



CRITICAL REVIEW

**Corina Lacatus, Gustav Meibauer & Georg Löfflmann (eds.),
*Political Communication and Performative Leadership: Populism
in International Politics*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023.
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The study of populism has experienced significant developments over the past two decades, particularly following the emergence of populist leaders in consolidated democracies and their impact on domestic political systems and the liberal international order. Traditionally, the literature of domestic and comparative politics on populism has focused on its political ideologies and values of populist voters (Akkerman et al., 2014), while scholars of political communication have examined the populist styles of interlocution, transgression and performance (Lacatus, 2019). Moreover, the literature on International Relations shows us how populist leaders influence foreign policy (Spandler & Söderbaum, 2023).

The collective work edited by Corina Lacatus (Lecturer in Global Governance at Queen Mary University of London, specializing in political communication and populism), Gustav Meibauer (Assistant Professor of International Relations at Radboud University Nijmegen, with research centered on foreign policy analysis and political communication of leaders), and Georg Löfflmann (Assistant Professor of US Foreign Policy at Queen Mary University of London, focusing on the role of identity and narratives in foreign and security policy) aims to produce a systematic comparative exploration of populist communication and its implications for international politics, integrating comparative politics, political communication and international relations perspectives. It centers “its analysis on the global, transnational and international dimensions of populist politics, while engaging with populism’s various communicative, discursive, and performative aspects and manifestations. The contributions accordingly focus on the use of strategic communication, political rhetoric, identity narratives, and a wide range of other discursive and media performances by contemporary populist leaders, in particular in the context of foreign policy

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and international politics, as well as their reception by international and domestic audiences” (p. 2).

Political Communication and Performative Leadership: Populism in International Politics represents an innovative study focusing specifically on the communicative and performative dimensions of populism in the international context, illustrating “how the antagonistic core logic of populism manifests as a particular leadership style in contemporary international politics, how it informs strategies of voter mobilization and policy legitimation in a global context, and what impact populist rhetoric, performances and styles have on policies and practices in the realms of security, global health, economics and immigration” (pp. 2-3).

At its core, there is the assumption that to understand the significance of populist communication, one must consider the extent to which populism is not merely a performative spectacle to lure in voters and amplify grievances, but also a force to remake policies and effect structural change in the international system. By interrogating the intersection of populist communication, performative leadership and international politics, it argues “that the impact that populist communication has on international politics is evident in two main aspects: (1) in the translation of domestic populist discourses into foreign policies and decision-making processes; and (2) Populist communication and populist performative leadership also affect key dynamics of international politics, from resistance against institutionalized multilateralism to opposition to free trade” (pp. 8-9).

The volume presents seventeen chapters organized into two main parts, offering a comprehensive perspective on how populist communication and performative leadership shape contemporary international politics. Part I exposes the interrelation of populist communication, performative leadership and the foreign policies of populist leaders, parties and movements across the Global North and South; and Part II reveals the populist potential to engender wider geopolitical and geoeconomic transformations in the international system, from recalibrating relationships between major powers to challenging longstanding alliances and partnerships.

Both parts are preceded by a substantial theoretical introduction (Chapter 1) where the editors establish the conceptual foundations of the book, defining populism as a set of interconnected discourses constructed around a central antagonism between the idealized will of a “true people” and a corrupt “elite” (p. 2). This approach privileges the communicative and performative dimensions of populism, understanding it as a political practice that creates meaning through language, deliberation, and discursive performance. The editors establish that “populist communication concerns the language, deliberation and discursive performance of populist ideas, as well as how these discourses are translated between different interlocutors” (p. 6), defining communication as the “rocket fuel” (Sorensen, 2021) of populist politics (p. 6).



As said earlier, Part I examines populist communication and foreign policy in a global context. Linda Bos, Frederic Hopp, and Penelope Sheets (Chapter 2) explore the extent to which foreign policy issues are moralized by populist and non-populist parties. Using the Moral Foundations Dictionary (MFD) to gauge the use of (different) moral words in party manifesto statements on different policy issues (n = 215,625 statements), the chapter shows that, overall, political parties in Austria, Germany, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom moralize statements on foreign policy more than statements on other policy domains, with the exception of policies on ‘the fabric of society’ (p. 43).

Corina Lacatus (Chapter 3) geographically expands the research focus by examining populist communication in Uganda’s authoritarian context. The study of Yoweri Museveni and Bobi Wine in the 2021 elections reveals how both leaders strategically use discourse about foreign aid for distinct electoral objectives, suggesting that in competitive African authoritarian contexts, “thick” ideology has limited impact on populist electoral behavior.

David Cadier (Chapter 4) analyzes the case of Poland under the Law and Justice party (PiS), demonstrating how populist practices affect foreign policy through three mechanisms: contestation and redefinition of established representations (particularly regarding the EU), appropriation and rollback (in policies toward the US, Russia, and Ukraine), and transgression of diplomatic norms through marginalization of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Federico Petris (Chapter 5) offers an analysis of the Italian Northern League, arguing that, to understand populist foreign policy, one needs to focus not on its substantive content, but rather on its single oppositional discursive logic.

Consuelo Thiers and Leslie Wehner (Chapter 6) apply operational code analysis to examine the belief systems of four Latin American populist leaders (Hugo Chávez, Evo Morales, Nayib Bukele, and Jair Bolsonaro). The results show that left-wing populist leaders share more pessimistic perspectives on the international environment, while right-wing leaders demonstrate greater predictability in international relations. Indeed, it concludes that “first, the belief systems of populist leaders differ substantially from other Latin American leaders, which can help explain their reluctance and critical approach towards the UN. Second, we found more similarities between left-wing leaders Chávez and Morales than right-wing leaders Bukele and Bolsonaro, with left-leaning leaders showing negative assessments of the international environment and using less cooperative tactics and strategies, while right-leaning leaders express high predictability of the future and prefer expressions of threat. Third, there is no clear indication that ideological differences can fully explain the belief systems of populist leaders, as we found both similarities and differences across left-wing and right-wing leaders” (p. 121).

The following chapters (7-10) examine populist responses to specific crises. Fabrizio Coticchia and Bertjan Verbeek (Chapter 7) analyze how Italian and Dutch populists reacted to the Russian-Ukrainian war, demonstrating variations in the extent of foreign policy change



based on loss aversion theory. Ole Frahm and Dirk Lehmkuhl (Chapter 8) study the Turkish case to explore whether populists possess “thick” ideological beliefs, concluding that in times of crisis core beliefs emerge through exclusion. Markus Ketola and Pontus Odmalm (Chapter 9) examine Finnish and Swedish populist parties, showing how they face difficulties in capitalizing on real crises after years of rhetoric about theoretical “crisis states”. Skonieczny and Boggio (Chapter 10) introduce the concept of “chauvinistic populism” (p. 179), showing how leaders like Trump, Modi, and Bolsonaro responded to Covid-19 with a particularly divisive, exclusive and ‘bad-mannered’ transgressive populism (p. 179).

Part II focuses on the structural impact of global populism on international politics. Théo Aiolfi (Chapter 11) develops a critical approach to populism as political style, analyzing identity performances on the global stage. He claims that “populism shapes the political communication of national representatives adopting the style in a rich array of ways. Populism may have a powerful impact on their communication, offering a set of intuitive tools to appear more authentic, distinguish oneself from the others, or even offer a more appealing way to present one’s agenda” (p. 220).

Gustav Meibauer (Chapter 12) introduces the concept of “populist bullshit” (p. 226), examining deceptive communication as a central element of populist performance. “Bullshit” is described as a communication characterized by a loose connection to truth in a post-truth era. Political bullshitters “say what they believe is necessary to persuade, manipulate or impress their audiences, evade accountability, and obscure their ulterior motives and/or lack of factual knowledge” (p. 227). The chapter zooms in on four aspects of populist bullshit: (1) populist bullshit as partisan transgression, (2) populist bullshit as a marker of authenticity, (3) populist bullshit as entertainment, (4) populist bullshit as an empty signifier (p. 229).

Subsequent chapters (13-17) explore transnational and diplomatic dimensions. Chetan Rana (Chapter 13) analyzes Modi’s discursive strategy with the Indian diaspora in the US, demonstrating how populists expand the conception of “people” to include foreign audiences. Eduardo Tamaki and Gustavo Venturelli (Chapter 14) examine Bolsonaro’s international discourses, revealing attempts to create transnational narratives of a common “populist identity”.

Sandra Destradi et al. (Chapter 15) empirically analyze whether populist governments adopt more confrontational rhetorical discourse in diplomatic relations, confirming this hypothesis while showing temporal variations. Emmanuelle Blanc (Chapter 16) examines the impact of populist communication on transatlantic diplomacy, demonstrating the resilience of diplomatic practices in the face of populist challenges. Finally, Alexandra Homolar and Georg Löfflmann (Chapter 17) analyze populist narratives of humiliation and resistance mobilization, demonstrating how these emotions can legitimize political violence.



The main original perspective of *Political Communication and Performative Leadership: Populism in International Politics* lies in the centrality attributed to communication and performance. As the editors argue, “populist communication simultaneously creates a space for representing this ‘silent majority’ and actively contributes to the production of its identity” (p. 6). This perspective transcends approaches focused exclusively on ideological content, demonstrating that the performative elements of communication are to be taken not as mere epiphenomena of political activity but as the very means of doing politics and acting politically.

Furthermore, the book significantly expands the geographical scope of investigation on populism, including cases from the Global South. Lacatus observes that “despite being a fast-growing field of academic inquiry, the nature and manifestations of populism in different national contexts on the African continent are understudied” (p. 49). The Ugandan study reveals that “strategic electoral communication is largely focused on positioning itself in relation to the West and signaling a genuine commitment to a strong linkage and true future democratization” (pp. 61-62). The Latin American research by Thiers and Wehner demonstrates that “populist leaders tend to promote expressions of non-cooperation and the use of threats as a means of persuasion in international fora” (p. 11), while Tamaki and Venturelli show how Bolsonaro sought “advancing a common international narrative of a singular transnational ‘people’ with a shared identity” (p. 15).

The volume also reveals important transnational dimensions of populism. As the editors underscore, populism is a transnational phenomenon not only because it occurs in different places worldwide, but more specifically because it includes specific transnational practices (p. 15). Rana demonstrates how Modi “strategically expands the conception of ‘the people’ to include foreign audiences of voters and supporters” (p. 15), while studies on cooperation between European populists reveal networks of mutual support.

Perhaps, the strongest point of *Political Communication and Performative Leadership: Populism in International Politics* lies in its global comparative scope revealing the complex ways that domestic and international politics intertwine, along with the connections between communication, performance, and policy, and the interplay of national, international, and cross-border events. Additionally, by bridging disciplinary divides, the book might lead us to rethink how we define populism — especially its communication strategies and leadership styles across the world.

On the other hand, the reader is faced with a limited longitudinal analysis. The volume tends to emphasize synchronic analysis of communication performance without sufficiently developing diachronic frameworks examining how populist communication evolves over time, particularly regarding learning effects, institutional adaptation, and changing international contexts. Besides, although several chapters allude to this, overall, it seems that there is still room to further theorize how populist communication functions



differently in authoritarian versus democratic contexts. Whereas the more or less authoritarian character of populist governments affects their international stances, the volume could develop more intricate analytical frameworks distinguishing regime-type effects on communication strategies.

Political Communication and Performative Leadership makes substantial contributions to understanding populism's international dimensions by systematically connecting political communication theoretical and empirical analysis with foreign policy scrutiny. Its emphasis on performative authenticity, global comparative scope, and communication-centered methodology addresses critical gaps in scientific literature. It firmly establishes the importance of the communicative and performative dimension, demonstrating that "the things populists say, and how they say them, matter" (p. 18). By offering a hitherto overlooked and detailed perspective on the global interlinkages of populist political communication, leadership styles, and political practices, this volume represents a fundamental contribution to the study of populism in international politics. It will certainly appeal to scholars interested in the intersection between populism, political communication and international relations. In an era of growing global populist influence, this work provides essential conceptual and empirical tools for analyzing these crucial developments in world politics.