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Populism meets EU Foreign policy: the de-Europeanization of Poland's Foreign policy toward the Israeli-Palestinian conflict

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ABSTRACT

This article bridges between the de-Europeanization framework and works on populism to theorize about de-Europeanization dynamics and their potential drivers. Empirically, the article explores Polish foreign policy under the PiS government for the case of EU-foreign policy cooperation toward the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. As a highly Europeanized foreign policy issue and long-standing EU priority, the Israeli Palestinian conflict constitutes an interesting case for the emerging research agenda on foreign policy de-Europeanization. Whilst Poland's traditional support for the EU's common approach to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been part of its wider Europeanization experience, we argue that under PiS government Poland's foreign policy has changed in important ways, showing signs of de-Europeanization. These changes have been driven by both, ideologically informed preferences of the Law and Justice led government as well as external expectations and pressures.

KEYWORDS

Poland; Middle East Peace Process; de-Europeanisation; populism; Israel

1. Introduction

After joining the EU in 2004, Poland's foreign policy has been characterized as a model case of Europeanization, marked by a considerable degree of adaptation of national structures, policies and processes to the requirements of EU foreign policy cooperation (e.g. Kaminska 2007; Pomorska 2007). Over recent years, however, the rise of populist movements like the right-wing Polish Law and Justice Party (PiS) has been described as a novel challenge for European foreign policy (Balfour et al. 2016). According to the European Union's (EU) High Representative, the 'nationalist and populist comeback' in Europe threatens the EU's very identity as a foreign policy actor (Chaudhury 2020). The fact that populist parties have formed governments in a number of EU member states – including in Poland where the right-wing populist Law and Justice party has been in power since 2015 – raises the question of how populists in government engage with a foreign policy that has become considerably Europeanised?

Addressing this question, this article bridges between the de-Europeanization framework developed in this special issue (Müller, Pomorska, and Tonra 2021) and works on

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populism. In particular, we conceptualize four main dynamics through which populists in government may contribute to foreign policy de-Europeanization, which include 're-nationalization', 'disengagement', 'circumvention' and 'resistance'. Empirically, the article explores Polish foreign policy under the PiS government for the case of EU-foreign policy cooperation toward the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. As a highly Europeanised foreign policy issue and longstanding EU priority, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict constitutes an interesting case for the emerging research agenda on foreign policy de-Europeanization. When Poland joined the EU in 2004 the EU had already developed a joint approach on core issues related to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which is rooted in international law and relevant UN resolutions (Müller 2012). Whilst Poland's support for the EU's common approach to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been part of its wider Europeanization experience, we argue that under the Law and Justice government Polish foreign policy has changed in significant ways, showing important signs of de-Europeanization.

The observed de-Europeanization outcomes relate to organizational structures and processes of the Polish foreign policy system as well as to substantive Polish foreign policy priorities, decisions and initiatives. At the level of organizational foreign policy structures and processes, the Polish foreign policy system has witnessed a significant strengthening of the central government under the PiS, which led to a weakening of the role of the foreign ministry, as well as a major turnover of foreign policy personnel. The appointment of political 'loyalists' to senior posts has not only reduced the number of Europeanised elites in the Polish foreign ministry but also led to a significant loss of diplomatic expertise, including on the Middle East file. Moreover, the PiS government has resulted in important changes at the level of the Polish foreign policy agenda and priorities. Whilst the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has long been considered a common EU objective, the PiS government did not consider it a priority to invest an active EU diplomacy toward the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Accordingly, Polish diplomacy under the PiS government has often taken a rather passive and reactive stance on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. At the same time, the PiS government has been prepared to circumvent the CFSP framework or even to block common EU-decisions if they were considered harmful to Polish interests (Balcer et al. 2016).

As our empirical case study will show, the identified de-Europeanization dynamics have been driven by both, altered foreign policy priorities of the populist Law and Justice led government as well as external expectations and pressures. In particular, its strong emphasis on transatlantic relations made the PiS government susceptible to demands from the US, which under President Trump (2017–21) has departed from key parameters of the international consensus on resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The article proceeds as follows. First, it introduces the analytical framework that conceptualises key de-Europeanization dynamics – which may involve 're-nationalization', 'disengagement', 'circumvention', and 'resistance' – and elaborates on the role of right-wing populist parties as potential drivers of de-Europeanization. The subsequent section examines the extent to which PiS' foreign policy preferences mark a departure from important priorities of Poland's traditional foreign policy approach. We then explore the evolution of Poland's role in EU foreign policy making under the PiS government, which involves important de-Europeanization dynamics. The conclusion discusses our key findings and its implications for future research.

2. Populists in Government: A Driver of de-Europeanization?

Europeanisation research has made valuable contributions to our understanding of the institutional development and pursuit of a common EU foreign policy and its impact on the national foreign policies of EU member states (Tsardanidis and Stavridis 2005; Wong 2005, 2006; Major and Pomorska 2005; Alecu de Flers and Müller 2012; Major 2005). By contrast, only a few studies have considered the possibility that past achievements of Europeanization may be challenged, undermined, or even reversed through processes of de-Europeanization (Müller, Pomorska, and Tonra 2021). Such processes of de-Europeanization may involve ‘the reconstruction of professional roles in predominantly national terms; the repudiation (implicit or explicit) of well-defined and established foundational EU foreign policy norms; and finally, the consequential structural disintegration of collective policy-making institutions’ (Müller, Pomorska, and Tonra 2021).

2.1 Populism: a driver of de-Europeanisation?

The relationship between populists in government and foreign policy is still little understood and emerging scholarship needs to deal with the fact that there is no consensus on what populism means and how it should be defined. Some argue that populism is mainly a political strategy to achieve and maintain power in the domestic political arena (Weyland 2017; Barr 2018). This would mean that foreign policy issues that do not resonate in significant ways with the domestic audience generally tend to be of little concern to populist strategies. However, if populism is more than a strategy to gain and sustain political power but rather reflects a ‘political ideology’ (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017, 5–6) that informs political preferences and behavior, then populists in government may impact on foreign policy Europeanization in more profound ways.

Whilst the foreign policy of EU member states is often understood to be guided by relatively stable diplomatic traditions, identities and notions of national interests, changes in government and party ideology have been identified by previous research as a potential source of foreign policy change (Joly and Dandoy 2018; Hofmann 2019). Considering the role of changes in government and party ideology for foreign policy becomes even more important when examining populists in government. Importantly, a defining feature of populist ideology is its division of society into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, the ‘pure people’ and ‘the corrupt elite’ (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017, 6). The ‘anti-elitism’ of populist parties raises questions about the commitment of populists in government to traditional foreign policy positions and previous accomplishments of Europeanization and their relations with the foreign policy ‘establishment’ in national foreign ministries and EU-institutions. Simultaneously, populists – who claim to represent the general will of the people – are often critical about core elements of constitutionalism and liberal protections for individuals and minorities that impede majorities from working their will (Galston 2018). Domestically, the PiS has not only contested key norms and values of European integration in its political discourse, but it also introduced highly controversial policies that resulted in conflict with EU-institutions. Most notably among them were a series of reforms that, according to the European

Commission, have compromised the independence of the judiciary in Poland (Cuddy 2017).

Particularly right-wing populist parties like the Polish PiS are known for applying an equally critical approach to the governance architecture at the international level (Koch 2020). Right-wing populists tend to maintain a skeptical attitude about multilateralism and core principles of international law, human rights and good governance that constitute key components of the liberal international order that are also at the heart of the EU's identity as an international actor (Manners 2002). The right-wing brand of populism promoted by parties like PiS marries the 'thin-centred' populist ideology with a nativist nationalism (host ideology). In particular, PiS' political discourse takes issue with conceiving the EU's identity predominantly in terms of liberal values whilst placing emphasis on Europe's common Christian heritage (Zgut and Csehi 2019). In this view, the EU elites are subject to a 'left-liberal' bias, based on a commitment to cosmopolitanism, multiculturalism, and governance beyond the nation state. Closely related to this is the critical view that the dominant narrative on European integration tends to emphasize the experiences of the Second World War, which translates into negative attitudes toward nationalism, whilst paying insufficient attention to what has been described as communism's deep sins in CEE-countries (Varga and Buzogány 2020).

Placing a strong emphasis on national sovereignty, the discourse of PiS also displays significant tensions with key procedural aspects of Europeanised governance in the foreign policy domain (Nuttall, Nuttall, and Nuttall 1992; Smith 2004; Alecu de Flers and Müller 2012), such as decentralised governance and the transfer of decision-making power to Brussels-based institutions, policy networks and technical experts. In particular, European integration is portrayed as a project dominated by Brussels' liberal elites and the interests of Western European countries that undermines Poland's capacity to act as a sovereign state and pursue its national interests (Lovec and Fenko 2019). In view of the PiS, EU-level cooperation should depend on the level of shared interests among the member states, whereas EU institutions – and their preferences, norms and values – should be secondary to the aggregated interests of the member states.

2.2. *Conceptualizing de-Europeanization: Renationalization, Disengagement, Circumvention and Resistance*

As shown above, there are apparent tensions between PiS right-wing populist ideology and key practices and norms of foreign policy Europeanization. Yet, foreign policy is subject to different influences and motivations and the question if, and to what extent, right-wing populist ideas that figure prominently in PiS political discourse also function as a driver for de-Europeanization processes needs to be addressed empirically. Building on the theoretical framework developed in this special issue (Müller, Pomorska, and Tonra 2021), we conceptualize four main dynamics through which populists in government may contribute to a de-Europeanization of foreign policy.¹

First, populists in government may pursue a 're-nationalisation' of EU foreign policy. Committed to national sovereignty and centralised government whilst skeptical of multilateral institutions, populists in government can be expected to put national interests above common European considerations. Re-nationalization can manifest itself at the level of the foreign policy agenda and objectives, relating to situations where national interests and priorities take precedent over previously established common European objectives in concrete foreign policy outputs. At the same time, re-

nationalization may involve changes at the level of organizational and administrative structures, routines and processes. To effectively promote national interests, as defined by the populist leadership, populists in power may seek to strengthen their authority and control over foreign policy structures. This may involve efforts to exercise control through the recruitment and management of staff, including through placing political ‘loyalists’ in key positions. Similarly, it may entail the reshuffling of authority and competences between the central government and different national ministries, as well as reforms of the organizational structures of the foreign ministry. It may also involve efforts to re-nationalize decision-making and to curtail the autonomy of Brussels’ based-representatives and experts, e.g. through a tight mandate and instructions and mechanisms of close control.

‘Disengagement’, in turn, relates to the reduction of a member state’s level of active commitment to CFSP cooperation in terms of leadership, diplomatic initiatives and foreign policy resources. Populists in government may opt for disengagement when dealing with CFSP-issues that they no longer consider a national priority. They may dedicate fewer time, staff, and resources to CFSP matters that don’t match their national priorities, reducing the level of active diplomatic participation in the various stages of the policy cycle (i.e. agenda setting, policy formulation, decision-making, and implementation). Hence, disengagement refers to situations where a member state turns into a less engaged actor or even into a passive bystander, refraining from making a substantive contribution of its own to a common EU foreign policy.

By contrast, ‘circumvention’ relates to situations where a member state increasingly relies on alternative frameworks or national action – rather than the CFSP – to pursue its foreign policy preferences (Gross 2009). Lacking a normative commitment to a common EU foreign policy, populists in power are likely to show a greater readiness to pursue national foreign policy objectives outside the CFSP framework and to align with the initiatives of other actors. In the case of Poland, individual member states may rely on mini-lateral groups like the Visegrad group (Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia) or bilateral relationships, such as transatlantic relations with the US. Whilst member states, in principle, are free to pursue policies outside the CFSP-framework, circumvention becomes obstructive when it takes place in an uncoordinated fashion or even competes with existing CFSP-initiatives and policies.

Populists in government may not only seek to disengage from or circumvent the CFSP framework, but they may also actively resist it. ‘Resistance’ is a response to perceived EU-level constraints where a member state questions, disregards, or contests established EU foreign policy institutions, positions and role expectations, including CFSP’s procedural and substantive norms. Populist resistance to EU foreign policy may be an active attempt to use foreign policy issues to construct an antagonistic divide between national interests and values, as an expression of the ‘will of the people’, and the institutions, norms and positions of a Europeanised foreign policy. Resistance may occur at the level of foreign policy-discourse and rhetoric, or through practices relating to foreign policy conduct and behavior through which a member state contests, core CFSP norms and governance practices. Whilst a certain level of such contestation is understood to fall into the realm of ‘normal’ CFSP politics, it is understood as de-Europeanisation once it crosses a certain threshold in terms of ‘scale’ and ‘scope’ (Müller, Pomorska, and Tonra 2021).

3. The Europeanisation of Poland's Foreign Policy and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

Prior to exploring the extent to which Poland's foreign policy under the Law and Justice government has resulted in changes that amount to de-Europeanization, we first need to briefly describe the previous Europeanization experience of Polish foreign policy. When Poland joined the European Union (EU) in 2004, its foreign policy went through a substantive process of Europeanization that involved the adaptation of Polish foreign policy structures, processes and positions to the requirements of EU foreign policy cooperation (e.g. Zuba 2020; Kaminska 2007; Pomorska 2007). New administrative routines, departments and positions were established at the Polish Ministry for Foreign Affairs to deal with the extensive foreign policy agenda, work rhythm and administrative procedures of CFSP. Simultaneously, existing departments in the foreign ministry that worked on geographical and thematic issues overlapping with CFSP-issues increasingly realised the need to include the EU-agenda in their work. Administrative changes also occurred in Poland's Permanent Representation to the EU in Brussels, whose staff tripled in the first three years after Poland's accession to the EU (Pomorska 2007).

The Europeanisation of Polish foreign policy institutions also involved a transformation of the administrative culture of Polish diplomacy, which became deeply involved in the CFSP's multi-level governance system (Kaminska 2007, 2014; Pomorska 2007). Poland's representatives in Brussels were the first to become socialized into the procedural norms and practices of the CFSP's 'culture of cooperation', such as mutual consultation, information sharing, consensus-seeking and the respect of previously agreed EU foreign policy positions. The fact that Poland's representatives in Brussels were more in tune with the procedures, informal culture and negotiation dynamics of CFSP than their colleagues in the foreign ministry in Warsaw facilitated a certain decentralization of foreign policy-making. Among other things, it was informally agreed that Polish representatives in Brussels would not need to realize instructions from the foreign ministry in full, granting them a certain leeway and autonomy when representing Poland's position in the EU (Pomorska 2007).

Besides change at the level of the foreign policy structures and bureaucracy, Poland's foreign policy also had to expand and adapt its foreign policy positions in line with the EU's substantive foreign policy acquis. Poland's foreign policy towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was part of this wider Europeanization of its foreign policy agenda. The resolution of the long-standing Israeli-Palestinian conflict has long been identified as an important priority foreign policy priority of the EU, which has routinely addressed the conflict since the beginning of European foreign policy cooperation in the early 1970s (Müller 2013). When Poland joined the EU, the European positions on key issues related to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict like borders, the status of Jerusalem, refugees and Israeli settlements had already been well-developed (Müller 2012). In particular, the EU's approach supports a two-state solution – with an independent Palestinian state living side-by-side in peace and security with Israel and its neighbors – based on international law, relevant UN resolutions and previous agreements between the parties to the conflict (EEAS 2016). These positions were also supported by Poland and constituted part of the broader international consensus at that time.

Successive Polish governments considered the CFSP as the main framework for addressing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. However, historically the Israeli-Palestinian conflict did not constitute a major concern for Poland, which in the Cold War era had mostly followed the pro-Arab position of the Soviet Union (Jarosław and Szydzisz 2018). In the context of Polish membership in the EU, it then became a Europeanised issue, with Polish diplomacy accepting that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict represented a common EU concern. Within the CFSP framework, Poland developed into an important advocate of Israeli views and was situated in the group of 'pro-Israeli' member states, with Polish diplomacy arguing that Israel should be given special attention and empathy from Europeans. Among foreign policy officials, in turn, Poland's policy approach toward the Israeli-Palestinian is frequently described as a policy of 'equal distance' that should be developed and pursued in line with the EU's preferred solutions in the Middle East.

The efforts on the part of Poland and other EU member states to play a constructive role in CFSP-negotiations was reflected in an active European peace diplomacy, with the EU's Foreign Affairs Council alone issuing 14 conclusions on the Middle East peace process in the period between 2007–15 (European Council 2021). Poland's integration into a common EU approach toward the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was aided by a relatively high degree of transatlantic cooperation. Given its strong 'Atlanticist' foreign policy orientation, US foreign policy in the Middle East has traditionally been an important concern of Polish foreign policymakers (Joanna 2019). And whilst the 2003 intervention in Iraq – in which Poland participated as a member of the US-led coalition – had left the EU-divided and strained transatlantic relations, the EU's foreign policy towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict displayed a relatively high degree of cooperation. The US and the EU both participated in the so-called 'Middle East Quartet' – composed on the UN, the US, the EU and Russia – which had emerged in 2002.

As part of the Middle East Quartet, the EU supported several US-backed initiatives, including the 2003 'Roadmap to peace' plan and Israel's 2005 'disengagement plan' from the Gaza Strip. Similarly, the EU supported the so-called 'Quartet principles' and subsequent boycott of the Hamas-led Palestinian government that emerged from the 2006 elections, the US sponsored Annapolis peace conference of 2007, as well as the US-led peace diplomacy that was conducted in the period from 2013 to 2014 under the administration of US President Barack Obama. Whilst the EU did not approve of all aspects of US-diplomacy, there often was enough agreement on the fundamentals to support the US-lead in conflict mediation, whilst also functioning as the main sponsor of Palestinian institution-building and socio-economic development. This allowed successive Polish governments to reconcile their pro-European and Atlanticist foreign policy orientations, playing a constructive role in EU foreign policy making towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict whilst at the same time maintaining good relations with the US.

4. Polish Foreign Policy and the Law and Justice Government: from Europeanization to de-Europeanization

As the analysis in this section will show, under the PiS Polish foreign policy has experienced important de-Europeanization processes. As part of its broader efforts to reform the civil service, the PiS government introduced substantive organizational and administrative reforms in the Polish foreign policy system that expanded direct governmental

control over foreign policy-making, including through shifts of authority and competences away from the foreign ministry and a large turnover of personnel and the placement of political loyalists in key positions. This has weakened the previous degree of Europeanization of Poland's foreign policy structures and bureaucracy, including those dealing with Middle East policy. Whilst de-Europeanization has been most evident at the level of organizational and administrative change, it also relates to foreign policy processes and substance.

4.1 The Re-nationalisation of Polish Foreign Policy: Putting the National Agenda First

After taking office in 2015 the PiS government has pursued several political reforms that led to a renationalization at the level of structures, processes and the substantive agenda of Polish foreign policy. In terms of foreign policy structures, important organizational reforms were closely related to broader efforts of the PiS government to reform the civil sector. As such, they were closely linked to PiS' political efforts to centralise governmental control, placing foreign policy-making increasingly in the hands of a political leadership that saw little merit in investing in a foreign policy agenda beyond what it considered immediate national interests.

Among the first major pieces of legislation enacted by PiS was a new civil service law that eliminated open competition for senior posts in the civil service and established the requirement that candidates must not have belonged to a political party in the previous five years (Tworzecki and Markowski 2017). In December 2017, amendments to the bill on the foreign service were enacted that specifically addressed the Polish foreign policy system. Among other things, amendments to the foreign service law prohibited people who had cooperated with the communist security services of the People's Republic of Poland (1947–1989) from working in diplomatic services (PAP, 2018). Yet, the process of re-structuring the personnel in the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs went even deeper, as these restrictions were also applied to graduates from Soviet and Russian universities – which have traditionally played an important role in the training of diplomats (Rzeczkowski 2020).

These reforms created the background for a major turnover of personnel in Poland's Foreign Ministry, which benefited political loyalists of the new government and led to a weakening of the Europeanised elite in the Polish foreign policy bureaucracy. From November 2015 till February 2018, 88 out of 100 positions at the level of ambassadors and 34 out of 38 'consul's general' were replaced. Moreover, 21 out of 24 directors of Polish Institutes were replaced. Among the layoffs was also the head of the Africa and Middle East department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, who had served in various capacities related to Middle Eastern affairs. Often, newcomers to the Foreign Ministry were ideologically close to the line of the PiS government or even had previously held positions in the PiS party or the PiS government. Simultaneously, the majority of the newcomers in senior positions lacked an extensive previous diplomatic background and training and had no previous experience concerning the workings of CFSP-institutions (Bielecki 2020).

Organizational reforms, moreover, involved steps to centralise the control of the national government over foreign policy making, further weakening the role of Europeanised elites in the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA). Under the PiS

government, the Chancellery of the Prime Minister and the President and his office increasingly served as the main loci of decision-making. In 2019 the responsibility for European Affairs was moved from the Foreign Ministry to the Prime Minister's Office, which meant that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs no longer had the legal competences nor the necessary expert knowledge to be actively involved in EU affairs, which also limited its capacity to manage important issues in relation to Poland's Permanent Representation in Brussels (Bielecki 2020).

These changes in the allocation of competences contributed to the increasingly top-down nature of the foreign policy-making process, in which the Foreign Ministry and professional diplomats and experts played a more limited role that often focused on policy implementation. As an interviewee has noted: 'when Law and Justice took over the power, in principle, the flow of information from the expert's level up to the politicians did not take place at all or they were completely falsified, in the sense that experts responded to the needs of decision-makers, so they provided politicians with the recommendation they were ready to accept' (Interview 5, 2020). A former Polish ambassador described the role of Poland's diplomats in even more drastic terms, stating that under the PiS government 'experienced diplomats are not only unnecessary but due to their competences and institutional memory, they constitute a deadly threat' (Rzeczkowski 2020).

The centralisation of political power and the narrowing of the Polish foreign policy agenda under the PiS government also impacted on Poland's role in EU foreign policy cooperation toward the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Foreign policy on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was less informed and shaped by the professional foreign policy apparatus in the foreign ministry that is closely linked with the CFSP-system in Brussels, but was increasingly centralised in the hands of a PiS leadership with limited foreign policy ambition, diplomatic experience and expertise. The prime minister's office, which now deals with matters pertaining to CFSP cooperation, does not have specific staff dedicated to the Israeli-Palestinian file. Accordingly, it lacks resources and expertise to pay systematic attention to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which is not considered a Polish foreign policy concern (Interview 4, 2020). Against this backdrop, developments in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict primarily matter to the Polish government when they have implications for other Polish priorities, such as its relations with Israel, its role in the EU, or its (security) relationship with the US (Interview 5, 2020).

4.2 Disengagement: Reducing Polish Inputs in Europe's foreign policy

Limiting its foreign policy ambitions to narrowly defined national interests, the PiS government showed little interest in the EU's common foreign policy toward the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Simultaneously, the Polish foreign ministry – whose role in foreign policy-making had become circumscribed – turned into a less influential and engaged actor in terms of directing Poland's foreign policy on the Israeli-Palestinian issue. Given the increasingly top-down nature of the foreign policy making process under the PiS government, professional diplomats found it ever more difficult to perform their traditional role in informing and shaping foreign policy decisions. This has made Polish diplomacy toward the Israeli-Palestinian conflict more passive and reactive.

Against this backdrop, Polish diplomacy also disengaged from EU-level cooperation on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and Middle Eastern issues more generally. Within the CFSP-

framework, Polish interventions were generally limited to interventions where the government felt that national Polish interests were concerned. Often, this involved situations where the Israeli government, which was considered an important partner for Poland, articulated strong disagreement with particular EU policies and positions or where Poland sought to mitigate tensions between diverging positions between the EU and the US on Middle East peacemaking (see below).

However, the disengagement of Polish diplomacy from CFSP-cooperation on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was not only the result of the low priority it was attributed by the PiS government. Rather, there was also a relatively widespread perception in Polish foreign policy circles that the EU's established foreign policy approach towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was largely ineffective and was no longer consistent with the expectations of the Polish government. For Poland and other CEE countries, the adaptation to the EU's established positions on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict already constituted an 'upper limit', whilst the viewpoints of countries like France, Belgium, Ireland or Sweden were considered as far too radical as to guide a common approach. Accordingly, there was a sense in Polish diplomatic circles that there no longer was a sufficient common basis among the EU member states for further developing the EU's established approach, nor for giving it a new direction.

This contributed to efforts to limit and moderate – rather than to actively promote – EU foreign policy initiatives.

4.3 Circumvention: Investing in Transatlantic Relations and Cooperating in the Visegrad Framework

Under the PiS government, Poland not only became a less engaged actor in EU foreign policy cooperation, but it also became more willing to pursue its foreign policy outside the CFSP framework. Poland's relationship with the US played a central role for Poland's foreign policy, with Poland's diplomacy also providing important support for US positions and initiatives toward the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that were at odds with established EU positions on the conflict. For the most part, Poland's support for US-foreign policy was based on an effort to invest in good bilateral relations – which are considered of key strategic importance for Poland's security – rather than on genuine interest to play an active part in Middle East peacemaking. As noted by a Polish diplomat, 'Poland tries to be careful and consider American's Middle Eastern policy, their views and arguments. It has a lot to do with Poland's security strategy. This mechanism applies to the relations and position towards Israel as well' (interview 2, 2019).

Poland's support for US foreign policy complicated its role in the CFSP, as under the administration of President Trump US foreign policy departed considerably from key parameters of the international consensus on resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Poland responded to competing expectations and pressures from the US and the EU by taking a constructive attitude towards US-initiatives, whilst at the same time stating its support for established EU positions. As noted by an interviewee, 'Poland wants to maintain a balanced position regarding the (...) Middle East Peace Process. However, it is not our aim to question America's policy toward the region' (interview 4, 2019). A prominent example was Poland's response to the US' decision to move the American embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, which led to its relocation in May 2018 (Plett

Usher 2018). The US move was widely understood to violate the international legal consensus on Jerusalem that also informs the EU's common position. In line with the established international consensus, the EU does not recognise Israel's unlawful annexation of East Jerusalem. And it considers Jerusalem as a final status issue to be resolved through negotiation between the parties on the basis of relevant UN resolutions.

Following a pro-US line, Poland was among a group of six EU countries – including also Croatia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Latvia and Romania – that refused to provide collective EU support at the UN General Assembly for an UN-resolution critical of the intended relocation of the US embassy (Rettman 2018). At the same time, the PiS government did not go as far as Hungary and the Czech Republic, where leading politicians publicly contemplated to follow the US by relocating their own embassies to Jerusalem, with Hungary subsequently opening a trade office with official diplomatic status in Jerusalem (Ahren 2019). Poland, in turn, resisted calls by representatives from the US and Israel to relocate its embassy, with Poland's foreign minister Jacek Czaputowicz stating that Poland coordinated its policy on that matter with the EU and that it did not envisage such a move (Glick 2020).

Another important instance where Poland's offered its support for a controversial US foreign policy initiative was the organization of an US-led Middle East conference in Warsaw in February 2019. Entitled 'Ministerial to Promote a Future of Peace and Security in the Middle East' the conference's main focus was meant to be on Iran, on which the US and the EU were strongly divided. However, meeting strong European objectives on a conference that focused on building a broad international coalition against Iran, the agenda was broadened to wider security issues in the Middle East. Several high ranking officials from the EU – such as the EU's High Representative as well as the foreign ministers from Germany and France – still did not attend the conference. Similarly, Palestinian representatives stayed away, expressing concerns that the conference served to normalise relations between Israel and key Arab countries despite Israel's continued occupation of the Palestinian territories (Mikheev 2019). Whilst it was evident that Poland organised the conference without the support of key EU actors, Poland did not go as far as contesting common European positions on key issues like the EU's support for the Iran nuclear deal, which had previously been abandoned by the Trump administration. Rather than taking sides, Poland tried to portray its role as a mediator between the different positions and viewpoints in the EU and the US (Strzałkowski 2018; Polandin 2020).

Poland was also among a small group of EU countries that supported US President Trump's Middle East peace plan of January 2020. The US-initiative marked a considerable break with previous US initiatives, as it departed from the international consensus on key positions pertaining to a two-state settlement and for discarding major principles of international law, including the principle of self-determination and the prohibition against annexation (Oppenheim 2020). This was also highlighted in the reaction of the EU's High Representative Josep Borell, who stated that the plan did not adhere to 'internationally agreed parameters', arguing that a just and lasting peace required direct negotiations between the parties to the conflict and calling on the parties to refrain 'from any unilateral actions contrary to international law' (DW 2020). By contrast, Poland's foreign minister commented the peace efforts of the Trump-administration, describing the plan in his official response as a 'valuable basis for an in-depth discussion' of the

parties to the conflict' (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Republic of Poland Press Office 2020). Papering over evident contradictions between key parameters of the Trump peace plan and established EU foreign policy, the foreign minister's statement simultaneously echoed the EU's position that real peace could only be achieved on the basis of 'voluntary agreement of both parties'. In subsequent statements, Poland's foreign minister, moreover, echoed other EU representatives by stating that a resolution of the conflict should be in line with 'internationally agreed parameters and in respect for international law' (TVN24 2020). These examples show that Poland's circumvention of EU foreign policy-cooperation was only partial, as Poland's diplomatic alignment with US initiatives was often complemented by efforts to uphold established EU foreign policy positions.

Besides providing diplomatic support to major US-initiatives, Poland's circumvention of the EU's common foreign policy also took place in the framework of the so-called Visegrad group. Established in the early 1990s the Visegrad group includes Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia (Eisenchteter 2019). Though it is not a cohesive political block – with the Czech Republic and Slovakia generally displaying more European integration-friendly views than Poland and Hungary – its members have managed to forge a common approach on a number of important issues, including on matters pertaining to the 'migration and refugee crisis'. The Visegrad group not only serves as a framework for cooperation on regional issues and for amplifying its members voice in the EU, it also serves as a vehicle to address foreign policy issues outside the CFSP framework. The relations between the Visegrad group and Israel have emerged as an important foreign policy agenda item of the Visegrad group and both sides are committed to regularly meetings and exchanges – including at the level of foreign ministers (Dyduch, 2018).

Unlike the development of the EU's relations with Israel – which aim to the EU take developments in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process into consideration – cooperation in the Visegrad group does not involve this kind of political baggage. Including some of Israel's strongest supporters in the EU, the Visegrad group provides a framework for focusing on opportunities for developing economic, technological and energy relations in the absence of the political constraints of the EU's common foreign policy. Moreover, both sides agreed in 2017 to strengthen cooperation in regional and international organizations, including at the United Nations (UN) (Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2017). The Visegrad group's growing ties and coordination with Israel evidently involves certain challenges for the EU. Among other things, this was apparent in the refusal of Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic to support a joint EU-line in support of a UN resolution against the US embassy relocation to Jerusalem in 2018 (see below). However, for the most part Poland has not used the Visegrad group as a framework to openly challenge the EU on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Rather, it was seen as a framework to pragmatically promote Polish interests without seeking to openly compete with the EU.

4.4 Resistance

Despite its political discourse that promotes a value-based criticism of the project of European integration, the PiS government did not consider the EU's foreign policy toward the Israeli-Palestinian conflict a matter for high profile populist contestation. For the most part, the PiS government and Polish official foreign policy representatives have not

engaged in efforts to openly contest substantive EU foreign policy norms and established EU-positions on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Rather, statements of Polish foreign policy officials frequently made reference to Poland's commitment to the EU's common positions on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which are based on international law and relevant UN resolutions. Its rhetorical backing of EU positions notwithstanding, Polish diplomacy has shown considerable flexibility in supporting controversial initiatives from the US on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, even if they were considered to undermine or even contradict established EU positions and key principles of international law (see above). Lacking real normative commitment to CFSP-cooperation and considering the EU's foreign policy little effective and a low priority, the PiS government has seen little utility in promoting European positions through concrete contributions and actions.

Within the CFSP framework, Poland has also occasionally played the role of a brakeman of EU initiatives and joint declarations when it faced competing expectations and pressures (see above). In this respect, Poland has been identified as an actor within CFSP-negotiations that does not always live up to the procedural norms that make up the EU's culture of cooperation. As noted by the representative of another EU member state participating in the Mashreg/Maghreb working party of the Council, Polish representatives do not always play according to the rules, blocking common efforts and even going against 'agreed EU-language' on the Israeli-Palestinian peace process (interview 6). However, Poland has certainly not been the only – and also not the most assertive – member state in terms of contesting and resisting procedural EU norms such as 'consensus-seeking', 'information-sharing', and maintaining 'consistency' with agreed foreign policy positions. Poland's scepticism about the EU's declaratory diplomacy towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and its support of Israeli viewpoints in CFSP negotiations is shared by other countries, most notably Hungary, Romania and Croatia. Similarly, Southern member states like Greece and Cyprus have developed close relations with Israel, which actively cooperates with individual EU member states to influence or even undermine a common EU approach toward the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Pardo and Gordon 2018).

Against this backdrop, Polish diplomacy frequently does not need to act too assertively in disrupting diplomatic EU initiatives and statements on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, as other EU member states that are pushing in a similar direction are ready to take the lead. In April 2019, Hungary has even gone as far as single-handedly vetoing a common EU statement at the UN Security Council that expressed concerns on developments in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The Hungarian intervention came at the very last minute and without explanation or prior consultation with the other member states and marked already the fifth time Hungary had blocked a common EU statement on Israel in a period of two years (Rettman 2019). Another prominent example was the EU's failure to coordinate a common approach toward US President Trump's 2020 peace initiative, where several EU countries spoke out against a move by Luxembourg's foreign minister to speak up with a strong, unified voice in defence of key EU positions (Emmott et al. 2020).² Hungary even went as far as blocking any attempt to draw up a joint statement for a meeting of foreign ministers in May 2015.

Certainly, policy making dynamics on the Israeli-Palestinian file in CFSP-institutions have changed, limiting the scope for consensus-seeking and compromise. Whilst the EU has had a long-standing record of speaking with a common voice on the Israeli-

Palestinian conflict – as visible in its routine statements at the level of the Council – its declaratory diplomacy has stagnated over the past years. As an EU diplomat has noted on the difficulties to reach consensus on the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, it has ‘become hell in the EU to try to get a common position on this’ (Emmott et al. 2020). Yet, Polish diplomacy has not made an effort to systematically resist EU culture of cooperation, often leaving it to others to disrupt EU-level diplomacy. Accordingly, resistance to the EU’s culture of cooperation is often tactical and targeted towards specific EU initiatives, rather than categorical and systematic (interview 2, 3,4).

5. Conclusion

Under the PiS government Poland’s foreign policy has witnessed notable signs of de-Europeanization at the level of foreign policy institutions, processes and policy substance. Reforms at the level of foreign policy-making structures and processes have strengthened the direct control of the PiS-leadership and its political loyalists in foreign policy-making, whilst limiting the role of the foreign ministry and the Europeanised foreign policy bureaucracy. This has also involved a process of centralization, which reduced the leeway of diplomats in the foreign ministry and of Brussels-based representatives in shaping Polish positions in CFSP-negotiations, limiting their role to the implementation of foreign policy. With the PiS government attributing a low priority to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Polish diplomacy has become less engaged in the CFSP framework. Moreover, Polish foreign policy has shown a tendency to circumvent the EU foreign policy framework, supporting US initiatives and working through the Visegrad group.

As far as Poland’s role in CFSP institutions has been concerned, the PiS governments emphasis on promoting national preferences – which was often equated with defending Israeli interests in the EU – involved a certain resistance to CFSP culture of cooperation. Rather than constructively engaging in consensus-building at the EU-level, Poland was ready to prevent policies EU it considered harmful to Polish interests. Simultaneously, its lack of ideational commitment to a Europeanised EU foreign policy has made the PiS-government particularly susceptible to external expectation and pressure, particularly from the US. However, whilst Poland has shown a certain readiness to resist procedural norms of Europeanised CFSP governance, the PiS government did not engage in open value-based contestation of substantive EU foreign policy positions on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Though the PiS government does not identify with core norms and principles of the EU’s external foreign policy identity, Polish diplomacy routinely expressed its support for the EU’s established foreign policy acquis on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which makes close references to international law and pertinent UN-resolutions.

This suggests that populist’s in power may not engage in an across the board resistance to EU foreign policy norms and positions, but rather focus their populist discourse and policy on salient issues that are at the core of their political agenda. In fact, the foreign policy of the PiS government towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict – which it considered an issue of minor importance – has displayed a considerable degree of pragmatism. In particular, Polish diplomacy sought to ensure that their policy did not complicate their relations with the EU and with the US, which constitute core political priorities. As it is the case in domestic politics (Peters and Pierre 2019: 1522), the ‘need to govern’ may

encourage political restraint and moderation of populists in power, with foreign policy being subject to multiple considerations, including well established interests and diplomatic relations. Overall, Polish foreign policy under the PiS-government appears to be driven tactical considerations and a narrow view of national interests, rather than by efforts to contest EU foreign policy on the grounds of populist ideology.

Notes

1. Whilst these Europeanization dynamics are distinct analytically, they are not mutually exclusive and may occur in parallel.
2. These countries included Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Austria, Greece, Latvia, Cyprus, and Poland.

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