

# The international cooperation of the populist radical right: building counter-hegemony in international relations

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# The international cooperation of the populist radical right: building counter-hegemony in international relations

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## Abstract

This article analyses the international cooperation of the radical right and the role of populism in forging cross-border ties between different political projects. Drawing on the Laclauian-Mouffian poststructuralist discourse theory, it conceptualises this cross-border collaboration as an attempt to build an international counter-hegemonic project and sheds light on its discursive formation and content. Through the discourse analysis of primary textual data drawn from Europe and the United States, it examines how the discourses of the populist radical right construct collective meanings and identities that enable these actors to cooperate with each other and pursue a common political cause. The article demonstrates that this cross-border collaboration has been made possible and promoted by shared – populist, nationalist and reactionary – political logics of articulation that interpellate and construct subjects as members of an endangered and decaying ethnocultural nation who can only restore their identity through the reversal of political, economic and cultural globalisation and the re-assertation of the ‘native people’ against ‘globalists’, ‘foreigners’, ‘immigrants’ and ‘minorities’. While the transatlantic counter-hegemonic coalition-building has ultimately remained limited, Europe’s radical right has successfully broadened its international cooperation and forged a joint counter-hegemonic project that promotes the cultural-racist and supremacist notion of an ‘ethnopluralist Europe of nations’.

## Keywords

Europe, hegemony, populism, poststructuralist discourse theory, radical right, United States

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## Introduction

After the end of the cold war, there was a sense that liberalism had triumphed over competing ideologies and the diffusion of liberal democracy and market economy would pave the way for a global liberal order.<sup>1</sup> Today, there appears to be not much left of this post-cold war liberal euphoria. In 2016, the Brexit vote and the election of Donald Trump sent shockwaves through the liberal world, since ‘the two states that had done the most to construct the liberal order – the United Kingdom and the United States – seemed to turn their backs on it’.<sup>2</sup> With his claim that the people in the US and elsewhere want ‘to liberate themselves from global government and global trade deals and global immigration deals that have destroyed their sovereignty’,<sup>3</sup> Trump stroke a note that resonated with and empowered other radical, insurgent parties and movements in Europe and elsewhere. Many scholars have identified a ‘populist surge’<sup>4</sup> and see the ‘populist mobilisation of anti-elitism and anti-globalism’ as driving force behind this challenge to the liberal global order.<sup>5</sup>

Interestingly, despite their chauvinistic our-country-first nationalism, we can observe intensified cross-border networking and cooperation between these political actors. For example, Brexiteer Nigel Farage gave speeches at Trump rallies, while Trump’s former adviser Steve Bannon toured Europe and sought to unite European parties such as Alternative for Germany (AfD), Lega Nord (LN), National Rally (NR) and United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) in a joint ‘populist nationalist movement’.<sup>6</sup> Likewise, these and other like-minded parties organised several joint events in recent years and formed with the Identity & Democracy (ID) group a big, joint platform for the European elections in 2019. For some scholars these and other activities are evidence for ‘populist transnational performances’<sup>7</sup> or even a ‘populist international’.<sup>8</sup> Given their seemingly anti-internationalist outlook, this inter- and transnational engagement is indeed puzzling and raises numerous questions: how can staunch nationalists cooperate with each other? What is the purpose of their cooperation? What role does populism actually play in it? This question arises not the least, because populism has become buzzword that is often conflated with other phenomena such as nationalism or the far right or used as a general descriptor for certain political actors,<sup>9</sup> whereby it is simply assumed that populism is the driving force behind these cross-border activities.

Drawing on poststructuralist discourse theory (PDT) initially devised by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe,<sup>10</sup> this article analyses the international cooperation of the radical right and the role of populism in forging cross-border ties between different political projects. It understands this cross-border collaboration as an attempt to build an international counter-hegemonic project and sheds light on its discursive formation and content: how does the populist radical right (PRR) discursively construct collective meanings and identities that enable these political actors to define and pursue a common political cause in world politics? How does the PRR aim to achieve discursive hegemony, and what is its international vision? To address these questions, we necessarily need to go beyond populism due to its conceptual thinness and foreground the politics with which populism is combined. For this reason, this article uses the terminology of the PRR coined by Cas Mudde to emphasise that the politicians and parties discussed here are not simply or even primarily ‘populist’, but a particular manifestation of a much older and broader far-right tradition<sup>11</sup>; however, as discussed below, it departs from

Mudde's understanding of populism and radical right as ideologies and instead follows a discourse-theoretical approach.

The article aims to make the following contributions to the existing literature: First, it critiques the widespread tendency in International Relations (IR) scholarship, including studies mobilising the Laclauian approach, to treat populism as a phenomenon as such and to analyse 'populist' foreign policy,<sup>12</sup> narratives,<sup>13</sup> discourses and identities.<sup>14</sup> It argues that such an approach runs the risk of conflating populism with other political phenomena such as the radical right and providing unintentional legitimacy to specific political projects as representing the supposedly frustrated democratic demands and grievances of the 'common' people.

Second, following – what the present study regards as – a more consistent reading of the Laclauian conception of populism as political logic,<sup>15</sup> it argues that populism has no essence or substance and can only generate effects on foreign policy or identity formation as part of an articulatory process with non-populist discourses.<sup>16</sup> While populism has no ideological content, it can shape the way in which a political project is structured and appeals to its audiences. With the PRR, the article analyses this articulatory process by unpacking some of the key political logics – populism, nationalism and reactionism – through which PRR discourses construct meanings and identities and interpellate and mobilise the subjects they claim to represent.

Third, it contributes to the scholarship on the inter- and transnationalisation of the radical right<sup>17</sup> and populism<sup>18</sup> by drawing on the PDT concept of discursive hegemony to develop an analytical framework for the study of international counter-hegemonic projects. The framework provides analytical tools for capturing how collective meanings and identities can be constructed and cross-border relations of equivalence between different political projects can be forged. It regards populism not as the cause or goal of this cross-border coalition-building but aims to understand how it can serve as one of the means through which these ties and a common political cause can be constituted.

Fourth, it makes an original empirical contribution by analysing the inter- and transnational cooperation between the PRR in the US and Europe. For this purpose, it carries out a discourse analysis of independently collected textual data. The analysis shows that the PRR's transatlantic coalition-building has ultimately remained limited, while shedding light on the more successful formation of the ID bloc in Europe and the nature of its counter-hegemonic project.

The article proceeds as follows: The first section reviews existent scholarship that theoretically and empirically overlaps with this article's research objectives and themes. The second section draws on PDT to conceptualise the PRR as a discursive project and international counter-hegemonic projects. The third section outlines the method and analysed data. The fourth section discusses the discursive coalition-building of the PRR in the US and Europe and the form and content of its counter-hegemonic project.

## **Populism, radical right and the international**

The inter- and transnational dimension of populism and the radical right is recognised in the literature. While there is a rapidly growing IR literature on the role of populism in foreign policy and global politics and the comparative politics literature on transnational

populism, the literature on the inter-/transnationalisation of the contemporary radical right is comparatively small. What is notable is that there are relatively few attempts to bring these literatures together and to study how the radical right employs populism to further its political projects across borders. This can arguably be attributed to the fact that, although IR scholars have drawn on different theoretical approaches and conceptualised populism as thin ideology, strategy or discourse, most studies have in common that they tend to treat populism as a political phenomenon as such and thus use populism as a master concept by exploring ‘how populist governments mold their foreign policies’,<sup>19</sup> the ‘peculiarities of populist foreign policy’<sup>20</sup> or ‘populist forms of identity construction’.<sup>21</sup> In this review section, the article problematises this approach and shows that this is not only a problem of studies that aim to discern the impact of the ‘thin ideology’ of populism on foreign policy,<sup>22</sup> but also studies that focus – like the present article – on the theoretical concepts of discourse and identity and aim to study populism beyond the state level. Then, it considers the literature on the inter- and transnational dimension of the radical right and discuss how it can complement the literature on inter- and transnational populism, but also benefit from a greater engagement with populism scholarship.

While large parts of IR scholarship have relied on the Muddean, ideational approach and studied the effects of populist ideas and attitudes on foreign policy,<sup>23</sup> other studies focussed on the discursive, rhetorical and affective dimension of populism and its role in identity construction. Prime among them are those studies that mobilised the Laclauian, discursive approach. Existing studies have demonstrated the utility of the Laclauian approach for disentangling the role of populism and nationalism in foreign policy discourses and analysing how populist articulations affect foreign policy.<sup>24</sup> Yet, in their efforts to capture populism’s distinctive features in foreign policy and international relations, these studies tend to treat populism as a political phenomenon as such rather than as an element of different discursive projects and thereby conflate the latter with populism. For example, Chryssogelos understands ‘populism as a discourse of international relations that arises as response to state transformation’ and argues that populism ‘is less about policy content and more about how international change engenders tensions in the relationship between official power and political community’. However, Chryssogelos – like Jenne’s study on the ‘populist’ framing of foreign policy – de facto analyses populism as an ideology by making a priori claims about the content of populism based on anecdotal evidence rather than a discourse analysis: populism is said to oppose ‘the universality of the international norms’ that justify ‘the denationalization of policymaking’ to which ‘these populists juxtapose the moral claim to political representation of territorially rooted political communities’.<sup>25</sup>

A similar overreliance on the concept of populism can be found in two otherwise insightful studies on Trump’s security narratives and identity constructions. Homolar and Scholz show how populism and ontological security are interlinked by developing the notion of ‘populist crisis narratives’ characterised by ‘anti-establishment’ sentiments, ‘glorifying the nation’s past’ and agitation against ‘foreigners’.<sup>26</sup> Löfflmann’s concept of ‘populist security imaginary’ aims to capture how the ‘populist construction of identity, security, and threat’ and appeals to the ‘nostalgic reimagination of the United States and the restoration of past national greatness’ generated an affective resonance in Trump’s audience and provided ‘the legitimisation for America First measures from immigration restrictions to trade protectionism’.<sup>27</sup>

While both studies capture important elements of Trump's security narratives, their framing of these practices under the label of populism reveals a common problem of IR scholarship: scholars categorise particular political actors such as Trump as 'populist' and then imply that almost everything that these actors say and do is in one way or the other related to populism. Instead of understanding populism as an element or theme of particular types of politics and systematically considering – for example, in the case of Trump – the radical right politics that informed his project, populism becomes the master concept and is conflated with other political phenomena such as chauvinistic nationalism, xenophobia, racism and anti-globalism. When the concept of populism is used in such a broad way that it cannot be distinguished from other phenomena, as Stengel rightly warned, it has little analytical value.<sup>28</sup> Worse perhaps, as Brown and Mondon have shown, such an approach has contributed to the 'mainstreaming of the far right' by discussing, for example, racism and xenophobia under the label of populism and thereby contributing to the legitimisation of far-right positions.<sup>29</sup> When scholars, for example, speak of the 'internalisation of enmity in *populist* rhetoric from undocumented immigrants to Black Lives Matter activists'<sup>30</sup> or call the condensation of immigrants into 'foreigners [. . .] to be feared a key marker of *populist* rhetoric',<sup>31</sup> they not only conflate populism with a racist and xenophobic nationalism, but also unintentionally provide legitimacy to such positions as representing the frustrated democratic demands and grievances of the 'common' people.

This overreliance on the concept of populism can also be found in IR studies that do not study populism at state level. For example, Holliday has shown how the 'populist discourse of Islamic Republic of Iran elites' constructs a subaltern identity of 'the people' that can transcend borders and include other victims of 'Western imperialism'.<sup>32</sup> Hisarlıoğlu et al. have explored how 'populist leaders' can 'create the "pure people" transnationally' by considering the appeals of political leaders such as Erdogan to 'impoverished Muslims' abroad a form of 'transnational populism'.<sup>33</sup> Söderbaum et al. identify 'populist framings of regional cooperation' characterised by 'anti-liberalism', 'multiple and threatened identity' and 'popular sovereignty'.<sup>34</sup> While these studies make the important argument that populism does not prevent the construction of a transnational people or regional cooperation, their attempt to study populism in isolation results in its conflation with other phenomena such as (religious) nationalism, anti-imperialism or authoritarianism and renders the role of populism unclear.

Similar issues can also be found in Wajner's otherwise intriguing study on 'transnational legitimation' strategies of 'populist leaders'.<sup>35</sup> By asking '[w]hat are populists looking for "abroad"', the study suggests that whenever so-called populists interact with each other or appeal to audiences abroad this is evidence for 'populist transnationalism'.<sup>36</sup> Hence, instead of analysing to what extent populism informs these transnational interactions, it takes it as given that populism is the driving force. However, the provided empirical examples follow the left/right rather than people/elite axis, thus putting into question the significance of populism. By characterising politicians such as Orbán, Modi or Le Pen simply as 'populists', the study itself contributes to their transnational legitimation and helps them in framing their authoritarian and nativist policies as expression of a 'struggle between "the people" and "the elites"'.<sup>37</sup> Nevertheless, what we can take from this study is the importance of transnational legitimation for political projects, provided that we decentre the role of populism in this process.

In the comparative politics literature, De Cleen et al. have provided a more precise conception of transnational populism understood as the discursive construction of a transnational ‘people’ against an inter-/transnational ‘elite’, using the leftist Democracy in Europe Movement 2025 as case study.<sup>38</sup> While their pioneering work will form the basis of the theoretical framework developed in the next section, the authors merely acknowledge other forms of cross-border populism such as the PRR’s international cooperation, but do not explicate how such phenomena can be analysed. McDonnell and Werner have analysed past forms of PRR group-building and division in the European parliament, but explain this cooperation based on the rational-choice arguments of vote- and office-seeking and shared policy preferences rather than analysing how the discursive construction of collective meanings and identities makes the pursuit of a common political cause possible in the first place.<sup>39</sup>

In contrast to the populism literature, radical right scholarship has paid relatively little attention to the inter- and transnational dimension of contemporary radical right politics. However, there are a few studies that have explored the transnational networking of radical right actors in Europe as well as the opportunity structures such as globalisation and the European integration process for establishing cross-national networks.<sup>40</sup> This literature provides a very important corrective to the populism literature insofar as it explains this inter-/transnational interaction completely without reference to populism. However, this also means that these studies have not considered to what extent populism can play a role in the radical right’s inter- and transnationalisation. In addition, this literature has placed emphasis on mapping transnational networking and the diffusion of common themes on social media,<sup>41</sup> rather than analysing how radical right projects construct collective meanings and identities beyond borders and their cooperation in the real world. These limitations also partially apply to the otherwise insightful and relevant IR studies on the intellectual history of the New Right and its thinking about world politics.<sup>42</sup> Though these studies rightly argue against ‘the temptation to dismiss right-wing ideas as “merely” populist and by implication as lacking in ideological and theoretical foundations’,<sup>43</sup> they nevertheless refer to the New Right as ‘nationalist populist movements’,<sup>44</sup> but do not discuss the role of populism and how it might be used to further the New Right’s project.

Summing up, this literature review has shown (1) the inherent analytical and political problems caused by the overreliance on the concept of populism, (2) the importance of considering how populism can serve as a means to further cross-border cooperation and constitute a common political project and (3) the need for more research that analyses how populist and radical right politics are related. These insights guide the theoretical framework discussed in the next section.

## **A discourse-theoretical approach to the PRR and international counter-hegemony**

This article conceptualises the PRR as a discursive project and foregrounds the political logics through which it is articulated. Laclau has made the important argument that ‘a movement is not populist because in its ideology it presents actual contents identifiable as populist, but because it shows a particular logic of articulation of those contents



– whatever those contents are'.<sup>45</sup> This notion of logics of articulation moves away from the programmatic contents of particular political discourses to the way in which these discourses formulate collective political demands and interpellate, and thereby construct and mobilise, the political subjects in whose name they claim to speak.<sup>46</sup>

The logic of articulation lies at the heart of PDT. Laclau and Mouffe define a discourse as a 'structured totality' resulting from 'articulatory practices' that establish 'a relation among elements such as that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice'.<sup>47</sup> Articulation refers to the practice of connecting different discursive elements (i.e. words, concepts, material objects and actions) in a specific way so as to change their meanings. Through the repetition or re-production of such articulatory practices a more or less stable meaning structure – or discourse – is constructed. Hence, subjects, objects and practices such as 'the people', 'sovereignty' or 'foreign policy' are characterised by radical contingency and only become intelligible by being articulated in a discourse that confers meaning by relating different elements – and these meanings can change depending on the specific relational arrangement in which they are placed. Accordingly, PDT's basic ontological assumption is that political projects such as populism or nationalism do not represent pre-existing socio-political categories such as 'the people' or 'the nation' but are actively involved in the discursive construction of the very categories they claim to represent.<sup>48</sup> Political logics aim to capture how discourses construct these categories by drawing distinct political boundaries between Self and Other.<sup>49</sup>

The PRR is a political project that articulates populist and radical right discourses. A populist discourse articulates political demands and identities by coalescing a series of frustrated social demands around the signifier of 'the people' that is pitted against 'the elite' accused of frustrating 'the will of the people'. By conjuring a 'down/up antagonism' between 'the people' and 'the elite', it constructs and claims to represent 'the people' against an unresponsive 'power elite' and renders a series of different societal demands equivalent insofar as they share a common 'enemy' that frustrates their respective demands.<sup>50</sup> Importantly, such a populist discourse does not exist in the 'real world', but is a purely ontological concept that can capture elements of particular discursive projects. This is because populism itself cannot constitute the core categories outlined above: It cannot constitute who 'the people' are, why there is a 'people/elite antagonism', how this 'antagonism' can be solved or what 'frustrated demands' enter into the chain of equivalence. In short, populism itself tells us nothing about the nature, content and goals of a particular political project.

Populism is, therefore, always articulated together with other discourses and can constitute a dimension of a particular type of politics such as the radical right. This conception of populism departs from other IR studies that have mobilised the Laclauian approach and conceptualised populism as way of articulating or framing foreign policy<sup>51</sup> in that it does not understand populism as a political phenomenon as such but as a way of articulating non-populist politics and potential effects on identity or foreign policy as a result of this articulatory practice. Put differently, populism can only generate discernible effects as part of its articulation with other discourses as a result of which the populist form of a discourse acquires a more substantive content.<sup>52</sup> In this view, it is populism's missing essence that leads to the concept-stretching discussed in the previous section: As scholars search for distinctive manifestations of populism, they end up conflating



populism with other political phenomena under the label of populism, because populism lacks the essence they are looking for.

This article focusses on the articulation of populist and radical right discourses. Departing from the Muddean, ideational approach,<sup>53</sup> it does not understand the radical right as an ideology but as a discursive project underpinned by different discourses through which political demands can be formulated and political subjects can be constructed and mobilised. Likewise, it does not understand populism as an ideology that simply adds certain beliefs or attitudes to radical right politics, but as a political logic of articulating populist and radical right politics so as to produce new meanings and identities. The radical right is typically understood as a form of politics characterised by nativism (as a specific type of an exclusionary, ethnocultural nationalism), reactionism, authoritarianism, Euroscepticism and Islamophobia.<sup>54</sup>

To illustrate how populist and radical right discourses can be articulated together, the article focusses on two discursive elements of radical right politics: nativist nationalism and reactionism, and now translates these paradigms into a discourse-theoretical framework by capturing the political logics that structure these discourses rather than their programmatic substance. The main purpose of this exercise is not to capture the essence of radical right politics, but to identify (1) the presence (or absence) of these discourses in the textual material, (2) how they construct meanings and identities and (3) how they can be distinguished from and articulated with populism in a discursive project.

Nationalism is 'a discourse structured around the nodal point nation, envisaged as a limited and sovereign community that exists through time and is tied to a certain space, and that is constructed through an in/out (member/non-member) opposition between the nation and its outgroups'.<sup>55</sup> Thus, a nationalist discourse articulates demands on behalf of the members of the national in-group against those that are not considered part of the national community. In contrast to studies that follow a substance-based ideological definition of nationalism and seek to identify the main themes and goals of the radical right's nationalism, a discourse-theoretical approach analyses nationalist discourses based on how they structure the relationship between national in-group and out-groups and thus how *difference* is constituted. For example, a nationalist discourse such as nativist nationalism employs a racialised and xenophobic mode of Othering<sup>56</sup> and constructs national out-groups ('foreigners', 'minorities', 'immigrants' etc.) as existential threats, excludes them based on essentialised and thus insurmountable differences and classifies them as inferior.

Reactionism is a discourse that articulates demands – along a temporal axis – as restoration, envisioned as a process of returning to a past, but now lost, socio-political order, in opposition to present and future transformation processes that are argued to constitute a dislocatory threat and massive decline to the (imagined) order of the past.<sup>57</sup> Hence, reactionary politics interpellates subjects as threatened, disenfranchised and deprived by a present socio-political order and promises that the restoration of a past order will make them whole and secure again by restoring their 'rightful' identity. Both the notion of the current socio-political order and the idealised order of the past are discursive constructs, and this juxtaposition presents the interpellated subjects with a stark choice: either 'you' identify with the reactionary project and restore 'your' identity or 'you' will lose it for good. Importantly, from PDT's perspective, the desire for this state of ontological

wholeness and security sparked by reactionary politics or other discourses ultimately always remains unfulfilled and this structural incompleteness of 'our' identities and social orders is an important driving force of politics: different discourses promise to fill this 'lack' by animating affective investment in a particular political project that would supposedly make 'us' whole (again).<sup>58</sup>

For example, by articulating populism with nativist nationalism and reactionism, a discourse formulates – and thus frames, communicates and practices – radical right politics also along the lines of an antagonism between 'the people' and 'the elite' and vice versa. Thereby, the populist core categories obtain meaning in that the 'native people' are pitted against the 'elites as anti-national traitors' as well as sedimented radical right demands and identities acquire new meanings. By employing the populist logic, the radical right can present its xenophobia, anti-feminism or anti-globalism as the frustrated will of 'the common people', whereby a seemingly democratic and anti-establishment meaning is attached to its demands and identities. Hence, the interpellated subject is not simply constituted as a member of a racist, xenophobic and patriarchal national community who feels threatened by progressive social changes and wants to restore a past order of inequality, but as the 'rightful' demos whose demands and identity are negated and betrayed by an unresponsive establishment.

Against this backdrop, we can understand the populist logic as a means in – what Laclau and Mouffe call – the struggle for discursive hegemony through which a particular construction of meanings and identity becomes the 'normal' or 'commonsensical' perspective.<sup>59</sup> To understand this process, the works by Brown, Mondon and Winter on mainstreaming and Wajner's work on transnational legitimation can provide additional insights. Mainstreaming can be defined as 'the process by which parties/actors, discourses and/or attitudes move from marginal positions on the political spectrum or public sphere to more central ones, shifting what is deemed to be acceptable or legitimate in political, media and public circles and contexts'.<sup>60</sup> The populist logic can be employed in this process by the radical right to re-articulate its positions as an anti-establishment and democratic project that enjoys greater appeal and legitimacy. Following Wajner, we can define legitimacy as 'a structural, relational property that arises from intersubjective beliefs about the external acceptance of an actor and their actions'.<sup>61</sup> Legitimacy-seeking aims to enhance the acceptance of a political project domestically and potentially transnationally by articulating it in a particular way and associating it with other projects abroad.

When the struggle for discursive hegemony goes beyond the state level, it can be part of an effort to build an inter-/transnational counter-hegemonic project. At the most general level, counter-hegemony involves the contestation and re-articulation of sedimented meanings and identities.<sup>62</sup> More specifically, a counter-hegemonic project contests an existent social order by (1) making it the negative projection screen for a range of perceived crises, grievances and conflicts, (2) forging a chain of equivalence between different demands (e.g. employment and sovereignty) that subverts differences qua reference to a common negation, threat or enemy (e.g. neoliberal capitalism) and (3) produces a collective identity around a particular symbol, leader or project (e.g. Brexit, Chávez or non-alignment) that claims to represent the chain as a whole and animates the affective investment in it insofar as it promises to make 'our' identity and social order whole (again).

Populism can constitute an element of counter-hegemonic projects and contribute to the formation of political projects beyond state borders. However, populism is neither the cause nor does it determine the content of this political project but can serve as one possible means through which collective meanings and identities across borders can be constructed and a common political cause can be pursued. This cross-border populism can take two forms: While international populism is about ‘the *inter*-national ties between nationally organized populisms’ whereby different nationally defined peoples are pitted against ‘common international, transnational, or foreign elites (and to similar national elites),’<sup>63</sup> transnational populism refers to a type of populism, in which “‘the people” that populists appeal to and claim to speak for must go beyond the borders of the nation-state’.<sup>64</sup>

Based on these preliminary elaborations, this article conceptualises cross-border counter-hegemony as a political project that, at the very least, aims to group together different nationally organised discourses by pitting them against the same common negation, threat or enemy and thereby making these different discourses equivalent. This, in turn, presupposes that these discourses construct relatable identities of the Self (e.g. the ethnocultural nation) around similar symbols, demands or projects (e.g. ‘taking back control’). Transnational counter-hegemony, by contrast, goes beyond the construction of the same Other (e.g. US imperialism) and additionally constructs a single transnational identity of the Self (e.g. Ummah). Populism can feature in both forms by articulating demands and identities as a struggle between ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’ that goes beyond national borders, but populism only obtains a transnational dimension when a discursive project constructs a single transnational identity of ‘the people’ against a trans-/international ‘elite’ that is accused of frustrating its demands.

The article’s following section translates this framework into a methodological approach and outlines the data that is analysed to study the PRR’s international collaboration in Europe and the US.

## Method and data

To analyse the international collaboration of the radical right in Europe and US and the role of populism in forging a common counter-hegemonic project, this article carried out a discourse analysis. The basic premise of a poststructuralist discourse-analytical approach is that social actors, practices and institutions such as the state, foreign policy or sovereignty can be analysed as if reading a text by studying how linguistic and non-linguistic practices establish relations between different signifiers/elements and thereby create a field of intelligibility that makes subjects, objects and actions possible in the first place.<sup>65</sup> Hence, the purpose of the following analysis is to examine how the relations between signifiers are constructed and thus how subjects, objects and practices acquire their meaning in the language used by the PRR. The discourse analysis was guided by the following steps and questions:

- (1) *Identification and assessment of the discursive construction of Self and Other:* To what extent are the analysed discourses organised around similar nodal points, or

core signifiers, and employ compatible logics of articulating and thus making these elements (e.g. nation, elites) meaningful?

- (2) *International and transnational relations of equivalence*: to what extent are there active attempts by PRR actors to articulate their political projects as equivalent by using the same signifiers, demands or slogans (e.g. ‘globalists’ or ‘country first’), by endorsing the other political projects and through joint meetings, programmatic statements or other forms of political organisation? Do the analysed discourses merely establish international relations of equivalence between different nationally organised political projects by pitting them against the same common negation, threat or enemy, or do they attempt to create a single chain of equivalence articulated around a single transnational identity of the Self?
- (3) *Content*: to what extent have the attempts of forging cross-border ties between discursive projects resulted in the articulation of joint demands and a joint project? If so, what are those demands and what is this project?

The textual corpus covers the following material:

- (1) self-generated transcripts of all publicly available speeches and statements made at joint events of PRR actors in Europe and the US. These events include:
  - the ‘European Visions – Visions for Europe’ conference organised by the AfD in collaboration with FPÖ and the European Conservatives and Reformists group in Düsseldorf on 12 February 2016;
  - the ‘Freedom for Europe’ conference organised by the Europe of Nations and Freedom group in collaboration with the AfD in Koblenz on 21 January 2017;
  - the ‘For a Europe of Common Sense’ conference organised by the LN with AfD, Finns Party and Danish People’s Party in Milano on 8 April 2019;
  - speeches by European PRR politicians at Trump rallies and the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC);
  - Steve Bannon’s public statements and media interviews in Europe;
- (2) Campaign videos, tweets and statements published on the website of the ID group;
- (3) European PRR parties: party and election manifestos and speeches by leading politicians of these parties, including AfD, FPÖ, NR, PVV and UKIP;
- (4) Trump: As there are no election or party manifestos in the case of Trump, the analysis relied on Trump’s speeches as well as media interviews and tweets.

These materials cover the period from January 2015 to December 2021. The main criterion for the selection of the material listed in (3) and (4) was that it referred to ‘foreign policy’ or related terms such as ‘world politics’ and/or covered themes and issues through which – following a poststructuralist understanding of foreign policy and international relations<sup>66</sup> – political boundaries are drawn between the ‘foreign’ and the ‘domestic’ and the ‘national’ and the ‘international’, including relations with other states, external threats or immigration. The collection of textual data was stopped once no new themes and issues could be identified in the material.

## **The cross-border ties of the PRR: counter-hegemony in the making?**

Based on this methodological approach, the article's analysis of the PRR's international cooperation first determines to what extent the discourses are organised around compatible modes of constructing Self and Other on the basis of which inter-/transnational relations of equivalence between different discursive projects can be forged. To account for this process, it maps and discusses the discursive strategies and joint events of PRR actors to link their projects together. The analysis shows that efforts of unifying the PRR in a proper transatlantic counter-hegemonic bloc have ultimately not succeeded, while the European PRR parties have, with the ID group, forged a relatively big counter-hegemonic bloc in the European Union (EU). The second part of this section discusses the content of this counter-hegemonic project and thus what kind of common political cause this bloc aims to pursue.

### *Constructing Self and Other: the shared articulation of populist, nationalist and reactionary logics*

The analysis of the individual PRR discourses in the US and Europe reveals that all discourses are structured around the nodal points of the nation/people on the one side, and convoluted elites and foreign Others on the other side. Articulating populism with a nativist nationalism, the discourses construct a populist antagonism between the people as down-group and the elites as up-group, but define this antagonism primarily in nationalist terms and attach a strongly nativist meaning to these signifiers: 'the elites' are branded as 'anti-national' or 'globalist' traitors who represent 'foreign' interests (e.g. migrants, supranational organisations or multinational corporations) rather than the 'real' nationals.<sup>67</sup> Likewise, the signifier of 'the people' acquires an exclusionary nationalist character by employing a racialised, xenophobic and chauvinistic mode of Othering through which non-natives, minorities and foreign countries are turned into enemies that threaten the identity and security of the nation.<sup>68</sup>

By pitting 'nationalists' against 'globalists'<sup>69</sup> and conjuring 'a struggle for the survival of our nation',<sup>70</sup> the discourses, moreover, employ a reactionary logic in that subjects are interpellated as members of an endangered and decaying ethnocultural nation who can restore their identity through the reversal of political, economic and cultural globalisation and the re-assertation of the 'native people' against 'globalists', 'foreigners', 'immigrants' and 'minorities'. Thus, the different discourses animate affective investment in their projects by promising that the restoration of a past order through the reversal of – what PRR actors regard as the current hegemonic order characterised by – globalisation, multiculturalism and liberal multilateralism will lead to a whole and secure identity. This promise of a phantasmatic state of ontological wholeness and security finds expression in the calls 'to take our country back',<sup>71</sup> to put 'the "Great" back into Great Britain',<sup>72</sup> or that the 'Netherlands will once again become a sovereign country'.<sup>73</sup>

With globalism, the PRR discourses mobilise an entrenched far-right conspiracy theory that narrates globalisation and related phenomena such as deindustrialisation, migration, multiculturalism or global governance as a hideous plot by a small group of

'globalists'.<sup>74</sup> This conspiracy theory can be traced back to extreme right (Neo-)Nazi movements and parties<sup>75</sup> and, unsurprisingly, 'globalists' typically serves as code for the antisemitic notion of the wandering, cosmopolitan and powerful Jew as string-puller.<sup>76</sup> By embracing this conspiracy theory and articulating 'globalism' through the populist logic as a political struggle between 'the people' and 'the globalist elites', the PRR attaches a seemingly democratic meaning to it and has successfully mainstreamed this ultra-nationalist, racist and antisemitic notion of a world divided into ethnoculturally and racially pure nations threatened by Jews, immigrants and other so-called anti-national traitors. The media and academia have contributed to this mainstreaming by discussing the radical right's 'anti-globalism' simply under the label of populism<sup>77</sup> and thereby providing unintentional legitimacy to it as the alleged expression of the 'common' peoples' grievances and desire for popular sovereignty. While the PRR's open and frequent references to democracy – 'we will have a government of, by and for the people'<sup>78</sup> – distinguishes it from other far-right actors, it puts democracy in service of its xenophobic, racist and reactionary project by conjuring an 'antagonism' between 'globalism and universalism' on the one side and 'democracy as national institution' on the other<sup>79</sup> and thereby defending the exclusionary nation as the only legitimate form of political community.

With the discursive construction of racialised minorities, immigrants and foreigners as well as globalist elites as antagonistic Others, the PRR discourses constitute meanings and identities in opposition to shared Others and they indeed use these 'enemies' to articulate their political projects as equivalent struggles. In contrast to the Trumpian discourse that locates the 'globalists' primarily in the US establishment,<sup>80</sup> the European PRR discourses construct the EU as an 'agent of globalism'<sup>81</sup> and 'stooge' and 'instrument of an aloof elite, who undermines the sovereignty of the member states'.<sup>82</sup> The European integration process and the supranational EU institutions and policies enable the PRR discourses to interpellate different national peoples as joint victims of the same supranational – illegitimately powerful and anti-national – elites: 'In the minds of the Eurocrats, the European project is [. . .] only a step towards total globalism through the abolition of borders and protection, first within the European Union and then outside', as NR puts it. The party articulates a populist people/elite antagonism at the EU level, when it states that 'the European Union is so opaque, authoritarian and out of touch from the realities and aspirations of the people, because of its institutional organisation, which excludes the people from the decision-making process [. . .]'; yet, instead of constructing a disenfranchised European demos as collective political subject, it constructs this antagonism in nationalistic and reactionary terms insofar as it interpellates 'the nations of Europe' as victims of the 'Eurocrats' who are accused of promoting 'mass migration', 'Islamism', 'multiculturalism' and 'free trade agreements' that 'threaten the identity, security and prosperity of our nations', and demands the restoration of a 'Europe of nations'.<sup>83</sup>

This discursive coalition-building assumed a transatlantic dimension in 2016. In the US, Trump frequently voiced his support for Brexit – 'Many people are equating BREXIT, and what is going on in Great Britain, with what is happening in the U.S. People want their country back!'<sup>84</sup> – in Tweets and rally speeches, and sought to establish ties with leading Brexiters. Having met Trump and his adviser Steve Bannon at the Republican convention in July 2016, then-UKIP leader Farage was invited by Trump to



speak at one of his campaign rallies, where Trump introduced him to the crowd as ‘Mr Brexit’ and Farage highlighted the ‘parallels’ between the Brexit and the Trump movement and said that ‘anything is possible if enough decent people are prepared to stand up against the establishment’.<sup>85</sup> By articulating the Trump movement and Brexit as equivalent struggles, they not only endowed their domestic political projects with legitimacy but presented them as part of a bigger, anti-globalist project of peoples who want to ‘take back control of their country’.<sup>86</sup> Farage was the first European politician who met Trump after his election victory in 2016 and has, since then, frequently embraced Trump’s positions on Twitter and given speeches at CPAC. At CPAC in 2017, Farage called Brexit and the election of Trump ‘the beginning of a great, global revolution’: ‘2016 was the year the nation-state democracy made a comeback against the globalists [. . .]’.<sup>87</sup>

Such joint events of PRR parties have also increased in Europe in recent years; and, like Farage, many European PRR politicians celebrated Trump’s election and presented their own political struggles as part of a global uprising by adopting Trump’s slogans such as ‘America First’<sup>88</sup> and ‘make our country great again’<sup>89</sup> and connecting with Trump and other radical right politicians on Twitter.<sup>90</sup> These cross-border interactions serve not only the purpose of transnational learning and legitimation for their domestic projects, but also to forge and promote a common international counter-hegemonic project. At a big international gathering hosted by the AfD in January 2017, including Marine Le Pen, Geert Wilders, Matteo Salvini and representatives from UKIP, FPÖ and Flemish Interest, the assembled PRR actors did only pledge to ‘seek the international cooperation with partners to fight for an alternative vision of Europe’,<sup>91</sup> but also sought to establish a transatlantic chain of equivalence by juxtaposing their respective projects and demands to common ‘enemies’. Praising Trump for unleashing a ‘wind of freedom [that] is finally blowing around the world, gripping and encouraging citizens and thus uniting them’, LN leader Salvini stated, for example, in his speech:

Good luck and good job, Mr Trump! He sparks a yearning in all those people who have been humiliated by a ruinous model that imposes globalisation without rules [. . .] and ignites hope that the downfall spiral created by authoritarian EU elites, can be stopped. [. . .] As Trump aptly put it, we bring back our jobs! Our borders, our wealth, our future, our dreams. A different Europe is possible.<sup>92</sup>

Similarly, FPÖ politician Harald Vilimsky proclaimed that ‘Donald Trump and we stand for the same things: [. . .] We are the apologists of a new age, which erupts against this old system of a corrupt establishment that serves the financial world and multinational corporations instead of the people’.<sup>93</sup>

By conjuring a people/elite antagonism, Vilimsky, Salvini and Farage all employ a populist logic to establish equivalential ties with the Trump movement. However, Trump’s populism only matters for the European PRR insofar as it is a means through which their shared nationalistic, xenophobic and White supremacist positions can be articulated as a seemingly democratic struggle of ‘the peoples’ against ‘the establishment’. Accordingly, Trump signals for the AfD, for example, ‘the will to self-assertion of the White and Christian, European-occidental America’ against the multicultural idea of the US as ‘melting pot’.<sup>94</sup> Similarly, Le Pen sees Trump as an embodiment of ‘the new



national/globalist divide': 'All over the world, people aspire national protection and the defence of their identity, as do the world's largest nations, from India to China, from Russia to the United States, and smaller ones such as Austria and Hungary'.<sup>95</sup> This statement, which must be seen in the context of the struggle for discursive hegemony, shows that the PRR is not simply 'projecting the [populist] categories of "people" and "elites" transnationally' to gain legitimacy,<sup>96</sup> rather it seeks to mainstream its political project by representing its non-populist core as being in keeping with the rise of chauvinistic nationalist and authoritarian regimes across the globe. At a joint conference in Italy in April 2019, which brought – with LN, AfD, Danish People's Party and Finns Party – parties together that had so far been split into four different groupings in the European parliament, the participants underscored this by pledging to form a new 'European alliance' of 'right-wing conservative, patriotic forces'<sup>97</sup> and thus forging a common cause around the left/right rather than populist people/elite axis.

In fact, the discursive construction of a transnational struggle between 'people' and 'elite' would disrupt the radical right's discursive construction of the exclusionary nation as natural order.<sup>98</sup> That is why the European PRR even at joint events underscores that it seeks an 'international alliance' to create 'a Europe of the fatherlands'<sup>99</sup> rather than interpellating the people as a transnational, pan-European demos that is disenfranchised by the elites: 'There is and will be no European sovereignty', NR highlights, 'because sovereignty belongs to the people and there is no European people. This sovereignty is exercised exclusively within the framework of nation-states [. . .]'.<sup>100</sup>

However, although PRR discourses in Europe do not employ the populist logic to construct a transnational identity of 'the people', they all construct a shared transnational identity of the 'Christian-European Occident'<sup>101</sup> and 'civilisation',<sup>102</sup> which can go beyond the European continent and include European settler colonies such as the US. This shared civilisational identity is constituted by employing a racialised mode of Othering that demarcates the Occident from a 'dangerous' and 'inferior' civilisational outside and conjures a 'clash of civilisations'<sup>103</sup> sparked by 'mass migration' and 'Islamisation'.<sup>104</sup> This racist civilisational discourse qualifies the radical right's nativism in that the parties do not oppose migration per se, but the migration of Muslims and Africans in particular who are singled out as 'civilisational enemies'.<sup>105</sup> This representation of Muslims and Islam can also be found in Trump's discourse who called in a speech in Poland on 'the West' to 'stand united against these shared enemies [. . .] to preserve our civilisation in the face of those who would subvert and destroy it'.<sup>106</sup> However, this interpellation of 'the West' as collective subject has been a very marginal theme in the Trumpian discourse not the least because of his regular verbal attacks against the European allies,<sup>107</sup> while the European PRR parties, despite their endorsement of Trump, distance themselves from the 'submissive' transatlantic partnership<sup>108</sup> and the multicultural notion of a United States of Europe.<sup>109</sup>

This might also help to explain why the attempt to unite the PRR in a proper transatlantic counter-hegemonic bloc has ultimately not been successful. Trump's former adviser Steve Bannon tried to forge such a transatlantic alliance by founding *The Movement* in January 2017 envisioned as a potential platform for the 2019 election of the European parliament<sup>110</sup> and nodal point that 'help[s] knit together this populist nationalist movement throughout the world'.<sup>111</sup> In Europe, Bannon met with representatives of

several PRR parties such as AfD, UKIP and LN<sup>112</sup> and gave a speech at NR's party conference in March 2018.<sup>113</sup> Though Bannon's initiative met initially with interest, he ultimately did not manage to convince any party – apart from the small and today dissolved Belgium People's Party – of formally associating itself with *The Movement*.<sup>114</sup>

While the PRR's transatlantic coalition-building has remained limited and not resulted in defining and pursuing a joint counter-hegemonic cause, the international collaboration of European PRR parties has been more successful and led to the formation of the ID group that managed to unite parties from 10 member states and create the biggest ever PRR group in the European parliament. For the European elections in May 2019, the group held joint rallies in different European cities and created joint election campaign videos and social media channels to spread its message: 'You can change Europe's destiny and say «no» to this technocratic EU that despises peoples: on May 26th, vote for a Europe of sovereign nations!'<sup>115</sup> The group's name captures very well how the European PRR has constructed a counter-hegemonic bloc by articulating shared populist, nationalist and reactionary logics to interpellate different national peoples as joint victim of the 'undemocratic' EU and its 'anti-national' policies and frame the promised 'restoration' of racial and xenophobic identities as part of a legitimate democratic project on behalf of the supposedly disenfranchised native, majoritarian peoples in the member states.

### *'Ethnopluralism': the international vision of the ID group*

So far, the article has focussed on how PRR discourses interpellate and construct the subjects they claim to represent as well as the attempts to forge inter- and transnational relations of equivalence between their projects. This section outlines what kind of international vision informs the ID's political project. Instead of discussing policy preferences, it focusses on the main contours of its international vision that is characterised by an 'ethnopluralist' conception of international politics. The focus on the ID group is not to suggest that the PRR in the US does not share this vision; however, the PRR's transatlantic collaboration has ultimately remained limited to bilateral interactions and not resulted in joint gatherings and proclamations through which a common counter-hegemonic cause can be constituted and analytically discerned.

The ID's international vision is well-captured in a video that the group posted on its social media channels after the 2019 European election: 'The French who voted for Rassemblement National voted because they want to remain French in France. Italians, because they want to remain Italians in Italy [. . .] – what 'bind[s] us above all [. . .] is defending our identity' as nations and as a 'Christian' Europe.'<sup>116</sup> Accordingly, the group defines the defence of 'identity', 'sovereignty' and 'borders' as its overarching political goals on its website.<sup>117</sup>

However, ID is not simply demanding the return of decision-making powers from the EU to sovereign nation-states and the protection of national identities, but the 'restoration' and defence of closed ethnoculturally and racially homogenous nations against multiculturalism, immigration and other 'foreign' influences. A common thread in the discourse of ID and its members is the fierce opposition to multiculturalism: 'multicultural societies are the most violent, the most criminal, the most divided and hostile communities'.<sup>118</sup> For the ID members, multiculturalism threatens peace, security and the

very survival of the native peoples by risking, in the worst case, a 'civil war' and 'the subjugation' of the native peoples under the 'alien Other'.<sup>119</sup> Therefore, ID postulates: 'our peoples are different but our interests and concerns are the same! We must pass on what is dear to us because we are the last line of defense! [. . .] We do not want to be subjected to multiculturalism that causes parallel societies and Islamisation!'<sup>120</sup>

With this strict opposition to multiculturalism and propagation of the ethnoculturally homogenous nation, the ID group draws on the well-established notion of ethnopluralism in far-right discourses.<sup>121</sup> The idea of ethnopluralism can be traced back to the self-identified New Right – a loose transnational network of radical right intellectuals and think tanks who draw inspiration from radical conservative thinkers in the Weimar Republic as well as the thought of Antonio Gramsci<sup>122</sup> – and has been promoted from the 1970s onward. Ethnopluralism highlights the importance of cultural differences and negates 'the possibility of ethnically diverse communities living peacefully side by side in the same society'.<sup>123</sup> In contrast to the far-right's classical biological racism, ethnopluralism claims to treat other ethnicities and cultures not as inferior, but merely as incompatible and therefore demands the separation of humans along ethnocultural lines.<sup>124</sup>

The concept of ethnopluralism has been widely discussed in the far-right literature. However, its international dimension has received little scholarly attention. The main exception is de Orellana and Michelsen's insightful study on 'reactionary internationalism' defined as the New Right's 'reactionary challenge to liberal belief in human universality' by advocating the restoration and defence of 'a birth-culture identity' and 'the nation as the dominant actor in international relations'.<sup>125</sup> However, with the notion of 'birth-culture identity', the authors adopt the language of the New Right that uses culture to justify the enforced segregation of peoples and thereby glosses over the 'racist' underpinning of the ethnopluralist project<sup>126</sup> that would amount to 'a global apartheid'.<sup>127</sup> This euphemising language is part and parcel of the New Right's struggle for discursive hegemony – and adopted by the ID group.

By pitting its 'ethnopluralism' against 'globalism', the ID group can articulate its nationalistic, xenophobic, racist and reactionary positions against multiculturalism, immigration, the EU and globalisation as a struggle for 'our vision of a world where diversity is preserved as part of the heritage of humanity'<sup>128</sup> and thereby position itself as a force that supposedly defends pluralism and diversity against the 'totalitarian [. . .] globalist project'<sup>129</sup> of the 'one world'.<sup>130</sup> In international relations, the ID's ethnopluralism opposes any 'globalist, centralised and centralising project'<sup>131</sup> and constructs '[u]niversalism [. . .] as a threat',<sup>132</sup> thus negating the existence of universal institutions and norms such as 'human rightism'<sup>133</sup> by making 'the preservation of the [particular] identities of the peoples and nations'<sup>134</sup> through their strict 'demarcation [. . .] the highest goal of world politics'.<sup>135</sup> This international vision does not rule out that 'sovereign nations [. . .] cooperate with each other' to pursue this goal or other common interests.<sup>136</sup> For the ID group, the basis of its common counter-hegemonic project is to work together to create a racist and xenophobic 'fortress Europe'<sup>137</sup> to protect 'our borders' and 'defend our identity against the flood of migration'.<sup>138</sup> Unlike the notion of ethnopluralism suggests, ID does not treat other cultures merely as different but constructs them – in a racist and supremacist fashion – as 'dangerous' and 'primitive' Others in opposition to Europe

as the alleged ‘bulwark of civilisation’<sup>139</sup>: ‘This is our civilisation! European nations must unite in the face of Islamic barbarism to win this war!’<sup>140</sup>

However, given its chauvinistic our-country-‘first’ nationalism,<sup>141</sup> ID naturally struggles to define a joint agenda that goes beyond the opposition to the supranational EU and the creation of a ‘fortress Europe’. While ID claims that ‘the idea of internationalisation and globalisation’ is the root cause of contemporary problems, threats and conflicts<sup>142</sup> and postulates that ‘[t]he nations basically share the same interests and everyone knows that a patriotic policy does not isolate a country but, on the contrary, leads to greater solidarity with other nations’,<sup>143</sup> the discourses of the group’s members disrupt this notion of world politics insofar as they also interpellate subjects as members of a national community that is threatened by ‘fellow’ European Others such as Eastern European immigrants<sup>144</sup> or Germany as the EU’s supposed prime beneficiary.<sup>145</sup> Hence, the radical right’s antagonistic and hierarchical positioning of the nativist nation against other nation-states and non-native Others clearly impedes their international cooperation.

## Conclusion

This article analysed the radical right’s international cooperation and the role of populism in forging cross-border ties between different national discursive projects. It conceptualised this cross-border cooperation as an effort to build an international counter-hegemonic project that contests and aims to replace the dominant meaning-systems through which we currently make sense of the world and constitute and practise our identities. It explored how political actors, generally known for their chauvinistic nationalism and anti-internationalism, can discursively construct collective meanings and identities and thereby define and pursue a common political cause in world politics.

The article understood the PRR as a discursive project and analysed the articulatory practices that make this project possible by unpacking some of the key political logics – populism, nationalism and reactionism – through which PRR actors discursively construct meanings and identities and interpellate and mobilise the subjects they claim to represent. The populist logic enables the radical right to articulate its demands as the frustrated will of the ‘native people’ against unresponsive ‘anti-national’ elites, whereby it tries to attach an anti-establishment and democratic meaning to its political project that enjoys greater appeal and legitimacy.

Drawing on the PDT concept of discursive hegemony, the article then developed an analytical framework for the study of international counter-hegemonic projects that focusses on how collective meanings and identities can be discursively constructed across borders and considers populism as a potential means through which the construction of cross-border relations of equivalence between different political projects can be promoted. Through the analysis of PRR discourses in Europe and the US, the article has shown that there has indeed been increased cross-border cooperation between PRR actors, including joint events, gatherings and coalition-building, made possible by shared – populist, nationalist and reactionary – political logics of articulation that interpellate and construct subjects as members of an endangered and decaying ethnocultural nation who can only restore their identity through the reversal of political, economic and cultural globalisation and the re-assertation of the ‘native people’ against ‘globalists’,

‘foreigners’, ‘immigrants’ and ‘minorities’. To forge cross-border ties, PRR actors have projected this discursive mode of relating Self and Other onto the international and sought to articulate their different national projects as equivalent and part of a joint struggle.

Populism helped the PRR to construct cross-border relations of equivalence qua reference to a shared ‘globalist elite Other’ that can be interweaved with and modify the radical right’s strict nationalist inside/outside antagonism, which often prevents their international cooperation. However, the populist people/elite antagonism only mattered to the extent that it acquired a shared meaning in PRR discourses through its articulation with an exclusionary, cultural-racist and xenophobic nationalism and reactionism. It is this compatible articulatory practice that prompts the PRR to establish international ties to promote its political project domestically and internationally. In short, populism is neither the cause nor a sufficient basis for international collaboration, as it lacks the political substance for defining and pursuing a common political project.

In fact, the empirical analysis has shown that the shared antagonism between ‘the peoples’ and ‘globalist elites’ was ultimately insufficient for forging a transatlantic counter-hegemonic project and overridden by the radical right’s antagonistic and hierarchical construction of national Self and Other. While the international cooperation between European PRR parties has been more successful and resulted in the biggest ever PRR group in the European parliament, populism has ultimately taken the backburner insofar as the transnational pitting of ‘the people’ against ‘the elite’ runs counter to the nationalistic core of the PRR’s project. Rather, PRR parties mobilised a racist civilisational discourse to construct a shared European identity as superior, Christian and White ethno-cultural space that is being threatened and conquered by ‘civilisational enemies’. The counter-hegemonic project of an ‘ethnopluralist Europe of Nations’ is in itself neither novel nor populist but draws on a well-established concept in far-right discourses. However, the populist articulation of its demands by the radical right parties themselves but also by parts of academia and the media, which discussed their chauvinistic nationalism, authoritarianism, xenophobia etc. simply under the label of populism, has helped the radical right in the struggle for discursive hegemony.

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### **Notes**

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