-	-	-	-	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	100.00%
SK	SNS*	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
	SMER-SD*	14.81%	29.63%	51.85%	3.70%	-	-	-	-
	OĽANO	77.78%	22.22%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	100.00%

Note: * indicates parties represented only by substitutes without recorded activity in PACE

Source: Authors

This pattern, however, only applies to the EP as PACE delegates rarely voted. When voting, PACE delegates from ANO and Jobbik voted for, while delegates from Fidesz, KDNP, Mi Hazánk, PiS, SDS, SNS and SMER-SD voted against. The representatives of Levice and OĽANO never voted in PACE.

On migration, populist votes were generally against the proposed resolutions, with representatives of most of the analysed parties voting predominantly against (Table 4). The exceptions to this regional trend were OĽANO, which was mainly supportive, SMER-SD, whose members tended to abstain, and SDS, which was once again divided, with one MEP voting for and two MEPs voting against or abstaining. ANO MEPs also displayed some support for migration resolutions; nevertheless, 'against' votes were in the absolute majority. In PACE, only Mi Hazánk's delegate showed up to vote.

In contrast with migration, populist votes in Central Europe were generally in favour of resolutions related to the Russia-Ukraine War (Table 5). Strong opposition was only mounted by SPD politicians. Fidesz and KDNP MEPs tended not to vote, although they supported early resolutions condemning Russia's 2022 invasion. Abstentions were rare. In PACE, almost all of the votes cast were in favour of the resolutions.

The EP model indicates that being a government party member negatively affects MEPs' tendency to cast 'no' votes or not vote, and positively affects their likelihood of abstaining. Being a right-wing party member does not affect negative votes and has an adverse effect on abstentions and participation in voting procedures. Finally, being far right increases the likelihood of voting 'no' or not voting, but does not affect abstentions. All of these relationships, except for the impact of being right-wing on DNV, are significant. In contrast, the PACE model uncovered no statistically significant relationships, likely due to the very high proportion of DNV in the sample. The non-significant results indicate a positive relationship between all predictors and voting behaviour, except for the impact of being a government party member on negative votes, where this relationship is negative. The results of the two models are summarised in Table 6.

Case studies: Fidesz, SDS and SMER-SD

Fidesz

The CoE as an IO has had a low salience for the Fidesz government. Even though the current National Security Strategy emphasises that the CoE is a key forum for pursuing Hungary's interests (Magyarország Kormánya 2020), the behaviour of Fidesz members questions this assertion as we observe various forms of disengagement from the organisation. First, and less importantly, criticism. On the few occasions when Fidesz politicians (or pro-Fidesz journalists) substantially engaged with the policies of the CoE, the tone was very critical, reflected in accusations that the CoE had taken unjustly condemnatory stances on the rule of law in Hungary (Molnár 2023), or of

Table 5: The mean vote of parliamentarians in the EP and PACE on Russia-Ukraine War resolutions by national party affiliation

country	party	EP				PACE			
		for	against	abst.	DNV	for	against	abst.	DNV
CZ	ANO	66.67%	0.00%	14.58%	18.75%	42.86%	0.00%	0.00%	57.14%
	SPD	0.00%	62.50%	6.25%	31.25%	-	-	-	-
HU	Fidesz	39.58%	6.25%	0.00%	54.17%	9.38%	0.00%	0.00%	90.63%
	KDNP	25.00%	0.00%	12.50%	62.50%	18.18%	0.00%	0.00%	81.82%
	Jobbik	75.00%	0.00%	0.00%	25.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	100.00%
	Mi Hazánk	-	-	-	-	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	100.00%
PL	PiS	90.10%	0.00%	0.00%	9.90%	21.62%	0.00%	2.70%	75.68%
	SP	100.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	-	-	-	-
SI	SDS	100.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	100.00%
	Levica	-	-	-	-	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	100.00%
SK	SNS*	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
	SMER-SD*	16.67%	12.50%	16.67%	54.17%	-	-	-	-
	OĽANO	75.00%	12.50%	0.00%	12.50%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	100.00%

Note: * indicates parties represented only by substitutes without recorded activity in PACE

Source: Authors

Table 6: The relationship between predictors and voting behaviour in the EP and PACE

Predictor	Vote	EP	PACE
Government	<i>no</i> <i>abstention</i> <i>DNV</i>	negative effect positive effect negative effect	negative effect positive effect positive effect
Right-wing	<i>no</i> <i>abstention</i> <i>DNV</i>	no effect negative effect negative effect	positive effect positive effect positive effect
Far right	<i>no</i> <i>abstention</i> <i>DNV</i>	positive effect no effect positive effect	positive effect positive effect positive effect

Note: Significant relationships are marked with **bold**.

Source: Authors

not working towards peace in Ukraine (Szabó 2024). Nevertheless, the CoE never became a prime target of Fidesz, and its media attacks remained few and far between.

The second, much more significant practice of disengagement was what might be called tacit obstruction, bordering on exit. Obstruction was evidenced by the refusal of Fidesz members to show up for voting. By (1) refusing to vote 80% of the time, and (2) supporting resolutions only 6% of the time, they clearly signaled that, firstly, the PACE was most of the time not important enough as a forum to take part in its decisions, and, secondly, in the seldom cases when it was, they disagreed with the contents of the tabled (and accepted) motions. Fidesz members did not actively block or hinder decision-making, nor did they try to extort concessions from the CoE. They just tacitly gave up on working in it. By effectively ceasing to operate in the PACE, Fidesz came close to what Pacciardi et al. (2024) call ‘exit’ or ‘termination of active participation’. However, this is not accompanied by calls for the termination of the organisation, nor is Budapest considering formally withdrawing. If the PACE is really this inconsequential, why should it?

In contrast, a very different picture emerges concerning the EP, whose activities consistently had a high domestic salience in the analysed period. In fact, the EP has been a constant target of Fidesz’s attacks since 2010. Setting the tone early in his second term, Orbán said in his 2013 Tusk speech that the institutions of the EU, including the Parliament, were ‘unable to find answers to the historical challenges Europe is facing today’ (Orbán 2013). He also called the extension of EP powers ‘a bad decision’ (Orbán 2016). Most importantly, in July 2022, the Hungarian Parliament, with the support of Fidesz-KDNP, accepted a resolution to replace the directly elected European Parliament with an assembly composed exclusively of national MPs, arguing that ‘European democracy must be led out of the one-way street into which the EP has manoeuvred it’ (Országgyűlés 2022: 4575). These indicate the importance of the EP and point towards a ‘hard exit’

behaviour, with calls for the termination of the EP as we know it, accompanied by proposals for the creation of a new EP, or counter-institutionalisation.

However, as long as these ideas remained no more than a pipe dream, the 13 MEPs of Fidesz remained active in the EP. In the 24 analysed votes, the 13 Fidesz MEPs had the theoretical opportunity to cast their ballot 312 times. They did so 247 times (79%), a striking difference from their passivity in the PACE. What remains the same is the fact that Fidesz MEPs usually stayed in the opposition. In our sample of votes, Fidesz MEPs went against the majority in 193 individual votes, or 62% of the cases. Conversely, individual Fidesz MEPs voted only 46 times with the majority, or 15% of the cases. Fidesz MEPs consistently opposed votes on rule of law issues (especially as far as Poland was concerned) and on migration. They also mostly opposed votes about political or financial support for Ukraine.

The behaviour of Fidesz politicians towards (and in) the EP can be best described as very strong criticism, manifesting all the elements specified by Pacciardi et al (2024). First, they undermine the legitimacy of the institution by discrediting its members. For instance, Foreign Minister Szijjártó said, 'Is this the same body that had several members arrested for corruption?' when commenting on the EP's condemnation of his trip to Belarus (Vaskor 2023). Second, they voiced discontent over the operations and institutional design, best evidenced by the aforementioned 2022 parliamentary resolution. Third, they criticised the normative orientation of the EP. Apart from the dominance of 'nay' votes by Fidesz MEPs, they also made claims that the various decisions of the EP were leading Europe into war (Exterde 2024), towards a catastrophe (Mandiner 2023), and towards the disintegration of society and the destruction of European norms (hirado.hu 2024).

SDS

Like Fidesz, the CoE and PACE were of limited importance to the SDS due to their low visibility in domestic politics. Nevertheless, SDS members have tried to instrumentalise PACE for domestic political purposes and voted against resolutions condemning their partners. After coming under pressure from the CoE and criticising the institution, they refrained from voting, thus rendering the forum irrelevant.

When SDS member Andrej Šircelj voted for Resolution 4850 on the establishment of an EU mechanism for democracy, the rule of law and fundamental rights in 2019, he pointed to the alleged interference of the then Slovenian centre-left government in independent institutions. In 2020, however, he voted against Resolution 15025 on the functioning of democratic institutions in Poland. In 2021, Dunja Mijatović, CoE Commissioner for Human Rights, condemned the Janša government's interference in the media and civil society, whereupon Janša called Mijatović part of a 'fake news network', while Suzana Lep Šimenko, SDS PACE member in the 2020–2022 period, questioned the transparency of the functioning of the European Court of Human Rights and its integrity in a written question in February 2022. Lep Šimenko

also abstained from voting on several resolutions and recommendations across the board (e.g. on LGBTI 15425, on the implementation of judgments of the European Court of Human Rights 15123 and on the challenge to the unratified mandate of the Parliamentary Delegation of the Russian Federation 15216), in contrast to the active participation and mostly positive votes of SDS representatives in the past.

Although SDS MEPs also instrumentalised the EP for domestic political purposes and to defend their political allies, they reacted with increased critical engagement in line with party ideology rather than disengagement after being pressured by the EU. This contrasts with PACE, which can be explained by the more important and visible role of the EU and the European Parliament within it.

For example, SDS MEPs Milan Zver and Romana Tomc referred to alleged interference in the media and the rule of law by centre-left governments in Slovenia in written questions to the Commission. They asked whether the Commission would also take action against Slovenia (26.11.2018 P-005934/2018 r P-001962-19). During the vote on the resolutions on Poland and Hungary in 2020, Tomc said that the way the EU was dealing with rule of law issues was unacceptable, as in her opinion it was clear, especially in the EP, that the procedures were politically motivated (Janša 2020). In January 2024, Zver and Tomc were among the 104 MEPs and the three EPP MEPs who voted against the EP's call to initiate Article 7 proceedings against Hungary.

In October 2021, a delegation of MEPs led by Sophie in 't Veld visited Slovenia in the run-up to the vote on the resolution on Slovenia. In 't Veld criticised the Janša government's interference in the media and independent institutions. The SDS accused the delegation of being biased and politically motivated, with MEP Tomc calling the visit and the resulting resolution 'a brutal attack on the government' and a 'national attempt, which corresponds to the European left-wing politicians in their goal of weakening centre-right governments, from the aspect that it abuses the power of the European Parliament' (Amiel 2021).

The antagonistic relations with the EU institutions and the majorities also led to a more critical attitude towards other legal acts, especially where this coincided with the party's position on migration and the EU in general. In April 2024, Zver and Tomc voted against parts of the Pact on Migration and Asylum relating to mandatory solidarity between member states. In the run-up to the 2024 European elections, they declared that they would not support another term in office for Ursula von der Leyen and called for a new conservative coalition in the EP (Lovec & Kočan 2025).

SMER-SD

Compared to the two previously discussed cases, SMER-SD delegates barely engaged with PACE, which may be at least partially attributable to the fact that the party was mostly represented by substitutes in the analysed time period. Never-

theless, the fact that the CoE is not mentioned in the government programme of any recent SMER-SD-led governments, in contrast with the EU, the OECD, the OSCE, NATO and the UN, indicates general disinterest towards the institution (Vláda SR 2016, 2018, 2023).

In contrast, a more detailed analysis is needed to understand the context of SMER-SD behaviour in the EP. The party list won three seats in the 2019 EP elections. However, Miroslav Čiž died in office in December 2022 and was replaced by Katarína Roth Neveďalová, and Robert Hajšel was an independent who nonetheless sat in the S&D group. Although the overall engagement of SMER-SD MEPs with the EP was low, as evidenced by the significant share of DNV on the rule of law and the Russia-Ukraine War (Tables 3 and 5), this aggregate value obscures individual circumstances which had an oversized impact on party engagement with the EP.

Namely, Miroslav Čiž never voted on the selected resolutions and made only five contributions to plenary debates, none of which relate to the three topics analysed in this paper. His lack of activity was, however, primarily the result of his failing health. He had long suffered from serious health issues and spent most of 2022 in the hospital before his death (Lacková 2022). If we look at the mean vote statistics of the SMER-SD list without him (Table 7), it is clear that SMER-SD-supported politicians were actually quite active on the rule of law and migration votes. They showed up and supported the majority of resolutions on the rule of law and voted with abstentions on the majority of migration-related resolutions.

Table 7: The mean vote of MEPs from the SMER-SD list without Miroslav Čiž

Topic	For	against	abstention	DNV
rule of law	55.00%	15.00%	5.00%	25.00%
Migration	14.81%	29.63%	51.85%	3.70%
Russia-Ukraine War	20.00%	15.00%	20.00%	45.00%

Source: Authors

The revised mean vote values also show that the SMER-SD-supported MEPs leaned towards different voting strategies in the three salient and politicised topics: support for the rule of law, abstention on migration and DNV on the Russia-Ukraine conflict. This trend can be explained by SMER-SD's pragmatic foreign policy orientation, which oscillates between support for and criticism of mainstream European policies based on the political situation at home and in Europe (Mravcová & Havlík 2022). As a member of the mainstream S&D group, SMER-SD generally toed the party line, although some MEPs disagreed with the rule of law proceedings (Topky.sk 2024). MEPs' preference to abstain on migration resolutions also corresponds to the party leadership's position to vote

against resolutions which respect the Slovak red line (no mandatory relocation), as the European dimension of immigration is no longer a salient topic in Slovak politics (cf. Holányi 2025). Active abstention may have allowed MEPs to show their continued engagement with European affairs while safeguarding their domestic anti-immigration image and aligning with the powerful right-wing parties in neighbouring Hungary and Poland (cf. Marušiak 2021). In contrast, the low share of 'no' votes on resolutions related to the Russia-Ukraine War seems to contradict SMER-SD's strong emphasis on the conflict and its deviant stance from the Euro-Atlantic mainstream (Bundzíkóvá & Janšta 2024).

Out of the four disengagement strategies mentioned by Pacciardi et al (2024), the MEPs supported by SMER-SD only manifested weak signs of criticism. For example, MEP Monika Beňová called the years of the 9th parliamentary term 'completely lost for the European Union [because] So many fatal mistakes have been made' (Topky.sk 2024). However, the criticism of MEPs remained focused on the EP's handling of specific issues without general attacks against the institution. For instance, MEP Katarína Roth Nevedálová explicitly argued that the Qatargate corruption scandal 'should be seen as an individual failure, not as a collective guilt' (Zmušková 2023), in stark contrast with Fidesz officials.

Discussion and conclusion

This paper sought to understand how populist politicians engage with IPIs from the perspective of the disengagement hypothesis proposed by Pacciardi et al. (2024). Its empirical findings can be summarised as follows.

First, the characteristics of the IPI matter. Populists were much more active in voting in the EP than in PACE. The EP also featured more prominently in the political rhetoric and strategies of Fidesz, SDS and SMER-SD. Foreign policy documents by SMER-SD did not even mention the Council of Europe or its parliamentary assembly. This indicates that the political salience of the institution greatly influences populists' approach towards it. Given the directly elected nature of the EP, the higher levels of populist engagement seem to correspond with populists' focus on the domestic political arena: Engagement with the EP, even if only for criticism and obstructionism, can be used to win votes. This finding seems to support Wajner's (2025) assumption that the degree of political authority vested in regional institutions influences how populists approach them.

Second, there is no single populist voting trend that applies across the three analysed topics. Populists voted differently across national and thick ideological lines, which supports the earlier findings of the populist foreign policy literature (Destradi & Plagemann 2019; Verbeek & Zaslove 2017).

Third, links to the national government matter. Those populists who were members of parties in government at home were less likely to vote against resolutions in both institutions, which echoes the results of Lipps and Jacob (2024)

on illiberal parties. Links to the home government also increased the likelihood of abstention and had the opposite effect on voting participation: Pro-government MEPs participated more often, whereas PACE delegates participated less often. However, these relationships are only significant for the EP. Nevertheless, this finding suggests that the international system and foreign interlocutors may have a moderating effect on the foreign behaviour of populist parties. However, this link needs to be explored further.

Fourth, being right of centre increases opposition towards mainstream positions in the EP. Being right-wing (including far right) seems to increase the likelihood of abstaining, a reserved way of expressing opposition. However, being far right increases the chances of 'nay' votes or refusal to participate in voting procedures. The case studies also suggest that using the disengagement strategies of criticism and obstruction may be linked to far-right ideology. Fidesz and SDS representatives engaged in intense and systematic criticism and obstructionism of the EP and PACE, accusing these organisations of political bias and double standards, and questioning their integrity. However, this behaviour may have also been motivated by criticism from these institutions against governments supported by these parties. In contrast, representatives of the left-wing SMER-SD voiced only moderate criticism of the EP, which was focused on the institution's performance on policy issues, instead of criticising the general functioning of the body.

What do our findings mean for the disengagement hypothesis? We found evidence for the use of three disengagement strategies in IPIs: criticism, obstructionism and exit. Exit was the most prevalent, albeit in a soft form: Populists simply did not engage with IPIs, instead of declaring their intention to leave. This manifested in the large share of 'DNV' votes across both institutions, which was more prevalent for the politically inconsequential PACE. However, when the populist party was in power at home, its MEPs participated more in the EP's work. Criticism and, to a lesser extent, obstructionism were used by far-right parties but not by the left-wing SMER-SD, which might suggest that these forms of disengagement might be linked to the far-right thick ideology, rather than the thin-centred ideology of populism.

Our results also add to the emerging literature on the political importance on IPIs and the drivers of voting behaviour therein. In addition to previous studies highlighting regime characteristics, the share of the foreign population and the geographical position of electoral sectors (Lipps 2021; Malang 2019) as relevant factors influencing the engagement of parliamentarians, our paper also suggests that populism may decrease the likelihood of active participation in politically non-salient IPIs. However, our results do not indicate that populists represent a systemic threat to the existence and functioning of these fora, contrary to results based on government behaviour (Destradi & Plegemann 2019). After all, political venues where one can perform politics, and visibly play out one's (dis)approval of the majority position, are handy tools for any party.

Connecting these findings to Wajner's (2025) typology, it seems that populists generally follow the a-regionalist approach towards IPIs as the degree of political authority vested in these institutions is not enough to prompt politicians to actively undermine them. Hence, they limit their disengagement to criticism and abstention from the IPI's work, which itself varies with the political salience and power of the IPI. Although the examined far-right parties' use of obstruction might indicate a populist far-right proclivity towards anti-regionalism in IPIs, drawing this conclusion is beyond the empirical scope of this study.

Future research could continue this work in two directions. On the one hand, the geographical, temporal and institutional scope of the quantitative analysis can be extended to cover a broader range of national parties, hard ideologies and IPIs over a longer time scale, which would allow for a more precise understanding of how various contextual characteristics shape voting behaviour. On the other hand, future work may also consider focusing more on the individual and party-level considerations shaping engagement with IPIs, going beyond analysing voting behaviour.



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Data availability statement

The appendices and the input data for the Bayesian multinomial logistic regression analysis is available here: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17432087>.

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