POPULIST DIPLOMACY: NAVIGATING IDEOLOGY AND MEDIATION

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Vienna, 23 May 2025

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ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates the impact of populist political logic on the structure of diplomacy, by developing a theoretical framework that understands diplomacy as constituted by two different functions: the mediative and the ideological. The role of the latter is to perform and sustain a coherent subject that is represented through ideological interpellation, while the former aims to maintain the space for meaningful interaction, by suspending the ideological drive to totalize. The relationship between the two functions is being explored by analyzing a high-level diplomatic encounter between U.S. President Donald Trump and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy. This investigation is performed by drawing on Laclauian - Mouffian discourse theory and the analytical categories defined by the two functions. This framework enables us to make sense of the impact of populism not as a disruption or a shift, but as an intensification of an already-existing tension that is inherent to diplomacy.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

For the past decades, the 'populist surge' (Mudde 2016; Katsambekis 2017; Gordon 2018) that now appears to shake the status quo in the 'West' has most certainly drawn attention to a burning question: how will this surge impact the current international order? Or more precisely, what are the impacts of populism, however defined, on foreign policy? While this idea that, once populists take power in a state, a predictable foreign policy course can be discerned has been dispelled (Chryssogelos 2023; Eklundh, Stengel, and Thorsten 2024), attention has been drawn to the practice of diplomacy itself. In many ways, it appears as if diplomacy is either damaged and disrupted, or changed and reappropriated by populists in order to reinforce those fantasies that their political logic relies on: that of an animated political subject (Laclau 2005). But diplomacy has always ontologically relied on a delicate fiction: the symbolic representation of something constantly changing shape, of an absent coherent self. At a time when important parts of international diplomacy have become more ubiquitous than ever, and its public display is so easily accessible by anyone, one can distinguish a need to rethink how diplomacy functions in order to better understand this populist impact, if there truly is one. This quest is probably very well encapsulated in Ukrainian President Zelenskyy's remarkably calm reply to US Vice-President JD Vance, in their infamous encounter in the Oval Office: "What kind of diplomacy, JD, you are speaking about? What do you mean?" (Zelenskyy 2025, 41:20). This is the opposite of a hysterical question, in the psychoanalytical sense of the word. It is a most genuine, surgical question.

The existing literature investigates the impact of populism on foreign policy and diplomacy in a fragmented way, spanning ideational, discursive, or performative approaches. Consequently, they tend to overemphasize either the "disruptive" (Löfflmann 2022; Bustinduy 2022), "transgressive" effects of populism (Lacatus, Meibauer, and Löfflmann 2023; Jenne and Thies

2024), or the performative quality of populist foreign policy and diplomatic practices, understood as staged spectacles for domestic audiences (Day and Wedderburn 2022). What remains undertheorized is how these two dimensions of disruption and spectacle can function together, or how they relate to each other. Or more importantly, what this interplay reveals about the deeper tensions within the structure of diplomacy itself.

In order to investigate this very tension, this thesis argues in favour of a different understanding of diplomacy: not as a neutral structure destabilised or appropriated by populism, but rather as being already shaped by a constitutive tension. This tension takes place between the mediative and the ideological functions of diplomacy, two functions locked in dialectical contradiction. In this sense, 'populist diplomacy', if there is such a thing, is no longer a mere aberration, or a different phenomenon altogether, but a symptom that becomes visible within contradictions that are inherent to diplomacy. Therefore, the aim of this thesis is to develop a framework that can capture this dialectical tension and then apply it on a concrete case of 'populist diplomacy'. In effect, the central research question that guides this inquiry is: How does populist discourse affect the functioning of diplomacy? In order to capture this effect, the selected case is the infamous meeting between US President Donald Trump and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelesnkyy, in the Oval Office, in February 2025. Few diplomatic encounters have left such a lasting impression on the world, while being colloquially understood as a textbook example of what populist leadership can do to 'damage' diplomacy.

The structure of this thesis will be the following: the first chapter will consist in a literature review that highlights the existing tensions within the literature. This includes the differences between the ideational, discursive, and performative approaches, a difference in focus between policy outcomes and symbolic practice, as well as the aforementioned tension between 'populism as disruption' and 'populism as performance'. The second chapter formulates a theoretical framework that understands diplomacy as constituted by two dialectical functions:

the mediative and the ideological. The third chapter explains the case selection, and sets the methodological ground that draws heavily on Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory. The fourth chapter presents an in-depth analysis of the meeting between Trump and Zelenskyy in the Oval Office, showcasing how the symbolic structure of diplomacy is first strained, and then descends into ideological closure. The last part of this chapter also includes a brief critical reflection on the drawbacks of the defined theoretical framework. Finally, the concluding chapter summarizes the findings and limits of the research, while also clarifying the contribution and the implications for a future research agenda.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Populism is widely seen as a "challenge" in various ways across the field, which is only natural in a context in which populist platforms tend to be all the more successful in the Western world. When focusing on its effects on foreign policy and diplomacy, much of the existing literature remains divided across ideational, discursive, and performative approaches. Ideational perspectives frame the impact of populism as contingent on what ideology it becomes attached to. More recent discursive approaches have highlighted populism as a political logic, which mainly focuses on the construction of political subjectivity. Finally, performative approaches usually portray populism as a "style", which appropriates foreign policy and diplomacy for staging performances. Focusing on diplomacy, what is important to note is that these studies remain focused on either describing the "negative" effects of populism, or by emphasizing the performative, instrumentalizing shift. This review aims to trace how various scholars have understood the relationship between populism, foreign policy and diplomacy.

Understanding the impact of populism on foreign policy depends on how populism is understood as a political phenomenon. One popular conception is that populism is a "thin ideology," as developed by Mudde (2004; 2007). According to this view, populism is a mere "shell" requiring additional ideological content from coupling with another political ideology, such as socialism, liberalism, or nativism. This explains the existence of left- and right-wing populism. This conception is associated with the ideational theoretical approach to investigating the impact of populism on policy (Hawkins et al., 2018). Ideational theories argue that foreign policy under populists depends heavily on the leaders' shared ideas, meaning it is influenced by the "thick" ideology populism is associated with. For example, Morales (Bolivia), Chávez (Venezuela), and Correa (Ecuador) displayed left-wing internationalist tendencies, while

Berlusconi (Italy) and Fujimori (Peru), Collor (Brazil), and Menem (Argentina) display market-liberal-oriented foreign policies (Verbeek and Zaslove, 2017).

Nevertheless, a certain centralization and personalization of foreign policy is evident, structured around the idea that "only the populist leader — and no one else — can speak on behalf of the 'true' people" (Destradi & Plagemann, 2019, p. 724). This anti-pluralist dimension of populism is described as separating the way populist leaders get involved in foreign policymaking — a more personal approach — from that of their predecessors (Destradi & Plagemann, 2019, pp. 723–724). Thus, we can already observe a representational logic underlying this type of foreign policymaking that does not depend on a "thick" ideology. Populists claim to represent, fight for, and argue in favor of the "people" and their interests. The "true people" are referenced in populist efforts to sideline traditional democratic institutions (e.g., the media or other government bodies). Populists seek to involve their constituencies in policymaking, especially through new communication technology (Plagemann & Destradi, 2019, p. 288). This representational logic becomes more apparent in the work of Wehner and Thies (2021, 321–326), who define three core components of populism as a "thin ideology." They combine this approach with role theory. These components are "the people," "the elite," and "the general will." The "general will" reflects populist leaders' belief that they know what the people want and deserve. They argue that the "general will" is mainly at play in the justification of foreign policy, in the way populist leaders justify their selection of roles to be played internationally to both domestic and international audiences (Wehner and Thies, 2021, 321–326).

The wider implications of this representational logic, which are only hinted at in ideational theories, are more apparent in critical/discursive approaches to populism. These approaches have been inspired by the intellectual work of political theorist and philosopher Ernesto Laclau. For Laclau, populism is a political logic, a mode of articulation that generates "the people" as a political subject. This is achieved by establishing an antagonistic divide between the "people"

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and an illegitimate elite (Laclau 2005, 117, 226). In this sense, the goal of populist discourse is to create a seemingly unified and coherent political subject in the form of the "people." However, this discourse is grounded in "empty signifiers" that seek to embody the totality of the unfulfilled demands that animate "the people" as a subject (Laclau 2005, 69–71). Populist discourse, in effect, obscures the inherent antagonism of society, preventing the emergence of a fully cohesive society and a coherent "people" (Laclau 2005, 161–162).

In many ways, this theoretical orientation is a response to populism's "ideological thinness," which does not offer solid foreign policy prescriptions. Thus, it has been argued that "in foreign policy, at least, it may be better to see populism as a discourse rather than an ideology—a new way of talking about foreign policy while doing largely the same things" (Chryssogelos, 2021, p. 18). The efforts of the "Essex School" point in this direction, investigating the effects of populism as a discourse and a logic of articulation. According to Stavrakakis (2014), populists in the context of European policy debates distinguish between "the pure people" and corrupt elites at the national and European levels. For example, international agreements made during the austerity measures triggered by the Eurozone crisis are portrayed as imposed by an unrepresentative elite (Stavrakakis 2014, 509). It is interesting to see how, in Stavrakakis, Laclau's lowest unit of analysis, the demand (Laclau 2005, 7, 8), is transposed into an international environment. Unlike in Laclau's original conception, these subjectifying demands target entities beyond the system's scope or the ruling class's authority.

This is how the logic of representation can be translated in Laclauian terms: once the populists capture power (and become, in some ways, the system, the ruling class), the generation of 'the people' as a political subject is based on an otherness in the international. A similar idea is formulated by Chryssogelos (2020), who argues that populism acts as a counter-normative discourse that opposes the universality of dominant international norms (like efficiency, openness, rule-based decision-making, rights). These norms, that serve as legitimation for state

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transformation for the state elites, are challenged by populist grievances whose claim to universality is provided by the very fact that they are 'the demands of the people' (Chryssogelos 2020).

The same representational logic has been identified in more recent discourse-oriented literature. For example, populism has been defined as a reaction to "perceived gaps in the representation of certain groups within the state" (Jenne 2021, 325). This representation extends to the international stage through "foreign policy revisionism" that aligns with the interests of an "idealized sovereign community" (Jenne 2021, 325). Importantly, however, foreign policy revisionism is not observable at the level of policy itself (Visnovitz & Jenne, 2021, pp. 684–685). In their investigation of populist rhetoric in Viktor Orbán's Hungary, Visnovitz and Jenne (2021) outline how revisionism instead takes the form of "a particular type of political argument that asserts the need to revise old alliances and build new ones to better represent the people's will internationally" (684–685). The literature concludes that "the foreign policy effects of populism are likely to be found at a higher level of abstraction—in diplomatic practices rather than in a coherent foreign policy doctrine or grand strategy" (Jenne, 2021).

Populist diplomacy: between disruption and spectacle

Although not always explicitly framed as such, literature investigating the impact of populism on diplomatic practice tends to oscillate between diagnosing populist diplomacy as either a disruption of mediation or an intensification of ideological spectacle. Although these practices have been studied before, Cooper (2019, 38–40) draws attention to their spread toward the liberal core.

Scepticism of the institution of Diplomacy

Research suggests that populists are skeptical of diplomacy and diplomatic culture. Populist governments often view career diplomats as part of a technocratic elite, which they naturally distrust. "Due to its professional formation and the elitist traditions attached to it, the diplomatic corps will likely appear suspicious to a populist leader and his or her followers" (Plagemann & Destradi, 2019, p. 288; Cooper, 2019, p. 38). Some populist governments have translated this suspicion into policy. For example, an "unprecedented number of senior positions within the State Department remained vacant" during the Trump administration (Plagemann and Destradi 2019, 288). Other examples include Poland under PiS, where many ambassadors were replaced with political appointees, and Turkey under AKP, where the purging of the diplomatic corps was followed by a similar politicization. India under Modi has also experienced a significant decrease in the importance of its traditional diplomatic apparatus due to the substantial centralization of foreign policy decision-making in the hands of the prime minister (Plagemann & Destradi, 2019, p. 295). In addition to populist skepticism toward elites, Lequesne (2021a) identifies two other conflicts that shape the tension between populists and diplomats: expertise versus politics and intermediation versus disintermediation. The former refers to populist governments' natural dislike of experts, as opposed to emotion and political truth. The latter refers to populists' preference for direct communication, which disregards the mediation usually facilitated by diplomats (Lequesne 2021a, 781–783).

Disruption of Diplomatic Mediation & Populist Capture of Diplomacy

One way the populist effect on diplomacy has been described is as a disruption of its "traditional" functions and practices. For example, Sevin notes that the AKP-led government in Turkey "has supported closer relations with the Turkic republics and encouraged the formation of various platforms to facilitate communication outside of traditional diplomatic channels"

(2017, pp. 150–151). This is exemplified by how the AKP channeled its foreign policy through formats such as the Parliamentary Assembly of Turkic-Speaking Countries (TURKPA) and the Cooperation Council of Turkic Speaking States (TÜRKKON) (Sevin 2017, 150–151).

In addition to establishing non-traditional backchannels, populist governments attempt to politically capture diplomatic apparatuses. In this context, political capture refers to populist parties' attempts to control foreign services and impose their foreign policy agenda (Lequesne 2021a, 781). Assuming that populists and diplomats are locked in a structural conflict, Lequesne (2021a) posits that populists in power are always tempted to control the diplomatic establishment, but that the success of such a power play depends on certain factors. For instance, in Austria, diplomats enjoy statutory protection, which reserves access to ambassadorial posts for career diplomats, while populists successfully purged career diplomats in Poland (Lequesne 2021a, 790–94). In the case of Turkey, the literature suggests a reduced quality of decision-making, caused by political capture (Özdamar and Yanik 2024, 1856). This expectation is based on the hypothesis that political appointees are less critical and unlikely to disagree with populist leaders (Özdamar and Yanik 2024, 1856).

Countering this structural perspective, Tekines (2025) explores the agency diplomats retain in populist regimes. Focusing on Turkey, he distinguishes three main roles for diplomats: messengers (who execute policy), policy shapers (influential diplomats that have the power to alter policy) and policy resisters (they seek to deflect or hinder policies they disagree with). Within a populist regime, diplomats also engage in reassurance (maintaining a sense of stability and continuity for international partners) and damage control (mitigating the negative consequences that populist policies may have) (Tekines 2025). These roles are in accordance with Blanc (2023), who points at significant resilience in diplomatic culture, in the case of the first term of the Trump administration. The usual role of the diplomatic service switched "from advancing cooperation towards clarification and reassurance to cope with the disruption caused

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by populist rhetoric" (Blanc 2023, 313–15). This also reinforced paradiplomacy - the bypassing of traditional diplomatic channels by local and regional governments (Paquin 2020) - in the sense of an increased interaction between American cities and states with Europe (Blanc 2023, 313–15). Nonetheless, Blanc (2023) only looks at a situation in which the diplomatic apparatus was not captured by the populists.

Performance Over Negotiation

This focus on the populist disruption of mediation is complemented by a tendency to regard populist diplomacy as a performative act. This strand springs from a specific approach in populism studies that goes beyond populism as ideology or discourse. This socio-cultural perspective treats populism "as transgressive political style and media performance that disrupts conventional notions of 'high politics' and elite norms of political behaviour and public communication" (Löfflmann 2022, 406), and focuses on *how* populism is performed and enacted by political actors. Mirroring our previous discussion on representational logic, this approach identifies an appeal to 'the people' as a core element, an attempt of bringing this political subject into being.

In this way, the foreign policymaking of populist leaders has been seen as riddled with "anti-diplomatic impulses." For example, Hugo Chávez, Venezuela's president from 1999 to 2013, employed a "diplomacy of the peoples" (diplomacia de los pueblos) that "celebrated the disruption of orthodox practices" (Cooper 2019, 39, 40). Importantly, Cooper (2019) attributes this tension to the different objectives of populism and diplomacy. While diplomats are outward-looking and focused on managing international relations, populists believe that "national interests and identities begin and end at home" (Cooper 2019, 39–40). He argues that this tension is especially visible in public diplomacy. Its traditional role of "mediation" is faced with a "disintermediation dilemma," which is the divergence of interests between "a worldly

elite as opposed to a localistic public" (Cooper 2019, 41). This is where the performative aspect comes into play. In President Donald Trump's case, international encounters are seen as a specific operational style that only pursues domestic goals, as opposed to facilitating international communication (Cooper, 2019, p. 41). Cooper argues that this disruption of public diplomacy leads to a shift in practice and favors accepting "an accentuated and responsive domestic turn that puts an onus on practical and visible delivery in terms of different strata of society" (2019, 49).

The effects of populism on public diplomacy have also been investigated through a Baudrillardian lens, referred to as "simulated public diplomacy." Surowiec and Miles (2021) analyzed the Trump administration and found that Trump significantly altered the scope of public diplomacy and its norms rather than helping to build relationships with foreign publics. They argue that "in Trump's foreign affairs, reality is denied, and as a result, all codes lose their referential value. Public diplomacy is diminished in its meaning-making focus, thus undermining its purpose" (Surowiec & Miles, 2021, pp. 26–27).

We can thus see how the existing literature reveals a rather fragmented understanding of how populism interacts with foreign policy and diplomacy. Again, these efforts tend to understand populism either as disruption / transgression or as a spectacle or performance. What remains insufficiently explored is how these two different impacts of populism actually interact or enable each other. At the same time, not much attention is paid to how populist discourse reshapes the diplomatic subject position. What could help achieve a better understanding of this is to understand diplomacy as already structured by a constitutive tension that describes these two impacts. In effect, populist discourse would not simply distort diplomacy, but would function through the constitutive tension itself: one between mediation and ideology.

CHAPTER 3: DIPLOMACY BETWEEN MEDIATION AND IDEOLOGY

In order to capture the impact of populism on diplomacy, this chapter attempts to formulate a framework that allows us to decipher how can populism be both disruptive (capturing diplomatic apparatuses, damaging the efficiency of negotiation) and productive (by changing the style, the register, or the purpose). In this sense, proceeding from several past understandings of diplomacy, two functions of diplomacy will be defined: the mediative function and the ideological function. The mediative function aims to maintain a discursive space for meaningful engagement, while the ideological function seeks to perform and sustain the illusion of a unified political subject through symbolic representation. I mainly draw on post-structuralist accounts in diplomatic studies, as well as more novel approaches rooted in post-foundationalist ontologies. Ultimately, this chapter will explore how this framework impacts our understanding of diplomatic subjectivity, and ultimately define how these two functions are locked in constant interaction in any diplomatic interaction.

Mediative Function

At the core of Der Derian's argument is the concept of "estrangement," which he uses interchangeably with the term "alienation." Der Derian explores the ambiguous understanding of alienation by examining its historical use, from Hegel's view of the state as "the highest mediation of the political alienation of individuals" (Der Derian 1991, 39, 40) to Karl Marx's concept of man's alienation from his work.

In general, Der Derian points out that "estrangement" refers to a separation marked by indifference or hostility. This "separation" can emerge at various levels and between different entities: between individuals, groups, or peoples; between an individual and God; between an

individual and his work; and so on (Der Derian 1987, 107). Der Derian uses this concept to identify the emergence of proper diplomacy. With the advent of Westphalia and the concept of sovereignty, emerging states recognized each other as sovereign, but lacked relationships of vassalage (as in the Holy Roman Empire) or papal mediation. Thus, they became mutually estranged. In this sense, the estrangement of states becomes an ontological given. Nevertheless, despite this fundamental and irreconcilable separation, contact between states is necessary due to their inevitable encounters and clashes of interest. "As states become the ultimate mediation of national groupings, they recognize the need and possibility of a 'mediation of the mediations,' or, in other words, diplomacy" (Der Derian 1991, 111, 112). Constantinou takes this idea further, defining "estrangement" as more than a state that needs to be overcome or managed. For him, estrangement is constitutive and the only path to self-realization. The separation intrinsic to estrangement is fundamental to the emergence of identity through differentiation between self and other (Constantinou 1996, 111).

Although estrangement remains a fundamental ontological fact, the concept of "mediation" emerges from the necessity of managing it. Der Derian intentionally selects the broad term "mediation" to capture the wide array of shapes diplomacy has taken throughout history. "Mediation" can be understood in multiple ways: "a connecting link" or "an intervention for the purpose of reconciliation." According to an adaptation of Marx's theory of alienation, the more relevant definition is diplomacy as a second-order mediation, or "mediation of mediation," on the Marxian model of understanding money (Der Derian 1987, 93). Through this definition, Der Derian acknowledges the interdependent and reconciliatory nature of diplomacy (Der Derian, 1991, p. 7). Constantinou's interpretation of mediation is a better match for a dual understanding of diplomacy. For him, "mediation" is a fundamental process required by "estrangement" functioning as a constitutive condition. For mediation, an intersubjective

process, to occur, the entities involved must be capable of relating to each other and deem each other "worthy of communication" (Constantinou 1996, 25, 26).

Der Derian also addressed diplomatic culture as a critical aspect that enables the mediation of estrangement. Building on Hedley Bull's original conception of diplomatic culture as "the common stock of ideas and values possessed by official representatives" (Bull 2002, 173–83), Der Derian frames it according to his alienation-based logic. Essentially, he defines diplomatic culture as "the mediation of estrangement by symbolic power and social constraints" (Der Derian, 42–43). From this starting point, we can understand diplomatic culture as a "discursive space" (Der Derian, 42–43) and an enabling factor. Subsequent investigations into the evolving nature of diplomatic culture maintain this core feature. Overall, diplomatic culture can be seen as a "balm, not a cure" for estrangement (Dittmer & McConnell, 2015, pp. 5–6), a process of connection that crosses boundaries of differentiation "across alien boundaries" (Der Derian, 1996, p. 86). It provides the necessary tools and establishes the shared understandings and spaces for interaction and negotiation between estranged entities. However, it is impossible to totally overcome estrangement: "There will always be excess, discontinuity, and confusion" (Dittmer & McConnell, 2015, pp. 5–6). Der Derian has emphasized this symbolic aspect, which has also been expressed in different ways, underscoring the importance of diplomatic rituals, for example (Balzacq 2020). In this sense, populism has been portrayed as disruptive to diplomacy. Populism's disruption of diplomacy has been described as a shift in diplomatic culture (Cooper, 2019; Surowiec & Miles, 2021), a breach of ritual (Koschut, 2024), or a breach of diplomatic code (Šimunjak & Caliandro, 2019).

Based on this ontology of alienation and Der Derian's original definition of diplomacy, one can arrive at an understanding of one of diplomacy's two functions. The mediative function of diplomacy refers to its symbolic role in sustaining the conditions for meaningful interaction across the irreconcilable differences generated by mutual estrangement. It is not a synthetic,

temporary resolution of separation but rather the maintenance of a discursive space in which engagement across boundaries is possible.

Ideological Function

One could argue that the mediative function does not fully capture how populists conduct diplomacy. This is why an additional function must be theorized: the ideological function. Building on the work of Constantinou, Althusser, Žižek, and Stagnell, it becomes possible to conceive of the ideological aspects of diplomacy as constitutive of the mediative aspects.

Constantinou acknowledges the subjective nature of diplomacy. His key point is that diplomacy takes place between artificial subjects. According to Constantinou, the "sovereign subject," which mainly refers to the modern territorial state in the context of diplomacy, is merely a fiction (Constantinou 1996, 103, 104). This concept of the state can be traced back to thinkers such as Rousseau and Carl Schmitt, and it is also present in IR theory, creating an "eternal subject" that "speaks diplomacy eternally" (Constantinou 1996, 103, 104). By discursively attaching the concept of *raison d'état* to the state, the state becomes "a subject, an autonomous, independent, and sovereign persona that wills." Thus, it has obligations, rights, and interests. It is said to be capable of feeling secure, insecure, and threatened and of committing violations, aggressions, and injustices. It can be held responsible and liable, and it must communicate, decide, and be aware" (Constantinou 1996, 103–104).

It is thus this illusion of a unitary subject that is a condition of possibility for any diplomatic encounter. This subject, Constantinou argues, is the result of a narrative construction, a "discourse of otherness that includes legal, theological, and personal attributes and rationales" (1996, 113). However, this fiction is reduced only to the concept of self-determination as a "process of differentiation", more specifically between what is internal and what is external. He then entertains that this process can encompass a wide array of processes, such as the "political

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construction of identities (for example, nation-building)" (Constantinou 1996, 113). Here, a hint towards a certain quality of diplomatic discourse becomes apparent: the construction of a charged political subject that goes beyond the artificial, fictional subject of the state. Nation-building goes well beyond the generation of the state as a useful fiction and enters the realm of ideology, understood as a cover-up of inevitable internal contradictions of society.

While Constantinou emphasizes the symbolic fictionality of the sovereign subject, Alexander Stagnell reframes this fiction not as a result of a discourse of difference, but as an ideological operation—an active displacement of lack that sustains the fantasy of coherence. In his book, "Diplomacy and Ideology. From the French Revolution to the Digital Age", Stagnell presents a very compelling argument about the ideological nature of diplomacy. For Stagnell, diplomacy in its current shape (which is always subject to change) is also tied to modernity and the rise of the nation-state as the dominant form of political organization. However, its role is redefined: it is not conceived of as an answer to the ontological separation between entities (such as states), but as an ideological state apparatus that serves an internal purpose: the reproduction of the unity of society within a fantasy of unavoidable mediation between peoples (Stagnell 2020). In this way, the function of diplomacy is to reinforce the ruling ideology through interpellation, rather than facilitating negotiation or communication between states.

Stagnell's critical argument starts from the concept of ideological state apparatus (ISA), as developed by Louis Althusser. Althusser explains the reproduction of power structures through two types of apparatuses: repressive (RSA) and ideological (ISA). While the repressive type enforces state ideology through the exercise of force (such as law enforcement, prisons or military institutions), ISAs have a more subtle role: the propagation of state ideology. Althusser's concept of "interpellation" encompasses the functioning of an ISA: the hailing, recruitment, and transformation of individuals into subjects (Althusser 2009, 13, 14). In this sense, ideology is more than a set of ideas; it is embedded in material practices reproduced by

ISAs. Examples of ISAs exist in many social spheres, including churches, schools, legal institutions, cultural institutions, and political institutions (Althusser 13–18). However, this conception was originally developed to describe the reproduction of relations of power and production within capitalist societies, where institutions assign individuals to specific social and political roles. The problem with this understanding is that it is overly structural and deterministic; interpellation locks individuals into a particular subjectivity, making it difficult to explain change.

To address this issue, Stagnell turns to Slavoj Žižek's well-known critique of Althusser. According to Žižek, the subjectivation of the International Socialist Tendency (ISA) is always incomplete because of the preexistence of an "uncanny subject" (Žižek 2014, 64). This "uncanny subject" is Žižek's version of the Lacanian subject, who is not an autonomous, unitary, coherent being but rather a divided subject defined by lack, which Žižek considers an ontological category. This pre-existing ontological lack is subjectifying in itself and occurs before interpellation (Žižek 2009, 140). In short, from a psychoanalytic perspective, an individual becomes a subject when he attempts to fill this primordial lack, generating an unfulfilled desire to do so (Fink 1995, ch. 4). This is why, for Žižek (as for Lacan before him), the subject (in this case, the political subject) is a desiring subject whose desire can never be fully articulated (Fink 1995, ch. 5). Ideological interpellation can never fully succeed precisely because the lack and the desire to fill it remain, leaving the subject at odds with the symbolic order in which he is interpellated. Thus, the ISA's mission to interpellate ideologically will always yield ambiguous results as the subject resists the totalizing drive of ideology. Stagnell argues that resistance and potential challenges to the ruling ideology emerge from the state apparatus's failure to fully interpellate (2020, 34–36).

Stagnell's central argument is that diplomacy functions similarly: it is an ideological state apparatus that assigns individuals roles. In our case, it creates the diplomatic subject (2020, 25–

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26, 44–45). However, the very act of representation presents us with a peculiar dilemma. Lacan himself discusses this in Seminar XI: "When diplomats address one another, they are supposed to represent something whose signification, while constantly changing, is beyond their own persons: France, Britain, etc." (Lacan 1998, 220). To explain this conundrum, Stagnell employs the psychoanalytic concept of *Vorstellungsrepräsentanz*, which can be literally translated as "the presentation of representation" (2020, 21–25). *Vorstellungsrepräsentanz* is not the representation of an unknown entity but rather "that which takes the place of the representation" (Lacan 1998, 60). Therefore, diplomatic representation does not represent an unknown or changing entity (France, Britain, etc.). Rather, diplomatic representation is a cover-up for the failure to symbolically represent the absent entity of the state.

This can be demonstrated by the fact that several gestures done by diplomatic subjects are open to a wide array of interpretations – showcasing the disconnect between the act of representation and that which is supposed to be represented. Stagnell uses the metaphor of the diplomat's cough as an example: in a diplomatic context, the cough of a diplomat during the speech of his counterpart can have multiple interpretations: signaling disagreement, drawing attention, or maybe having a cold (Stagnell 2020, 34-36, 45-46). A real-world example can better illustrate this surplus meaning: the diplomatic subject's gestures are always already overdetermined. In November 2024, Romanian President Klaus Iohannis appeared to ignore Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán upon arrival at the European Political Community (EPC) summit in Budapest[2]. After getting out of the car, President Iohannis appears to completely ignore Orban, turn his back on him, and arrange his suit for the next 19 seconds (szmo.hu 2024). The interpretations for this gesture were quite extensive: some media reports suggested that this was Iohannis' reply to the rumour that his motorcade was deliberately delayed by Hungarian

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[2] A video of the infamous encounter can be watched here: https://streamable.com/dizwax.

authorities (Bumman 2024). Another viable interpretation is that this is reflective of the history between the two countries, riddled with ethnic conflict. Or that Iohannis wanted to signal his discontent with Orban's anti-European stances and Hungary's lack of support for Ukraine, differences that were more pressing at the time. Some saw it as a diplomatic blunder (Independent.md 2024), while others described it as an insult, with the Hungarian Prime Minister being treated as if "he did not exist" (Petrescu 2024). This has even been attributed to Iohannis' temperament, or the troubled personal relationship between the two (Hungary Today 2024).

The list could go on, but the key point is that, like the diplomat's cough (Stagnell 2020, 24–29), this limited act resists easy interpretation. This is because there is no original, unified meaning behind actions of representation. The notion that Iohannis or Orbán could directly represent their state is an ideological illusion. Without an immediate symbolic translation, we must enter the realm of fantasy to interpret this act (Stagnell 2020, 34–36, 45–46). Stagnell would argue, in pure Lacanian fashion, that this interpretation depends on your object of desire (Stagnell 2020, 34–36, 45–46): an incompetent Romanian president committing a blunder or a strong one standing up to Orbán. Ultimately, "the diplomat's cough" is a symptom of the failure of complete interpellation or integration within the symbolic order through the ISA of diplomacy.

The issue is that while Stagnell paints a compelling picture of diplomacy as an ideological state apparatus, he focuses entirely on its representational role in performing the unity of the state. Reducing diplomacy to this ideological performance obscures its contingent and open-ended nature as a means of mediating estrangement. However, one could argue that Stagnell's ontology of lack is not incompatible with an ontology of alienation. In this view, his description is one side of the same coin; the other side is the mediative.

We can thus draw from Stagnell an understanding of **the ideological function of diplomacy** as a symbolic operation of performing and sustaining the illusion of a coherent political subject. Indeed, this illusion is a condition of possibility for diplomatic interaction (much like Constantinou's fiction of the sovereign subject), but it is not its sole goal. It serves an internal purpose of displacing contradictions, societal divisions, and the lack at the heart of political subjectivity. The ideological function operates by projecting inner antagonisms onto the international stage, turning diplomacy into a performance of the self, not just mediation of estrangement.

The Diplomatic Subject Position

This leaves us with the true challenge of the diplomatic agent: representing something absent and elusive with no clear form or distinguishable will. This aligns with Constantinou's understanding of the fiction of the sovereign subject because the entity being represented does not exist; it is merely a necessary fiction (1996, 113). It is important to note the tension between Stagnell and Constantinou. They both agree that the state is not a stable entity and that diplomacy is both symbolic and constitutive, not merely instrumental. They would also agree that the meaning generated in a diplomatic setting is incomplete. "Diplomacy's condition of possibility lies in identity/difference; however, in the radical alterity of the Other also lies diplomacy's impossibility of mediating final identities" (Constantinou, 1996, p. 113). However, Constantinou argues that the fiction of the state emerges from a discourse of differentiation. In contrast, Stagnell claims that it emerges from an ideological act that displaces an internal lack of coherent social order onto an external surface, such as the diplomat, the foreigner, or the Other. This is the key difference between their ontological commitments. Constantinou says that diplomacy is grounded in a relational ontology of estrangement, where identity emerges through symbolic encounters with alterity, including the human dimension of strangeness within the self (Constantinou, 2006). Meanwhile, Stagnell adopts a Lacanian ontology of lack.

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For Constantinou, estrangement is enabling, but for Stagnell, lack is disabling and must be covered over by fantasy.

In this framework, there is little room for diplomatic subjectivity in the essentialist sense. Instead, we can discuss a diplomatic subject position at the intersection of the two functions. On the one hand, the diplomat is expected to perform an ideological self, demonstrating state unity through words, gestures, and presence. At the same time, the diplomat embodies openness to dialogue, creating a space for the mediation of estrangement by maintaining necessary openness and ambiguity. Essentially, this amounts to suspending the ideological drive to totalize.

The diplomatic subject position is the interpellated role that the diplomat occupies within the symbolic order. From this position, the diplomat speaks and is recognized as "speaking for" a country, such as France or Ukraine, or an organization, such as the EU. Meanwhile, the diplomatic agent—such as a career diplomat, president in an international setting, or foreign minister—is the person who performs and is never identical to the subject position (and this distinction is important). One could argue that speaking from the "diplomatic subject position" while employing a populist logic, in the Laclauian sense, would actively reconstitute the subject position by calling "the people" into being as both the substance of representation and the audience.

What is the relationship between the two functions?

The two functions are thus locked in a dialectical contradiction. We can call it dialectical because they are structurally co-constitutive (McGowan 2019, chaps. 1, 4): mediation requires the presupposition of representation, while ideological representation always risks totalization, foreclosure. They pull in different directions. Mediation, however, also requires the suspension of this totalizing drive in order to maintain the possibility for negotiation and engagement.

Every diplomatic encounter is structured by this tension and witnessing one function at its purest is impossible. In this sense, the mediative aspect is not the opposite of the ideological, but its dialectical counterpoint: some ideological ground (Stagnell's fantasy of unity in a limited sense, or Constantinou's fiction of the sovereign subject) is required for the interaction to be meaningful, while resisting its foreclosure.

This is why, it can be argued, this framework can prove useful in investigating 'populist diplomacy', if there is such a thing. One can even argue that the frequent argument that populism poses a challenge to diplomacy, or that populism disrupts diplomacy, is in fact the illustration of **an opposition** drawn between an old, traditional way of doing diplomacy and a new one. But this opposition may simply be masking **a contradiction** that is inherent to diplomacy itself. But this is beside the point of this paper.

Ultimately, one could argue that populists in power would exploit this stage to reassert the unity of "the people" and their claim to direct representation. In this situation, populist discourse in diplomatic settings focuses on creating 'the people' as a political entity. The ideological function eclipses the mediative one because of the totalizing nature of ideology. This amounts to the collapse of diplomatic intersubjective engagement into an ideological spectacle, which the literature regards as populist "style" or "performance" in foreign policy. In such a case, the contradiction between the two functions becomes highly visible or disavowed. The populist claim to speak purely for "the people" eliminates the distinction, as no ambiguity is permitted. Openness to interaction becomes a weakness, and ambiguity becomes betrayal. Most importantly, the split cannot disappear; it must return in a distorted form, such as diplomatic breakdown, backlash, or interpretive instability.

CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGY

Case Selection

The case study under discussion is the 2025 Oval Office meeting between Donald Trump, the President of the United States, and Volodymyr Zelenskyy, the President of Ukraine. There are various reasons why this case study is particularly illustrative of the framework outlined above. First, this encounter takes place in a context of heightened geopolitical tension where the positions of the two represented states - US and Ukraine - have transformed considerably. We are talking about a renegotiation of identity taking place during this interaction, which is precisely the core of the entanglement between the two functions. Second, Donald Trump is a textbook example of a populist leader, whose style privileges directness, spectacle, and personalization over what can what is usually considered to be traditional diplomatic protocol. Third, the way this interaction has been perceived by the wider public is a perfect example of the tension present in the existing literature: that between populism as disruption and populism as performance. Was this a failed diplomatic interaction? Was this a premeditated performance? Was it a premeditated *failure*? Ultimately, and most importantly, the evolution of this encounter is quite visible: from surface-level cordiality to a powerful display of hostility, which makes it an ideal site to observe the dialectical tension between diplomacy's mediative and ideological functions. In fact, this interaction allows us to see exactly how the logic of populist discourse enters the diplomatic encounter and shifts the balance between the two functions.

Data collection

Data collection is fairly straightforward. I use the video of the meeting, titled "WATCH: Tensions flare in Trump and Zelenskyy's full Oval Office meeting", posted by PBS NewsHour on YouTube, which presents the entire 50-minute-long interaction. I also used a Rev transcript

for convenience, as well as a variety of different news sources to get a deeper understanding of the setting of the event.

Data analysis

For data analysis, I employ a version of discourse analysis inspired from Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory. That is because their post-foundationalist framework is ontologically compatible with the theoretical framework outlined above, being focused on examining conflict and struggle over identity. At the same time, Laclauian tools of analysing discourse are linked to his theory of populism (Laclau 2005) and thus can provide more help in investigating those elements of populist discourse that pass into diplomatic interactions.

A core ontological assumption is that the field of the social can never be fully sutured: a claimed objective identity can never be fully achieved (Marchart 2007, chap. 5). This impossibility of a coherent identity is the site of an inherent, irreconcilable antagonism of the social field (Laclau 1990, 21). Instead, "what one gets is a field of simply relational identities which never manage to constitute themselves fully, since relations do not form a closed system" (Laclau 1990, 21). 'Discourse' can be understood as a theoretical horizon within which the being of objects is constituted (Howarth and Stavrakakis 2000, 3). Discursive practices thus become strategies of 'fixation' or 'homogenization': attempts to partially stabilize the (otherwise contingent) social, through the creation of nodal points (Marchart 2007, 136, 137; Laclau 1983). A nodal point is "a privileged sign around which the other signs are ordered; the other signs acquire their meaning from their relationship to the nodal point" (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002, 26). In the case at hand, terms like 'peace', 'support', 'Russia', 'Putin', or even the signifier 'diplomacy' itself, serve as nodal points through which each actor attempts to stabilize meaning. Some of these nodal points function as 'empty signifiers', signifiers which unify a range of different meanings without having an intrinsic meaning of their own. They showcase the absent cohesion

of the community (Laclau 2005, 161-62), or in our case, of the represented identity. This will be the case of the signifier "deal", which anchors the discourse of President Donald Trump.

This framework is compatible with our understanding of diplomacy' mediative function as the maintenance of a "discursive space". This also informs how the shift toward ideological closure can be traced: as the hegemonic fixation of nodal points that foreclose mediation. After all, what I aim to investigate is how a symbolic encounter shifts from openness to closure, from estranged engagement to ideological foreclosure. Laclau's conceptual tools thus become very effective.

CHAPTER 5: POPULIST DIPLOMACY IN PRACTICE: THE TRUMP–ZELENSKYY OVAL OFFICE ENCOUNTER

The Oval Office meeting between US President Donald Trump and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy took place on February 28, 2025. This was in the context of Trump's return to the White House and the subsequent shift in US foreign policy. A substantial element of this shift was Trump's willingness to reverse the traditional US policy of isolating the Russian Federation, and pursue instead an agreement with Moscow (Kulakevich 2025). Moreover, on the first day of his new mandate, Trump signed an executive order freezing foreign aid to all countries for ninety days (The White House 2025), which also significantly affected Ukraine.

The relationship between Ukraine and the United States is symbolically significant for both actors. US support for Ukraine helped cement its image as a defender of the current liberal order, while for Ukraine, besides the critical material support, alignment with the US was part of its image as a nation wanting to carve its own way towards the West. The shift in this relationship carries important implications for both sides, leading them to a situation where identities have to be renegotiated. The shifting tone of the US was already apparent in the views of both Trump and his Vice-President (Carr Smyth 2025). The two main characters also have a history: this was not the first time Trump-Zelenskyy relations made headlines. Back in 2019, Zelenskyy was involved in Trump's impeachment scandal, which arguably adds to the dynamic here.

Regarding the performance itself, it is worth bearing in mind the highly ritualized venue of the Oval Office. The intense performative expectations are reinforced by a tradition of scripted decorum that reinforces authority, legitimacy, and the continuity of American presidential

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power. The fact that the whole discussion was live streamed arguably changed the logic of the interaction as well. This was not a secluded diplomatic meeting, but a show in its own right as well.

The international reaction to this meeting was quite extensive, with the ensuing disagreement being in many ways unprecedented. The sharp deviation in diplomatic norms that was perceived everywhere around the globe was quite remarkable. European allies, Germany, UK and France included, took the opportunity to reaffirm their support for Ukraine and unity against Russian aggression. Naturally, the Russian side was pleased with the performance and praised the United States for humiliating Zelenskyy. ("World Reacts after Donald Trump, JD Vance Berate Ukraine's Zelenskyy" 2025). The reaction in the US was split among party lines, with the democrats defending Zelenskyy. ("How the World Reacted to Trump and Zelensky's Fiery Oval Office Meeting" 2025). In Ukraine, something similar to a "rally 'round the flag" effect could be observed (Waterhouse 2025).

Entering the Oval Office

The actual discussion between the Ukrainian President and his American hosts lasted for around 50 minutes. The initial part of the meeting proceeded in a rather cordial way, with the focus being on the rare earth minerals deal to be signed between the two countries, President Zelenskyy. After a series of questions, the discussion became visibly more heated, with disagreements on several topics. Before the end of the first 40 minutes, especially after the intervention of vice-president JD Vance, the interaction turned outwardly hostile.

As it has been theoretically discussed above, this meeting shall be interpreted as a diplomatic encounter, involving both functions: the mediative and the ideological. In effect, the two leaders met in the Oval Office in order to explore the potential of continuing the US-Ukraine partnership, in the context of its war against Russian invaders. This happened in a context in

which Ukraine needed continued support for its war against Russia, and the new administration of the United States made an important shift in the country's policy towards Ukraine. This has also been seen as an unprecedented opening towards Moscow (Arkin 2025; Caryl 2025). In the most abstract sense, this was a part of the continuous attempt to sustain symbolic engagement despite divergent interests - the mediative function. At the same time, the required ideological background that would sustain the fantasy of representation was powerfully charged. On the one hand, President Zelenskyy projected the image of a country at war with an imperialist power, fighting for its freedom, while President Trump had to assert the image of the United States as a global superpower, which he did through a quintessentially populist manner. In both their cases, discourse served to uphold the fantasy of a unified political subject, which was constantly in tension with genuine mediation.

Trump: the populist ideological component

The two ideological images that the two sides projected contain understandings of the self and of other objects that were symbolically incompatible. The ideological fiction of the United States as a coherent entity was rooted in several aspects of President Trump's discourse, as well as that of Vice-president JD Vance. Their words portrayed the United States as a benevolent and moral superpower, whose role as a neutral *diplomatic mediator* in the conflict between Ukraine and the Russian Federation was crucial. This was obvious in many of Trump's description of his role: "if I didn't align myself with both of them, you'd never have a deal"; "I'm in the middle" (Trump 2025, 38:55; 27:39), "I'm here as an arbitrator, as a mediator to a certain extent between two parties that have been very hostile, to put it mildly." (Trump 2025, 16:11)

The populist element is visible through multiple aspects. For instance, the fantasy of a superior leader in touch with the people is reinforced in a lot of instances. Trump did not shy away from

jokingly comparing himself with relevant figures in American history, when asked about it: "I'd say George Washington, Abraham Lincoln. I would say I'm far superior to George Washington and Abraham Lincoln. Now, you know I'm only kidding, right?" (Trump 2025, 12:43). The emphasis of his negotiation skills is spread all throughout the discussion: "that's all I do, that's what I do. My whole life, that's what I do is make deals" (Trump 2025, 34:00). The way these skills are brought in the service of the nation become obvious in the way he explains how the United States will gain a lot out of the rare earth mineral deal with Ukraine (Trump 2025, 08:00-09:05). Benevolence is another emphasized trait, not only by him: "I'm doing this to save lives more than anything else. Second is to save a lot of money, but I considered that to be far less important. [...] I hope I'll be known and recognized as a peacemaker." (Trump 2024, 17:32), but also by some reporters: "So what gave you the moral courage and conviction to step forward [...]" (C-SPAN 2025, 21:37).

An antagonistic frontier is drawn between his actions in service of the country and those of the (corrupt, incompetent, elitist) past administration: "until we came along, the Biden administration didn't speak to Russia whatsoever. They didn't speak to anybody. They just allowed this to continue," (Trump 2025, 1:31); "what the Biden administration did was terrible." (Trump 2025, 10:04); "Biden, he didn't know what the hell he was doing," (Trump 2025,19:25). Trump mentions Biden *seventeen times* in this discussion. In some instances, the level of divagation from the topic of the conflict to the reinforcement of Trump's mandate is literally impressive: "This could lead to a third world war. This was headed in the wrong direction. If this election were lost, if we didn't win this election, and by the way, we won it by a lot, that was a mandate. We won every swing state. We won the popular vote by millions and millions of votes. We won everything. The districts, you look at the areas of red, take a look at a map. This was a big mandate and this was one of the things I said, "We're going to get this thing settled." If we didn't win, I think this could've very well ended up in a third world war and

that would not have been a good situation. What was your second question?" (Trump 2025, 19:25).

In this sense, the entire US discourse is centred around the idea that President Trump will negotiate "a deal". This idea requires that Russia and Russian President Vladimir Putin are portrayed as trustworthy actors that can be negotiated with: "I've known [Putin] for a long time, and I feel very strongly that they're very serious about it" (Trump 2025, 09:21); "[Putin] had to suffer through the Russia hoax. You know, Russia, Russia, Russia was a hoax. It was all Biden. It was nothing to do with him." (Trump 2025 33:56). President Trump does not make any difference between the two warring sides: "people are getting shot and dying [...] they're Russian soldiers and they're Ukrainian soldiers" (Trump 2025, 09:50). In the same vein, the US side also tries to portray Ukraine as weak and in desperate need of US help:" the big thing is the number of soldiers [...] being killed. You're losing thousands of soldiers" (Trump 2025, 01:08). This is in accordance with the fact that they painted a bad image of Zelenskyy in the past, such as the time when Trump called Zelenskyy a "dictator" (Pomeroy and Wright 2025). "Russia" and "Putin" serve as important nodal points ordering the discourse of the two sides, as they have very different understandings of them.

"The Deal" as an Empty Signifier

Trump's entire discourse is ordered around the nodal point "the deal", which also happens to be an empty signifier. The "deal" functions, arguably, like a phantasmatic object of desire that appears to sustain the fantasy of the leader as peacemaker: "It's something that you want and that he wants. We'll have to negotiate a deal, but we've started the confines of a deal and I think something can happen" (Trump 2025, 00:50). This "deal" seems to be the solution to anyone's problems. In the few moments where Trump accepts to define some aspects of the deal, it becomes clear that it does not align with Ukrainian demands, amounting only to a ceasefire:

"when they stop the shooting and we end up with the deal" (Trump 2025, 02:45). When asked about what will protect the exploitation of Ukrainian minerals, Trump refuses to outline any concrete measure regarding security guarantees or military presence, and "the deal" suddenly appears to cover that as well: "They will be protected. [...] The agreement will protect them. [...] And if that were going to happen, I wouldn't make a deal" (Trump 2025, 37:47). It can be argued that the very ambiguity of this term, which also serves as object of negotiation, is also responsible for the openness required to sustain mediation.

Zelenskyy and Ukraine

Meanwhile, the ideological content behind Zelenskyy's performance is focused on the portrayal of a strong Ukraine who is able to continue the war, with valiant soldiers fighting for freedom. This image is also strengthened by an antithetical portrayal of Russia and Vladimir Putin as untrustworthy, oppressing, enslaving, evil. Zelenskyy calls Putin "a killer and terrorist" (03:46), and he takes his time to emphasize the crimes committed by Russian forces against Ukraine: "this crazy Russian, that they've stolen 20,000 of children, Ukrainian children. They changed their names, they changed their families, relatives, and now they're in Russia" (Zelennskyy, 05:21).

This image of Russia makes security guarantees a necessary demand for Zelenskyy and Ukraine in this negotiation: "of course no compromises with the killer about our territories" (2025, 04:05); "I hope that this document [...] will be [the] first step to real security guarantees for Ukraine" (2025, 03:06). This is why, for Zelenskyy, the idea of "peace" is not that of a ceasefire, but that of a sustainable peace with Western guarantees. This is why he insists multiple times on discussing these points: "I want to discuss it [...] during our conversation. And of course, the infrastructure or security guarantees." (Zelenskyy 2025, 03:30); "I want to speak about the

contingents" (Zelenskyy 2025, 05:02). The obvious clash between the two visions of peace is one of the main loci of contradiction within the discussion.

Cordiality and Discursive Openness

The first part of the interaction is distinguishable cordial. It is observable how both sides validate the other's position, which reinforces the emergence of a discursive space where mediation is possible. They defer key disagreements and maintain open-ended language to preserve the appearance of dialogue, allowing diplomacy to function as a space of temporary coherence amid underlying antagonism. President Trump begins by acknowledging the difficulties of the negotiation:" we had little negotiations spat, but that worked out great I think for both countries, I think for the world actually, beyond both countries" (2025, 00:19). He reinforces a certain image of Ukraine: "your soldiers have been unbelievably brave" (Trump 2025, 01:55); "I give tremendous credit to your generals and your soldiers and yourself in the sense that it's been very hard fighting" (Trump 02:12).

A very illustrative moment is an obvious disagreement on the topic of the amount of support that Europe and the US have given. For context, President Trump repeatedly affirmed that the US sent more aid to Ukraine than Europe, which has been proven wrong (Eardley 2025). Zelenskyy reaffirms European support: "Europe really helped. President Trump said that they made less support, but they're our friends and they are our very supportive partners. They really gave a lot, Mr. President" (2025, 11:40). Trump replies: "they gave much less", to which Zelenskyy instantly says "no". This pattern repeats, until they both smile and virtually agree to disagree.

Escalation and Symbolic Contestation

The second part of the discussion consists in a deeper contestation over the meaning of some specific nodal points. Ultimately, the empty signifier "the deal", and then the use of the word "diplomacy" gets over-interrogated. This leads to "the collapse of the mediative function and the desperate reassertion of ideological closure. Trump has to restore authority not by clarifying but by re-insisting on the projected ideological image.

A prime point of cleavage is the nodal point "Russia". This signifier plays an important role in the definition of both ideological structures. Trump imagines an equivalence between Russia and Ukraine that is unacceptable for Zelenskyy: "think of the parents, whether they're in Russia or Ukraine, think of the parents of all these people being killed needlessly", to which Zelenskyy instantly replies: "*they* came to our territory" (2025, 3:00). The Ukrainian President later returns to this utterance" And [the] president speaks about the people and the soldiers which are dying, but they came to our territory. They came to our land, they began this war and they have to stop" (Zelenskyy 2025, 13:36).

A seemingly trivial moment - when Zelenskyy is asked why he is not wearing a suit - marks an important shift in the symbolic register of the encounter. A reporter, agreed by the American President, attempts to draw attention to Zelenskyy's departure from the ritualized codes of diplomatic decorum expected in the Oval Office. Arguably, this functions as a subtle mechanism of symbolic subordination, the reinforcement of a certain hierarchy through the emphasis of protocol. It demands justification for deviation from etiquette and reasserts the normative expectations embedded in the performative space of US diplomacy: "a lot of Americans have problems with you not respecting the dignity of office", (C-SPAN 2025, 18:58). Thee tone is ironic: "you're the highest level in this country's office and you refuse to wear a suit. Do you own a suit?"; the Ukrainian President replies in kind, noting that he will

wear a suit after the war is over: "maybe something better, [...] maybe something cheaper" (Zelenskyy 2025, 19:10). What appears humorous on the surface functions as a discursive reminder of who sets the terms of appearance, legitimacy, and hierarchy within the encounter (C-SPAN 2023, 18:39 - 19:20). It has also been reported that Zelensky was advised by Trump's team to dress more formally, and his refusal to do so bothered Trump (Sky News 2025). Nonetheless, President Trump later returned to the topic minutes after the question: "but you know what? I think he's dressed beautifully. I think he's dressed beautifully", to which his counterpart replied "I will answer more serious questions. If I can." (2025, 23:04).

What happens next is an intense questioning of the empty signifier "the deal". When "the deal" is actually asked to mean something (security guarantees, troops, other content), either by Zelenskyy or the reporters, Trump defers: "I don't want to talk about security" (2025, 20:11). He avoids answering whether Russia should pay reparations (2025, 26:43) or whether he will visit Ukraine (32:40). The "deal" functions, again, as an inevitable solution: "I think once this deal gets done, it's over. Russia is not going to want to go back and nobody's going to want to go back", a moment to which Zelenskyy visibly shakes his head in disagreement (2025, 20:11). The Ukrainian President later draws attention to the topic of security guarantees, and that Putin is not trustworthy which clearly damages his counterpart's ideological story (Zelenskyy, 2025, 23:21). Trump has to counter, by reaffirming that Putin never broke his word with him. This triggers an entire argument about the chronology of ceasefires in Ukraine and whether Trump was responsible for them (23:21). This damages Trump's image as a good negotiator, and implicitly that of the role of the US as mediator that Trump tries to project.

Later, Trump challenges Zelenskyy's image of Ukraine: "but a lot of cities have been destroyed. A lot of cities that are not recognizable. There's not a building standing" (2025, 32:47). This forces his interlocutor to reply by reinforcing his own picture of his country: "mostly cities alive and people work and children go to school [...] Ukraine is fighting and Ukraine lives"

(Zelenskyy 2025, 32:47). Zelenskyy later implies that Trump is being fooled by Putin: "maybe it's Putin who [is] sharing this information that he destroyed us. He lost 700,000 people, 700,000 soldiers. He lost everything" (2025, 37:30).

Breakdown and Ideological Closure

Starting with the intervention of Vice-President Vance, the conversation effectively collapses. The dialogue ends, and the symbolic space for meaningful interaction closes. What remains is pure performance, the affective reassertions of both ideological images, while also damaging the others'. Vance's invocation of the signifier "diplomacy" is a quite peculiar instance. It is not meant in its original sense: it is, in fact, a hegemonic rearticulation of the term. Populist discourse reclaims it through a new chain of equivalence: diplomacy is now linked to personalized strength, authenticity (Trump's foreign policy performances), and "political realism" (openness to Russia). Zelenskyy attempts to unpack this: "What kind of diplomacy, JD, you are speaking about? What do you mean?"

No meaningful exchange remains: Zelenskyy is literally spoken over or ignored. Instead, through the utterances of President Trump and his VP, the US image is reasserted as benevolent, powerful, and morally righteous, while refrains like "we've done so much," "you didn't say thank you," etc., become nothing but ritualistic affirmations of dominance. Zelenskyy's limited attempts at injecting dissonance by, for instance, accusing Trump of repeating Kremlin lines, are effectively absorbed or ignored. What we are effectively forced to witness is ideological closure in its purest form; identities are no longer negotiated, they are imposed: "Accept that there are disagreements, and let's go litigate those disagreements rather than trying to fight it out in the American media when you're wrong. We know that you're wrong" (Vance 2025, 45:34).

In theoretical terms, this final stage of the encounter marks the collapse of the mediative function and the triumph of ideological closure. The discursive space, previously sustained through ambiguity and partial openness, disintegrates under the weight of hegemonic imposition: the nodal points contested throughout are now forcefully imposed by Trump and Vance. Their understanding of Russia, the situation on the front, etc. is literally imposed. rump's complaint that Zelenskyy is not being grateful or thankful exposes this ideological structure: there is no negotiation, but a literal demand for affective affirmation. Trump's infamous declaration that "this is going to be great television, I will say that," may arguably not be made from a diplomatic subject position at all. There is no symbolic other to mediate with, only an audience to perform for, only the staging of identity rather than mediation of estrangement.

Discussion

Employing this understanding of diplomacy as a dialectically constituted by two functions, mediative and ideological, allows us to get a better understanding of how the political discursive logic of populism can affect diplomatic encounters. In this specific case, this thesis explores how the meeting in the Oval Office between US President Donald Trump and Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy shifts from an open-ended symbolic engagement to a closed ideological performance. What is important to note is that, here, populism is not treated as an external disruption to diplomacy, but it integrates its effects within the internal contradictions that diplomacy always already harbors. We can thus state that populist diplomacy is not "breaking" diplomacy, but overemphasizes certain aspects of it.

That being said, the proposed framework has its limitations. One concerns the way the two functions actually interact. A very important question is: can mediation ever truly "suspend" ideology? The required "discursive space for mediation" may sound as a rather idealistic category. It is very important to note that diplomatic encounters are very much defined by power

dynamics, so the 'openness' enabled by mediation is far from being a neutral ground. The generated space is not 'outside' ideology.

Very importantly, one might also ask whether this framework overdetermines populist encounters. And rightfully so, I believe that one can easily imagine non-populist actors engaging in highly hyper-ideological or even spectacular diplomatic encounters. What is special about populism is that this tendency towards the ideological is quite explicit. All diplomacy is ideological.

Another issue is the very limited engagement with the fact that the selected case has an audience as a component. In fact, one can argue that multiple audiences, as defined by the fiction of representation itself, exist at the same time and draw very different conclusions from the interaction. However, the focus should not be on the impact of the encounter on the audience, but the other way around. One may be entitled to ask: if the ideological function is about enabling political subjectivity, in which way is that related to the interpellation of one's audience? At the same time, the fact that a certain diplomatic interaction is performed in front of an audience might make one wonder whether there are moments where the diplomatic subject position is abandoned in favour of another subject position whose only goal is to interact with the audience. I would also add that an emphasis on the ideological instead of the mediative is not directly related to the existence of an audience. It is not necessary that any of the interlocutors in the case described above are tempted to interpellate their audience at home. That is because the opposite argument can also be made: both audiences very much expect and desire an agreement, which can only be reached if meaningful interaction is pursued.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

As originally stated, the purpose of this thesis was to answer the following research question: How does populist discourse affect the symbolic functioning of diplomacy? It attempted to answer it by developing a theoretical framework that understands diplomacy as structurally constituted by two functions: the ideological and the mediative. The purpose of the mediative function is to maintain the discursive space necessary for meaningful interaction. At the same time, the role of the ideological function is to perform the illusion of a unified political subject through symbolic representation and interpellation. Both functions are inherent to any diplomatic interaction: the fiction of a unified, coherent entity to be represented is a condition of possibility for diplomacy, but for an interaction to be worth having, the mediative function has to suspend the ideological drive to suture meaning.

In this context, the impact of populism no longer has to be assessed on two different logics: either as disruption or as spectacle. Populist discourse has an impact on the interaction between the two functions: the tendency of a populist engaged in diplomatic interaction to reiterate their claim to representation is an overemphasis of the ideological function. This carries the risk of ideological closure and the break of mediation, as we have seen in the analysis of the Trump–Zelenskyy Oval Office meeting. In this interaction, the discursive space needed for mediation visibly breaks down, as a result of what can be understood as ideological totalization.

An argument can be made that this framework can be used extensively in studying other such interactions that differ in significant ways. On the one hand, investigating meetings between two populist leaders may reveal a very peculiar instance where the ideological aspects are mutually reinforced. It is expected that the representational logic sustained by both leaders will be mutually supported, rather than damaged (as Zelenskyy often does throughout the Oval

Office meeting), and mediation is not broken. At the same time, there is little reason to limit research at the level of state leaders. Considering the level of political capture of diplomatic apparatuses done by populists (Lequesne 2021), it is worth asking whether political appointees that replace career diplomats also tend to overemphasize the ideological function. Another element worth examining is, again, how this theoretical framework can take into account the presence of an audience.

Despite the focus on populism present in this thesis, it can be argued that this framework is fairly versatile and can be applied to a wide variety of diplomatic interactions. One may expect a similar level of ideological suture of other encounters, where the background is similarly ideologically charged (for instance, Cold War interactions between US - USSR leaders or diplomats). Another area worth exploring are multilateral settings. NATO summits, for instance, are highly ideological, focused on sustaining a shared identity (Koschut 2024) - how would the ideological aspect of diplomacy function in such a setting? Alternative subjectivities can also be explored, by examining how non-state actors (e.g. cities, regions, IOs) engage in diplomacy - do they reproduce the same dialectic?

Ultimately, the nature of diplomacy is so contested and multifaceted that it is impossible to list all the nuances missed by the proposed framework. The point of this exploratory work was to merely offer a different lens for understanding the way populism interacts with diplomacy, where populism is not either disruption or spectacle, but both. The ultimate impression left is that populism does not bring something new to diplomacy, but only exposes tensions that the very practice of diplomacy perpetually seeks to manage.

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