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‘Totus mundus agit histrionem’: Silvio Berlusconi’s legacy in foreign policy and international affairs

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ABSTRACT

Silvio Berlusconi’s legacy in Italian politics has been considerable and widely studied. However, did Forza Italia’s leader change Italy’s foreign policy as dramatically as he changed domestic politics? What legacy, if any, has Berlusconi left in international politics? In this article, I will argue that Berlusconi left a distinctive although not enduring legacy in Italian foreign policy, initiating a populist, nationalist and revisionist course that partially disrupted Italy’s traditional diplomatic stance and foreshadowed a number of global trends. Berlusconi’s impact on international affairs, however, goes beyond his record as diplomat. Berlusconi provided a template, or model, that leaders worldwide widely emulated, helping to set the stage for populists everywhere. The combination of short-lived policy changes and long-lasting shifts in political attitudes constitute Berlusconi’s complex legacy in international politics.

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When asked to bring to mind Berlusconi’s trajectory in international affairs, inevitably readers are reminded of the histrionics that made him famous.¹ Berlusconi made a name for himself internationally for his endless faux pas: miming at press conferences, hand gesturing during official photos with foreign dignitaries, as well as dispensing offhand racist or sexist remarks about the issue of the day (Time Magazine 2012). The highest point of Berlusconi’s diplomatic career, according to his supporters, was also a deeply theatrical affair: at the 2002 ‘Pratica di Mare’ NATO-Russia summit, in the lavish neoclassical citadel purpose-built for the occasion, Berlusconi went as far as to claim he had ‘officiated a wedding’ that ‘ended the Cold War’ between Russia and the West (Venturini 2002).

For years, analysts tended to dismiss such theatrics as questions of style rather than substance. Yet, Berlusconi’s tricks and strategies found fertile ground internationally. In the 2010s Maurizio Viroli presciently warned, ‘international public opinion might think that Berlusconi is just an Italian extravagance. Improbable as it might appear, however, Berlusconi’s methods and language could find imitators in other countries’ (2010: xxii). If Berlusconi treated the world as a stage, as the title of this article suggests, how did that stage expand so much as to absorb the entire world, adding more *histriones* as time went

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by? The dismissive tone of many analysts must be therefore set aside to confront the more challenging question of whether not just Italian politics, but the world may have in some way been changed by Berlusconi and his legacy.

To properly consider this question, the paper will proceed in two stages. In the first part, I will review the initiatives and policies with which Berlusconi's governments directly acted in the world: those related to Italy's foreign policy during his four mandates. My argument is that these policies disrupted the continuity in post-war Italian foreign policy and initiated a populist, nationalist, and revisionist course in Italian foreign policy. This reorientation of foreign policy was short lived; yet, it intersected with developing global trends and contributed to emboldening a set of transnational developments that have now coalesced around a global conservative turn in world politics (on the global 'reactionary' turn, see Drolet and Williams 2022; Michelsen, De Orellana, and Costa Buranelli 2023). From endorsing forms of 'banal nationalism' that defied loyalty to a progressive, cosmopolitan ethos, to legitimizing despots and their revisionist challenges to a liberal international order now in full crisis, Berlusconi helped pave the way to the multiple, intersecting crises which we are witnessing today.

Berlusconi's impact on international affairs, however, goes beyond his record as chief diplomat. In the second part of the paper, I will argue that Berlusconi's biggest legacy is, in fact, himself. Berlusconi provided a template, or model, that leaders worldwide widely emulated (Ben-Ghiat 2021). He helped to set the stage for the rise of populism, embodying a prototype of leadership that marked 'the end of old politics' (Mancini 2011) and inspired a new generation of maverick politicians, from Donald Trump to Boris Johnson and Javier Milei. Mindful of the difficulties involved in establishing political legacies of individual statesmen (Fong, Malhotra, and Margalit 2019), and of the need for modesty and reflexivity in making these claims, this article suggests that Berlusconi's legacy in international affairs can therefore be tentatively conceptualized as an eclectic combination of 'hard', yet short-lived, policy changes; and 'soft', yet long-lasting, shifts in political attitudes (Farrall, Hay, and Gray 2020, 3).

Italy in the world, Berlusconi on stage

Almost immediately, Berlusconi's 'taking to the field' of Italian politics generated controversies and spirited debates on a host of issues – from whether he was 'fit' to rule Italy to whether the ownership of his media empire constituted too jarring a conflict of interest. Foreign policy was much less of a central topic in these early debates, and yet during the 2000s a healthy academic exchange developed around the question of whether the four Berlusconi governments that spanned the 1990s and 2000s marked a discontinuity in the field of foreign policy, or not (Brighi 2007; Carbone 2009; Croci 2005; Ignazi 2004; Webber and Cladi 2012). Although informative, this debate frequently suffered from the limitation of all 'hot takes': a lack of perspective that, coupled with the imposing figure of this leader, inevitably distorted the picture. 'We may choose to regard [Berlusconi] as a prototype or as an exception', Paul Ginsborg wrote: 'time will tell which of these views is closer to the truth' (2004: 10).

From today's vantage point, it is possible to suggest that the foreign policy change initiated by Berlusconi was not a mere tactical adjustment, or an innovation in rhetoric only. Although falling short of a full-on restructuring of foreign policy

(Holsti 1982; Rosati, Hagan, and Sampson 1994), Berlusconi's new foreign policy course involved a strategic reconsideration of some of its goals and an attempt to reorientate Italy's position in the international system (Alden and Aran 2017; C. Hermann 1990; Haesebrouck and Joly 2021; cfr. Coticchia and Vignoli 2021). A classic example of leader-driven change (Blavoukos and Bourantonis 2014; Brummer 2024; C. Hermann 1990; M. Hermann et al. 2001) – with inputs from coalition partners, as will be detailed below – this new foreign policy course was, in essence, populist, nationalist, and revisionist.² In what follows, I shall deal with each of these traits in turn.

There is now little doubt that Berlusconi embodied most, if not all, of the qualities of a populist leader – and that this carried through to foreign policy (for background, see Balfour 2016; Destradi, Cadier, and Plagemann 2021; Diodato and Niglia 2019; Giurlando and Wajner 2023).³ To start with, a simplifying and polarizing language was apparent from Berlusconi's first foray into politics, which marked a clear discontinuity with the past. In his now famous televised speech of 26 January 1994, Berlusconi presented himself as the voice of 'the people' against the old and corrupt political élites, on the one hand, and against 'the Communists', or the left-wing 'cartel' that was threatening to win the elections, on the other. His international outlook was similarly polarized in that it pitted Western liberal democracies against 'countries governed by old Communist apparatuses, be they revamped or recycled' (Pedullà 2011, 851). If this polarization still echoed a Cold War mentality in the early 1990s, ten years later Berlusconi's foreign policy outlook became organized around another binary, a civilizational one: the Western world against Islam. Two months after the G8 summit in Genoa and just days after the 9/11 attacks, Berlusconi infamously claimed that 'we should be conscious of the superiority of [Western] civilization, which [...] has given people widespread prosperity [...] and guarantees respect for human rights and religion. This respect certainly does not exist in Islamic countries' (Il Corriere della Sera 2001).

This civilizational discourse merged with growing concerns around identity politics to inform Berlusconi's positions internationally. The defence of 'the West' and especially its Christian roots was at the centre of the second Berlusconi's government's battle at the European Convention that produced the 2004 Constitution – a battle around which prominent parts of his centre-right coalition converged (Fabbrini 2004). In a clear break with the centre-left, under Berlusconi migration policies became influenced by exclusionary notions of identity and by the growing role of 'populist radical right' (PRR) parties such as the Lega Nord (Northern League, LN) and Alleanza Nazionale (National Alliance, AN) in the governing coalition (Tarchi 2008; Verbeek and Zaslove 2015; Vignoli 2021). In 2002, the 'Bossi-Fini law' was adopted under the second Berlusconi government in an attempt to curb migration (A. Colombo and Sciortino 2004). This law initiated the now infamous 'push back' approach towards migrants and stood out at that time for its draconian measures. Over time, this anti-immigration theme moved from the fringes to the centre of Berlusconi's government. By his third mandate Berlusconi's outlook had moved further to the right (to use Juliet Kaarbo's expression, Berlusconi was 'breaking bad'; Kaarbo 2021). He was depicting migrants as a criminal 'army of evil' and regularly accusing the centre-left of wanting to flood Italy with immigration: 'the left wants to open the doors to migrants so as to shift the balance of votes and win the next elections' (La Stampa 2010; Moore 2008).

Berlusconi's populism was apparent also in the extreme personalization with which he pursued foreign-policy objectives (on the relation between personalization and populism, see Balfour 2016, 22; Cadier 2024; Destradi and Plagemann 2019; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017, 42–46). During his second government Berlusconi's personalization of foreign policy reached a climax when he took over the role of Foreign Minister, after sidelining and then ousting the then Foreign Minister, Renato Ruggiero, over Ruggiero's support for the European arrest warrant and the Airbus project. A top diplomat and former Director-General of the World Trade Organisation, Ruggiero was guilty, in the eyes of Berlusconi, of embodying the internationalist and pro-EU foreign policy establishment from which Berlusconi was keen to make a clear break (Andreatta and Brighi 2002, 227–29). If Berlusconi sought to marginalize or bypass the foreign-policy bureaucracy in his early mandates – a trait typical of populist leaders engaged in foreign policy (Destradi and Plagemann 2019, 724–27) – later on he reversed this strategy and decided to shape the bureaucracy in his image, instead. Berlusconi's reform of the Foreign Ministry was a rebranding exercise that sought to transform Italian diplomats into businessmen and women promoting what Berlusconi called the '*Sistema Italia*', ie. the network of corporations and economic actors that embodied Italian culture and identity abroad (cfr. Diodato and Niglia 2019, 65 and 85).

Most of all, Berlusconi interpreted diplomacy as a highly personalized practice, in which relations between countries were presented as extensions of personal relations between leaders (for the foreign-policy consequences of populist leaders focusing on personal relationships, see Thiers and Wehner 2022). More than any previous Prime Ministers in Italy, Berlusconi used international diplomacy as a way of legitimizing himself internationally as a credible statesman, in a textbook example of 'two-level game' dynamics. But he also used diplomacy as a legitimizing tool domestically, to strengthen his profile vis-à-vis the electorate and to secure his leadership of the governing coalition (Andreatta and Brighi 2002). This was apparent on occasions as different as the 'Pratica di Mare' NATO summit of May 2002, Berlusconi's televised address to a joint session of the US Congress in March 2006, and the series of high-profile summits that marked Italy's rapprochement with Libya between 2008 and 2010 (Ferrari and Pejranò 2011; Ferrini et al. 2023). Events such as these primarily served the aim of creating a spotlight for Berlusconi and casting him as a skilled diplomat. In the long run, this strategy turned out to be his nemesis – the souring of his relationship with German Prime Minister Angela Merkel and French President Nicolas Sarkozy closely preceded Berlusconi's controversial ousting in November 2011. However, in the short run, this tactic reaped a number of rewards. Berlusconi relished in using highly personalized and emotive language able to mobilize the electorate and ingratiate the interlocutor. Thus, announcing the newly signed 'Treaty of Friendship' between the Italy and Libya, in August 2008 Berlusconi offered his apologies to the Libyan leader Muammar Ghaddafi in these terms: 'In the name of the Italian people, as head of the government, I feel it my duty to apologise and express my sorrow for what happened many years ago and left a scar on many of your families. Today I leave you my heart, happy, truly happy and [...] and look forward to a future of friendship, fraternity and love' (Ferrari and Pejranò 2011: 102ff). The treaty was branded as 'historic' by Berlusconi and inevitably framed as his

own personal victory – a somewhat hollow victory, however, considering that only three years later Libya would be Berlusconi's nemesis, as shown below.

If there are many reasons to characterize Italy's foreign policy under Berlusconi as populist, then there are equally good reasons to highlight its nationalist character. After all, one of the first actions Italy took under Berlusconi's very first government was to block Slovenia's EU accession application and question the Treaty of Osimo, which had fixed Italy's border with the former Yugoslavia (Neal and Katz 1996). This irredentist demand broke a taboo and reflected the increasing influence, within the governing coalition, of AN: a party with a clear nationalist agenda and eager to re-open an 'Istrian question' that resonated heavily with its fascist past. Remarkably, Berlusconi's was the first European and post-Cold War government to include the far right. The fact that 30 years later the far right leads only one national government in Western Europe, that of Italy, and that Fratelli d'Italia (Brothers of Italy, FdI) is the direct successor of AN, has not gone unnoticed by scholars of right-wing populism (Ben-Ghiat 2021; Mudde 2023).

Berlusconi's foreign policy was not just populist; it was also nationalist. In a clear break with decades of internationalism during the 'First Republic', the reassertion of the national interest was placed at the centre of his foreign policy vision and influenced policy discourse from the very start. In January 2002, in his inaugural speech as (interim) Foreign Minister, Berlusconi defended Italy's right to 'decide over the direction of its foreign policy in absolute autonomy', promising that 'Italy [would] make its voice heard in order to protect its national interest' (Camera dei Deputati 2002). Any exclusions from international *directoires*, such as from the Contact Group on Former Yugoslavia in the 1990s, or from the EU 'triumvirate' between France, Germany and the UK in the 2000s, regularly provoked muscle-flexing and revamped nationalist rhetoric: 'Beware. Nobody in Europe is ready to be a second-class citizen. [...] Italy is a country that is as large as the United Kingdom, or France, we have an economy that is as strong – now, it's better not to forget about this matter of fact' (BBC News 2004; Il Giornale 2004). National assertiveness was a theme throughout Berlusconi's four governments. Raising the country's profile and prestige became a priority, as well as avoiding being taken for granted.

Thus, in the spring of 2002, with Israel's operation 'Defensive Shield' fully underway, Berlusconi frustrated international expectations, including Washington's, and refused to grant asylum to the 13 Palestinian militants taking shelter in the Church of the Nativity, Bethlehem, besieged by Israeli forces (Il Corriere della Sera 2002). Breaking with Italy's traditional pro-Palestinian stance, Berlusconi resisted the combined pressure of the Vatican, the USA, and of *éminence grise* Giulio Andreotti, to demand that Italian national interests be recognized and its sovereignty respected. When he persuaded other European countries to share the load and host prisoners too, Berlusconi considered this as a personal diplomatic victory.

Although some analysts readily identified the nationalist turn in Italy's foreign policy under Berlusconi, others have been sceptical of this claim (cfr. Aliboni and Greco 1996; Diodato and Niglia 2019: esp. 64–72). Ultimately, whether Berlusconi's foreign policy can be identified as 'just' populist, or should indeed be considered nationalist, boils down to one central issue: whether the pursuit of foreign policy aims and national interests was driven not just by an oppositional logic of 'the people' vs. 'the élite', but relied on practices of 'othering' that demonized other nations or minorities, either outside or

inside the state (Jenne 2021). Berlusconi's foreign policy towards the Middle East provides evidence of the latter. It was under the Forza Italia (FI) leader that Italy's diplomatic posture shifted from its traditional pro-Arab stance to a progressively pro-Israeli position (Del Sarto and Tocci 2008), marking yet another discontinuity with the past. This turn cannot be explained by simply blaming the changed international context after 9/11. In effecting this policy turn, anti-Muslim sentiments were central. Berlusconi came to champion Israel as the 'only democracy in the Middle East' in opposition to what was perceived as 'the Islamic threat' (Marzano 2011). This position was central to the reorganization of Italy's international alliances, as will be shown more in detail later, but it was also effectively used domestically, to fan the flames of anti-immigration narratives that proved successful at the ballot box.

Berlusconi's foreign policy was not just populist and nationalist; I would argue that it was also revisionist (for a treatment of the link between populism and foreign policy revisionism that aligns with my argument, see Jenne 2021). During his four government mandates, Italy attempted to revise, and specifically raise, Italy's status in the international system through an inconsistent participation in the European project and an intensified Atlanticism, on the one hand. On the other hand, Italy welcomed the new opportunities offered by a changing international system and became particularly receptive to the openings made by challengers of the status-quo, such as Russia and Turkey.

The already mentioned policy shift from a pro-Arab to a pro-Israeli position was the first incarnation, in the post-Cold war environment, of a successful transnational alliance that would over time prove momentous – that between right-wing forces and Israel. Central to this shift, which also implied a geographical reorientation within Italian foreign policy, were Berlusconi's own convictions as well as the position of the most nationalist PRR party in Berlusconi's coalition, Gianfranco Fini's AN. Keen to gain international legitimacy and leave his fascist roots behind, Fini went to great lengths to demonstrate his friendship with Israel: from declaring that he 'understood' Israel's need to build its security barrier, thus making Italy an outlier in Europe, to defending Israel's military campaigns in Gaza and celebrating the death of Yasser Arafat as an 'historic day for Israel's security' (Brighi 2006a). Berlusconi shared this position: his was the first post-Cold War European right-wing government to idolize Israel.

The pro-Israeli shift went hand in hand with a resurgence of Atlanticism. Unlike European populists that followed, and were critical of NATO and of US hegemony, Berlusconi followed a trajectory of convinced 'Atlanticist nationalism' (Chryssogelos 2021). This combined a legacy of Cold War 'sentimental' Atlanticism, that still viewed the US as a force for good in the world, with a 'civilizational' form of Atlanticism that invested the US with the power of reinventing the West along cultural or civilizational lines. If Italy's traditional foreign policy had carefully balanced its European and Atlantic dimension, under Berlusconi the latter took precedence over the former (Coticchia and Vignoli 2021). No doubt the events of 11 September 2001, as well as Berlusconi's personal closeness to US President George W. Bush, acted as catalysts for precipitating the advance of Berlusconi's Atlanticism into a policy priority. However, it was the military campaigns of the 'War on Terror' that offered a crucial opportunity to show Italy's eagerness to follow the US lead (Davidson 2009, 2011), even at the expense of Italy's European allies. In 2003, Berlusconi enthusiastically signed an initiative by the leaders of the self-proclaimed 'new' Europe who backed the US-led military campaign in Iraq,

effectively helping to split the continent on the issue (The Wall Street Journal 2003). The massive domestic opposition that Berlusconi faced on the war in Iraq ultimately forced him to maintain a prudent stance, especially on the issue of ground troops (Davidson 2011, 130). However, it failed to change the substance of a foreign policy firmly tied to American unilateralism. Despite not participating formally in the war, carabinieri and army contingents were sent to Iraq on ‘humanitarian’ grounds on 15 April 2003, while Italian bases in the north east were regularly used as a key operational link in the mission of US paratroopers. As for Afghanistan, during his fourth and final term of office Berlusconi not only helped to lift the veil of hypocrisy over Italy’s full participation in military operations, but also agreed to contribute to Barack Obama’s ‘surge’, bringing the Italian contingent to almost 4,000 soldiers (Coticchia and De Simone 2016).

If Berlusconi’s defence of American unilateralism, including its grand strategy in the Middle East, was unwavering throughout his four terms, his attitude towards the European Union was less consistent and less positive. This was enough to change Italy’s traditional pro-EU posture and to introduce elements of revisionism (Jenne 2021, 330). A significant number of influential Ministers in Berlusconi’s governments (e.g. Antonio Martino, Giulio Tremonti) professed various brands of Euroscepticism. This translated into a Euro-critical attitude: from scepticism vis-à-vis the Euro (and, at times, the nostalgia for the Lira), to the lukewarm attitude towards enlargement, to the favour with which Italy looked at other Eurosceptical countries, such as the United Kingdom at the time. Berlusconi publicly embraced European integration only when this promised to bring personal success, as with the signing of the European Constitution, which took place in Rome in October 2004. But he never missed an opportunity to sow the seeds of division within the continent. Aside from his infamous escapades during the July–December 2003 EU Presidency semester, Italy’s defence of Russia’s military campaign in Georgia, for instance, helped to break the European front and attracted the telling epithet of ‘Europe’s Trojan horse’ (Carbone 2008).

Berlusconi’s foreign policy revisionism was manifest not only in its attempt to divide Europe and accommodate US unilateral ventures, but also in its pursuit of bilateral relationships aimed at exploiting the greater freedom of manoeuvre possible in the post-Cold War world, and then in the post-9/11 environment. Aside from the already mentioned shift to a pro-Israeli foreign policy, Berlusconi pursued closer relations with countries such as Russia, Turkey, and Libya. In the case of Russia, Berlusconi built on the already strong ties pursued under centre-left governments, but these underwent a qualitative change under the centre-right. Thus, Berlusconi not only defended Russia’s 2008 military campaign in Georgia while in office for the fourth time, but he sided with Putin during Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014, and finally defended Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022, much to the embarrassment of the current Prime Minister, Giorgia Meloni, of whom FI is still a key ally (Le Monde 2023). Berlusconi’s support of Russia jarred with Italy’s intensified Atlanticism and irritated Washington, to the point that the US Ambassador in Rome, Ronald Spogli, accused Berlusconi of being the ‘mouthpiece of Putin’ and of seeking to damage or ‘dilute American security interests in Europe’ (US Embassy Rome 2009).

Aside from Putin, Berlusconi also championed closer relations with two other despotic leaders at odds with the West: Turkey’s Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Libya’s Muammar Ghaddafi (The New Arab 2023). Both were courted by Berlusconi not least in an attempt

to manage migration flows from the Middle East and Africa, respectively – an objective that, according to Berlusconi, was worth pursuing even at the cost of legitimizing leaders who made no mystery of their resentment against the West and that, in turn, were increasingly ostracized by it. In the case of Turkey, Berlusconi continued to back Ankara's bid to join the European Union, and treated Erdogan as an interlocutor even at the height of domestic repression. In the case of Libya, the 'Treaty of Friendship' signed in August 2008, which combined historic reparations with measures to reduce migration, was presented as a watershed by Berlusconi and lavishly celebrated with the visit of Muammar Ghaddafi to Rome in August 2010. When the UN-sponsored and French-led multinational coalition initiated its bombardment of Libya to oust Ghaddafi only nine months later, in March 2011, however, Berlusconi realized that rather than anticipating a trend, in this case he had been out of step and faced a dilemma: between Italy's desire to please its Atlantic ally and its special relationship with Libya and its leader. This proved to be an impossible quandary and a fatal impasse for Berlusconi: only a few months after Gaddafi was assassinated, it was Berlusconi's turn to be definitively ousted from government.

'Sic transit gloria mundi'?⁴ the international and mimetic legacy of a proto-populist

Italy's foreign policy under Berlusconi was marked by short-lived, yet significant changes. With his injection of populism, his retrieval and pursuit of nationalist themes, and his declared penchant for revising and adjusting Italy's positioning in the world, Berlusconi attempted to steer Italy into new territory via distinct policy choices. This new course, however, did not last. Many of Berlusconi's foreign policy positions were abandoned by the governments that followed – for instance, Italy returned to its traditional pro-EU stance under the centre-left governments of the late 1990s and late 2000s, and even more so in the early 2010s, when the technocratic government of Mario Monti took over after Berlusconi's fall from grace in November 2011. Thus, many commentators dismissed Berlusconi's influence on foreign policy as negligible. In reality, although short-lived, these changes left a trace and intersected with developing global trends, helping to embolden a global conservative turn as well as reflecting a gradual shift to a multipolar order. From endorsing forms of 'banal nationalism' that defied loyalty to a progressive, cosmopolitan ethos, to legitimizing despots and their revisionist challenges to a liberal international order now in full crisis, Berlusconi's legacy contributed to a shift of political attitudes. Two aspects are particularly worth considering in this respect.

Firstly, despite his much-touted Atlanticism, Berlusconi effectively legitimized leaders that made no mystery of their ambitions to challenge the liberal international order – Russia's trajectory is a case in point. Berlusconi was not only the Western leader that most fervently supported Russia's inclusion in the G7, but he was one of the few in the West who consistently defended Russia's serial challenges to the status-quo, including challenges to the territorial integrity of other states. No wonder the US was concerned that Italy was sabotaging US efforts to 'curb the Kremlin's worst instincts', going as far as to accuse Berlusconi of putting collective security at risk (US Embassy Rome 2008).

Despite his strong defence of Western civilization and US hegemony, Berlusconi's desire to pamper dictators and ignore human rights violations was evident in his close

relationship with states such as Turkey, not to mention Ghaddafi's Libya or Mubarak's Egypt. His urge to bring Russia or Turkey closer to the West had nothing to do with the tradition of openness and dialogue which Italy pursued with the non-Western bloc throughout the Cold War (Brighi 2013). And neither can it be simply reduced to hypocrisy or self-interest due to his vast business portfolio. Berlusconi may well have believed initially that the transition from a unipolar to a multipolar system could be managed multilaterally. However, as events unfolded, and his leadership hardened, his default policy preference became to strike deals and find common ground with dictators (Kaarbo 2021). In this respect too, he set an important precedent. Only a few years after his fall from power, even 'normative power Europe' would resort to making deals with states such as Turkey and Libya to stop migration, in exchange for cash.

As for finding common ground with dictators, Berlusconi could draw on his own populist and nationalist dispositions to find quite a few areas of convergence. From the cult of his own persona to his disrespect for law and the judiciary; from his plebiscitary appeals to the masses to the centralization of power in his office, Berlusconi was as much of a nationalist as the liberal democratic framework allowed for. Although it is true that his successors went much further in practicing visceral and dangerous forms of nationalism, Berlusconi was unparalleled in reintroducing and legitimizing banal forms of nationalism able to first defy, and then gradually to erode the progressive and cosmopolitan ethos of the post-Cold War global public sphere. If it is true that Berlusconi once innocently told EU leaders at a summit that they should simply 'talk more about women and football' (BBC News 2023), one can see how the particular brand of nationalism pursued by Berlusconi – which combined patriotic appeals to the 'homeland' with sexism, racism, and homophobia – made him not only a perfect interlocutor of illiberal, nationalist regimes outside the West, but a model for populist leaders within the West.

However, Berlusconi's biggest legacy in foreign policy and international affairs was, quite simply, himself. He served as a bridge to twenty-first century authoritarians, inspiring a new generation of maverick politicians and helping to set the stage for populists everywhere (Ben-Ghiat 2021). As one of the first non-career politicians in the post-Cold War to claim he stood against the 'elite' of political professionals, Berlusconi brought wealth, corruption, and conflicts of interest to the very top of the political ladder, combining media and political power in ways hitherto unknown globally. Leaders all over the world emulated this trajectory, mixing media celebrity, reality TV, and political power: from Donald Trump's rise from 'The Apprentice' to the US Presidency, to Volodymyr Zelensky playing the President of Ukraine in the TV series 'Servant of the People', before actually becoming President. Stylistically as well, Berlusconi broke new ground in eroding the boundaries between politics and comedy, with his endless gags and pranks, mimicry and theatrics while in office – *pace* his attacks on the '*teatrino della politica*'. Before 'post-truth' and fake news became regular terms of debate, and certainly drawing on his own repertoire as 'commercial TV' tycoon, Berlusconi regularly replaced veracity with performance, thriving on breaking taboos with a bawdy sense of comedy that ingratiated him with the electorate (Molé Liston 2020). Reflecting on the consequences of oligarchic media control for democratic politics, Francis Fukuyama recently went as far as to state that, 'when future historians look back at politics at the turn of the 21st century, they will place the blame for the collapse of Western civilization on the shoulders of one man, Italy's former Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi' (Fukuyama 2021).

Whether Berlusconi precipitated the collapse of Western civilization or not, the influence of his legacy globally is hard to deny. Quite aside from what Berlusconi or Italy did in the world under his mandate, he was imitated worldwide. The mechanisms of transmission of his legacy, therefore, have less to do with standard notions of ‘policy transfer’, ‘policy diffusion’, or even ‘linkage politics’ (Dolowitz and Marsh 2000; Rosenau 1969), than with an equally compelling notion – that of imitation, or *mimesis* (Brighi and Cerella 2015; Goldsmith 2005; Troy 2021). This should not surprise, given that emulative linkages and contagion are now recognized as being central to populism (Rydgren 2005) in the same way that they were central to other ‘isms’ of the past.

Naturally, the claim that Berlusconi modelled, facilitated, or enabled some important political shifts should not be confused with the assertion that he single-handedly ‘caused’ them. This would be a preposterous contention, not just because of Italy’s negligible weight in international affairs, but more generally because social outcomes rarely rely on single causes (Farrall, Hay, and Gray 2020). Evidently, Berlusconi did not cause the world to shift to multipolarity, nor did he independently steer global politics to the right, or single-handedly invent populism. Indeed, Italy did not adopt any overtly drastic international measures during the *Cavaliere*’s four governments – no wars were declared and *pacta* remained *servanda*. Much ado about little, then? Not quite. Italy has often been likened to a ‘political laboratory’, foreshadowing political developments to come (Hobsbawm 1977); or a ‘canary in the coalmine’, warning of dangers ahead (Tarrow 2017). Despite being short-lived, Berlusconi’s policies left traces that joined up to create a roadmap – one delineating a populist, nationalist, and revisionist path, along which many countries have since travelled. Berlusconi also provided a model of leadership that has been widely imitated and contributed to a change of political attitudes. It is this combination of ‘hard’, yet short-lived, policy changes; and ‘soft’, yet longer lasting, shifts in political attitudes that constitutes Berlusconi’s eclectic legacy. Exactly three decades after he ‘took to the field’, as a recent *Foreign Policy* article titled, we are all living in Berlusconi’s world now (Jones 2019). And that world, today, truly is a stage.

Notes

1. This Latin motto was inscribed on a crest at the entrance of *The Globe* theatre, in London, and translated in William Shakespeare’s 1599 comedy ‘As You Like it’ (Act II, Scene VII, line 139) as: ‘all the world’s a stage’. I wish to thank the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, University of Westminster, for funding a writing retreat at The Abbey, Sutton Courtney, where this paper was first drafted.
2. This argument develops what I first outlined in Brighi (2006b) and (2013).
3. Berlusconi’s populism in foreign policy is best understood as a political strategy, aimed at gaining personalized power through anti-establishment appeals and plebiscitarian linkages (Barr 2009), as well as a specific ‘political style’ (Moffitt 2017; Ostiguy and Kaltwasser 2017), featuring the political use of socio-cultural signifiers, the public recourse to undiplomatic language, and the emphasis on personal bonds between world leaders.
4. ‘Thus passes the worldly glory’. Incidentally, these were Berlusconi’s words upon learning of Gaddafi’s death (BBC News 2011).

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