



The Impacts of the Russian Invasion of Ukraine on Right-Wing Populism in Europe

Gilles Ivaldi, Emilia Zankina

► To cite this version:

Gilles Ivaldi, Emilia Zankina (Dir.). The Impacts of the Russian Invasion of Ukraine on Right-Wing Populism in Europe. European Center for Populism Studies (ECPS), 372 p., 2023, 9789464755480. 10.55271/rp0010 . halshs-04024156

HAL Id: halshs-04024156

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-04024156>

Submitted on 10 Mar 2023

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

The Impacts of the Russian Invasion of Ukraine **on Right-Wing Populism** >>> in Europe

Edited by Gilles Ivaldi & Emilia Zankina



ECPS
EUROPEAN CENTER for
POPULISM STUDIES

THE IMPACTS OF THE RUSSIAN
INVASION OF UKRAINE
ON RIGHT-WING POPULISM
IN EUROPE



The Impacts of the Russian Invasion of Ukraine on Right-Wing Populism in Europe

A report by European Center for Populism Studies (ECPS)

Brussels -- March 8, 2023

Project Coordinator

Azize Sargin

Editors

Gilles Ivaldi

Emilia Zankina

Style Editor

Simon P. Watmough

©ECPS 2023

All rights reserved.

ISBN: 9789464755480

doi.org/10.55271/rp0010

Designed by NOW/UP Brand Agency - www.nowup.co

CONTENT

16	Introduction Gilles Ivaldi & Emilia Zankina
32	The case of the Austrian Radical Right and Russia during the war in Ukraine Reinhard Heinisch & Diana Hofmann
48	Pro-Russia or anti-Russia: political dilemmas and dynamics in Bulgaria in the context of the war in Ukraine Emilia Zankina
64	The impact of the Russia-Ukraine War on ties between the Vlaams Belang in Belgium and the Putin regime Teun Pauwels
76	The repercussions of the war in Ukraine on Croatia's Far Right Vassilis Petsinis
90	Our people first (again)! The impact of the Russia-Ukraine War on the populist Radical Right in the Czech Republic Vlastimil Havlík and Alena Kluknavská
102	The impact of the Russia-Ukraine War on right-wing populism in Europe: The case of Denmark Susi Meret
114	The impact of the Russia-Ukraine War on right-wing populism in Estonia Mari-Liis Jakobson & Andres Kasekamp
126	The impact of the Russia-Ukraine War on right-wing populism in Finland Yannick Lahti and Emilia Palonen
140	The impact of the Russia-Ukraine War on radical right-wing populism in France Gilles Ivaldi
156	To Russia with love? German populist actors' positions vis-a-vis the Kremlin Kai Arzheimer
168	Politicizing war: Viktor Orbán's right-wing authoritarian populist regime and the Russian invasion of Ukraine Zoltán Ádám

186	Italy's multiple populisms facing the Russo-Ukrainian war Cecilia Biancalana
200	The Russia-Ukraine War and right-wing populism in Latvia Daunis Avers
210	The populist Far Right in Lithuania during Russia's war against Ukraine Jogilė Ulinskaitė and Rosita Garškaitė-Antonowicz
222	The impact of the Russia-Ukraine War on right-wing populism in Norway Liv Sunnercrantz
234	The Russia-Ukraine War and the Far Right in Portugal: Minimal impacts on the rising populist Chega party Afonso Biscaia and Susana Salgado
250	Romanian populism and transnational political mobilization Sorina Soare
266	Balancing on a pin: Serbian populists, the European Union and Russia Dušan Spasojević
278	The Russia-Ukraine War and the radicalization of political discourse in Slovakia Peter Učeň
290	The Spanish Radical Right under the shadow of the invasion of Ukraine Hugo Marcos-Marne
302	The repercussions of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on the populist Radical Right in Sweden Niklas Bolin
314	Disagreement among populists in the Netherlands: The diverging rhetorical and policy positions of Dutch populist Radical Right parties following Russia's invasion of Ukraine Chris Nijhuis, Bertjan Verbeek and Andrej Zaslove
326	A foreign policy litmus test: How the war in Ukraine has fuelled populist rhetoric in Erdoğan's Turkey Emre Erdoğan
340	Conclusion Gilles Ivaldi and Emilia Zankina

EDITORS AND CONTRIBUTORS

(In alphabetical order)

Zoltán Ádám is associate professor at the Institute of Economics at Corvinus University of Budapest, Hungary, where he teaches courses in economics and political economy. He holds a PhD in economics from Debrecen University, an MPhil in Political Science from Central European University, and a Masters in Public Administration from the Harvard Kennedy School. His research focuses on the political economy of institutional change, referencing the post-communist transition in Central and Eastern Europe and the rise of authoritarian populism in CEE and elsewhere. Earlier, he was College Teacher in East European Economics at the School of Slavonic and East European Studies at University College London and Visiting Scholar at the Minda de Gunzburg Center for European Studies at Harvard University. Most recently, in February-March 2023, he worked as Visiting Scholar at the Department of Economics of Freie Universität Berlin's Institute for East European Studies.

Kai Arzheimer is Professor of German Politics and Political Sociology at the Johannes Gutenberg University in Mainz, Germany. He has published widely on voting behaviour and political attitudes and is particularly interested in Far Right parties and their voters.

Daunis Auers is Professor of European Studies at the University of Latvia, a Jean Monnet Chair (2022–25) and Director of the PhD programme in Social Sciences. He studied at the London School of Economics and defended his PhD at University College London. He has been a Fulbright Scholar at the University of California-Berkeley (2005–06) and a Baltic-American Freedom Foundation Scholar at Wayne State University in Detroit (2014). He has published widely on political parties, elections, referendums, populism and the Radical Right and economic competitiveness. His book, *The Comparative Government and Politics of the Baltic States: Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania in the 21st Century*, was published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2015.

Cecilia Biancalana is a non-tenured assistant professor in the Department of Culture, Politics and Society at the University of Turin. Her research focuses on political ecology, party change, populism, and the relationship between the internet and politics.

Afonso Biscaia is a PhD candidate in Comparative Politics at the Instituto de Ciências Sociais–Universidade de Lisboa. His main research interests include radical right-wing populism and digital political communication.

Niklas Bolin is Associate Professor of Political Science at Mid Sweden University, Sundsvall, Sweden. His main research interests are parties and elections, particularly organisation, leadership, intra-party democracy, Radical Right parties and Green parties. He is co-editor (with Nicholas Aylott) of the edited volume *Managing Leader Selections in European Political Parties* (Palgrave, 2021) and has published in high-ranking international journals, including *Party Politics*, *The Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties*, *Scandinavian Political Studies* and *West European Politic.*

Emre Erdoğan is a member of the Department of International Relations at Istanbul Bilgi University. With a doctoral degree in Political Science from Boğaziçi University, he has served as a researcher and senior consultant in various projects in academia and civil society. His research focuses on political participation, foreign policy and public opinion, child and youth well-being, methodology and statistics. He extensively studies and publishes about youth in Turkey, integration of Syrian refugee youth in Turkey, othering, polarisation and populism.

Rosita Garškaitė-Antonowicz is a PhD candidate at the Institute of International Relations and Political Science, Vilnius University. Her research interests include religion and politics, public opinion on European integration, and post-communist transformation.

Vlastimil Havlík is associate professor at Masaryk University and the National Institute for Research on Socioeconomic Impacts of Diseases and Systemic Risks (SYRI) (<https://www.syri.institute/>). His research focus includes populism and political parties in Central and Eastern Europe. He is also editor-in-chief of the Czech Journal of Political Science (politologickycasopis.cz). [ORCID: 0000-0003-3650-5783]

Reinhard Heinisch is Professor of Comparative Austrian Politics at the University of Salzburg and currently serves as head of the Department of Political Science. His research on comparative populism, political parties, the Radical Right, and democracy has appeared in journals such as the *European Journal of Political*



Research, JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies, Party Politics, Democratization, and West European Politics, among others. He recently completed a Horizon 2020 project on populism and democracy. Relevant book publications include *Understanding Populist Party Organization: The Radical Right in Western Europe* (Palgrave, 2016), *The People and the Nation: Populism and Ethno-Territorial Politics* (Routledge, 2019) and *Political Populism. A Handbook* (Nomos, 2021). He is an affiliated faculty member of the European Studies Center at the University of Pittsburgh and is a regular visiting scholar at Renmin University of China in Beijing

Diana Hofmann is a PhD student in Political Science at the University of Salzburg. Her research focuses on the effects of populist and nationalist attitudes on political participation and voting behaviour. Drawing on her expertise in quantitative research methods, she is also a researcher in the project on populism and conspiracy theories funded by the Austrian Science Fund. Moreover, she is currently involved in a project to help secondary school students across Austria better understand the concepts of populism and democracy from a political science perspective.

Gilles Ivaldi is researcher in politics at CEVIPOF and professor at Sciences Po Paris. His research interests include French politics, parties and elections, and the comparative study of populism and the radical right in Europe and the United States. Gilles Ivaldi is the author of *De Le Pen à Trump : le défi populiste* (Bruxelles : Editions de l'Université de Bruxelles, 2019), *The 2017 French Presidential Elections. A political Reformation?*, 2018, Palgrave MacMillan, with Jocelyn Evans. His research has appeared in journals such as *Electoral Studies*, the *International Journal of Forecasting*, *Revue Européenne des Sciences Sociales*, *French Politics*, *Revue Française de Science Politique* or *Political Research Quarterly*.

Mari-Liis Jakobson is Associate Professor of Political Sociology at Tallinn University, Estonia. Her expertise relates to populism and the politics of migration and citizenship. She has published articles on transnational migration and populism in top-ranked international journals, including *Contemporary Politics*, *European Political Science* and *Comparative Migration Studies*. In 2023, her co-edited volume, *The Anxieties of Migration and Integration in Turbulent Times*, was published with Springer. She is also the principal investigator of the project “Breaking into the Mainstream While Remaining Radical: Sidestreaming Strategies on the Populist Radical Right”, funded by the Estonian Research Council.

Andres Kasekamp is the Chair of Estonian Studies and Professor of History at

the Munk School of Global Affairs and Public Policy at the University of Toronto. Previously, he was a Professor of Baltic Politics at the University of Tartu and has served as president of the Association for the Advancement of Baltic Studies. He obtained his PhD in modern history from University College London in 1996 and was the first researcher to publish and teach on the Radical Right in Estonia. His books include *The Radical Right in Interwar Estonia* (Macmillan, 2000) and *A History of the Baltic States* (Palgrave, 2010).

Alena Kluknavská is assistant professor at Masaryk University and the National Institute for Research on Socioeconomic Impacts of Diseases and Systemic Risks (SYRI) (<https://www.syri.institute/>). Her research focuses on political communication and public and political discourses on migration and minority issues. She is also interested in understanding the communication strategies and successes of the populist Radical Right parties and movements in Central and Eastern Europe. Recently, her work has focused on truth contestation and polarisation in political discourse, particularly on social media. [ORCID: 0000-0002-3679-3335]

Yannick D. O. Lahti is a political scientist and a postdoctoral research fellow at the University of Helsinki. Lahti obtained his PhD-degree in 2022 from the University of Bologna in Italy. In his research, he examined European populism, populist actors, and political communication during the last European Union elections of 2019 within the Hybrid Media system. In his work, Yannick Lahti departed from the consideration that as populism and populist rhetoric are challenging concepts to define - especially in relation to different media environments; they should be addressed and analyzed through the usage of a combination of methods and theoretical perspectives, namely Communication Studies, Corpus Linguistics, Political theory, Rhetoric and Corpus-Assisted Discourse Studies. Recently Lahti was involved with Whirl of Knowledge project and is currently working as a postdoctoral researcher conducting research for the transatlantic ENDURE-project funded by the Finnish Academy (Suomen Akatemia).

Hugo Marcos-Marne is Assistant Professor of Political Science at the University of Salamanca. Previously, he has been a postdoctoral research fellow at SUPSI-Lugano, the University of St. Gallen, and the National University of Distance Education (UNED Madrid). His research sits at the intersection between public opinion and electoral behaviour, political parties, and populism. He has published on these topics in many top-ranked international journals, including *Political Communication*, *Political Behavior*, *West European Politics*, *Political Studies*, *Politics*,



Electoral Studies, the *International Political Science Review*, and *Politics and Governance*, among others. He is currently a researcher in the project entitled “Youth Political Socialization, Journalism & Social Media: Understanding Democracy in Contentious Times” and a member of the Democracy Research Unit (DRU) and Team Populism.

Susi Meret is associate professor at the Department of Politics and Society in the University of Aalborg, Denmark. Her main research interest is with populist radical right-wing parties in Europe, populism, political extremisms and civil society reactions. She has conducted studies on right-wing populism in Denmark (and beyond), also considering party leadership charisma, the mainstream parties’ counter-strategies, the role of Islam and, more broadly, the civil society responses to growing anti-immigration and ethno-nationalism. For more info: <https://vbn.aau.dk/en/persons/100658/publications/>

Chris Nijhuis is a PhD candidate and instructor in the Department of Political Science at Radboud University, Nijmegen, in the Netherlands. His research concentrates on the impact of populist parties on the foreign policy of states, with a particular focus on the link between national identity and foreign policy.

Emilia Palonen is a senior University Lecturer in Political Science at the University of Helsinki. She is Programme Director in Datafication at the Helsinki Institute for Social Sciences and Humanities and Leader of the HEPPSinki research group. She is PI of the Academy of Finland project WhiKnow (2019-2022), Kone Foundation project Now-Time Us Space (2020-24), European Commission funded DRad project (2020-2023), and the Academy of Finland and other Trans-Atlantic Partnership project funders’ ENDURE exploring resilience in crisis (2022-2024). Emilia is an Executive Committee member and chair of the publications committee of the International Political Science Association (IPSA). She served between 2018-2022 as the Chair of the Finnish Political Science Association. She is a board member of the Finnish Federation of Learned Societies (2021-2023) and Treasurer of the Society of Scientists and Parliament Members, Tutkas ry. (2019-2023).

Teun Pauwels holds a PhD in political science (Université Libre de Bruxelles) and is currently working as a policy analyst for the Flemish Ministry of Education and Training. He is the author of *Populism in Western Europe. Comparing Belgium, Germany and The Netherlands* (2014, Routledge).

Vassilis Petsinis is Associate Professor of Political Science at the Corvinus University

(Institute of Global Studies) in Budapest, Hungary. He is a political scientist with expertise in European Politics and Ethnopolitics. His Marie Skłodowska-Curie (MSCA-IF) individual research project at the University of Tartu (2017–19) was entitled: “Patterns and management of ethnic relations in the Western Balkans and the Baltic States” (Project ID: 749400-MERWBKBS). Vassilis Petsinis is a specialist in the politics of Central and Eastern Europe. He is the author of the monographs *National Identity in Serbia: The Vojvodina and a Multiethnic Community in the Balkans* (Bloomsbury, 2020) and *Cross-regional Ethnopolitics in Central and Eastern Europe: Lessons from the Western Balkans and the Baltic States* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), as well as other academic publications that cover a range of countries as diverse as Serbia, Croatia, Romania, Hungary, Slovakia, Estonia, Latvia, and Greece.

Susana Salgado (PhD, 2007) is political communication scholar. She coordinates research projects, teaches, and publishes on democracy, populism, disinformation, hate and online extremism, and political polarisation. Salgado is currently Principal Research Fellow at the Instituto de Ciências Sociais–Universidade de Lisboa and the principal investigator of externally funded research projects, including “(The Matrix of) Populist and Denialist Attitudes towards Science” (PTDC/CPO-CPO/4361/2021) and “Depictions and Politicization of the Truth in Democratic Politics” (2020.04070.CEECIND/CP1615/CT0007).

Azize Sargin is an independent researcher and consultant of external relations for non-governmental organisations. She submitted her doctoral thesis in International Relations focusing on Migration Studies to the Brussels School of International Studies-University of Kent. Her research interest covers migrant belonging and integration, diversity and cities, and transnationalism. Azize had a 15-year-long professional career as a diplomat in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkey, where she worked in different positions and was posted to various countries, including Romania, the United States, and Belgium. During her last posting, she served as the political counsellor at the Permanent Delegation of Turkey to the EU.

Sorina Soare is lecturer in comparative politics at the University of Florence. She holds a PhD in political science from Université libre de Bruxelles and has previously studied political science at the University of Bucharest. Her work focuses on post-communist comparative politics, and her main research interests are emigration, party politics, populism, transnational participation and post-communist activism. Among her recent publications are “Saved by the diaspora? The case of the Alliance for the Union of Romanians” (2023, *European Political*



Science, co-authored), “Speaking Out against the Discrimination of Romanians Abroad: An Analysis of Parliamentary Speeches in the Home Country” (2022, *Nationalities Papers*, co-authored) and “No populism’s land? Religion and gender in Romanian politics” (2021, *Identities*, co-authored).

Dušan Spasojević is associate professor in the Faculty of Political Sciences, University of Belgrade. His main fields of interest are political parties, populism, civil society and the post-communist democratisation process. He is editor-in-chief of the journal *Political Perspectives*, published by FPS Belgrade and FPS Zagreb. Spasojević is a member of the steering board of the Center for Research, Transparency and Accountability (CRTA).

Liv Sunnercrantz is associate professor at the Department of Media and Social Sciences in the University of Stavanger. Sunnercrantz’s work centres on post-foundational discourse theory and the sociology of intellectuals. Her current research is focused on populism and populist rhetoric, especially in the Scandinavian context.

Peter Učeň studied political science in Bratislava (Comenius University), Budapest (the CEU) and Florence (the EUI), focusing on party politics and populism. He spent most of his career as a practitioner in international democracy assistance and political party aid. Currently, he is a freelance consultant and evaluator in democracy, governance, civil society capacity-building, the rule of law and anti-corruption.

Jogilė Ulinskaitė is Assistant Professor of Political Science and research fellow at the Institute of International Relations and Political Science, Vilnius University. Her research focuses broadly on the discourse of populist parties in Lithuania. In the recent past, she was part of a research team that carried out several projects on the collective memory of the communist and post-communist past in Lithuania. Her current research focuses on populism and its links to emotional narratives about the past.

Bertjan Verbeek is Professor of International Relations in the Department of Political Science at Radboud University, Nijmegen, in the Netherlands. He researches decision-making in foreign policy, including during crises, and the link between populism and foreign policy.

Simon P. Watmough is a postdoctoral researcher based in Leipzig in Germany and a non-resident research fellow in the research program on authoritarianism at ECPS. He was awarded his Ph.D. from the European University Institute in April

2017 with a dissertation titled “Democracy in the Shadow of the Deep State: Guardian Hybrid Regimes in Turkey and Thailand.” Dr. Watmough’s research interests sit at the intersection of global and comparative politics and include varieties of post-authoritarian states, the political sociology of the state, the role of the military in regime change, and the foreign policy of post-authoritarian states in the Middle East and Southeast Asia. His work has been published in *Politics, Religion & Ideology*, *Urban Studies* and *Turkish Review*. Since 2005, Watmough has taught international relations, diplomacy, foreign policy, and security studies, as well as Middle Eastern history at universities in Australia and Europe. In 2010–11 he was a research fellow at the Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion (CASE) at the London School of Economics. He has held Visiting Scholar positions at Boğaziçi University in Istanbul (2012), the University of Queensland (2013), Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok, Thailand (2014) and the University of Graz (2017). In addition to his academic publications, he is also a regular contributor to *The Conversation* and other media outlets.

Emilia Zankina is an Associate Professor in Political Science and interim Vice Provost for Global Engagement at Temple University and, since 2020, has served as the Dean of Temple University Rome. She holds a PhD in International Affairs and a Certificate in Advanced East European Studies from the University of Pittsburgh. Her research examines East European politics, populism, civil service reform, and gender in political representation. She has published in high-ranking international journals, including *West European Politics*, *Politics and Gender*, *East European Politics*, *Problems of Post-communism*, and *Representation*, as well as academic presses such as the ECPR Press, Indiana University Press, and others. She frequently serves as an expert adviser for Freedom House, V-Democracy, and projects for the European Commission. In the past, Zankina has served as Provost of the American University in Bulgaria, Associate Director of the Center for Russian and East European Studies at the University of Pittsburgh and Managing Editor of *East European Politics and Societies*.

Andrej Zaslove is Associate Professor of Comparative Politics in the Department of Political Science at Radboud University, Nijmegen, in the Netherlands. He conducts research on populism and political parties. He measures populist attitudes among voters and within political parties and examines the links between populism and democracy, foreign policy and gender. His publications can be found in journals such as *Comparative Political Studies*, *West European Politics*, *Political Studies* and the *European Political Science Review*.



Introduction¹

*Gilles Ivaldi** CNRS-CEVIPOF-Sciences Po Paris

*Emilia Zankina** Temple University Rome

Background

Rising tensions between Russia and Ukraine boiled over on February 24, 2022, as Vladimir Putin launched what the Kremlin called a “special military operation” in Ukraine. This blatant attack on Ukraine’s sovereignty sent political shockwaves across the planet, upending international markets and triggering panic throughout Ukrainian society. In the year since, the war has claimed tens of thousands of lives and caused hundreds of thousands more to flee while devastating Ukrainian infrastructure and wrecking the country’s economy. However, the consequences of Russia’s aggression have been felt far beyond Ukraine’s borders. The financial sanctions on Russia, disruptions to supply chains, and general economic insecurity have destabilized global energy markets and supply chains, causing food prices to soar (Boungou & Yatié, 2022). Furthermore, the urgency of the Russia–Ukraine conflict has stalled critical international cooperation in addressing the climate crisis (Ali et al., 2022; Liadze et al., 2022; Câmpeanu, 2022; Orhan, 2022; Pereira et al., 2022; Rawtani et al., 2022).

The fallout of the conflict has hit certain territories harder than others, depending on the region’s proximity to the competition and reliance on Russian and Ukrainian exports. In Europe, this has meant an asymmetric impact on domestic economies relative to their dependence on Russian gas

1. The editors would like to thank Azize Sargin, Ivan Escobar Fernández and Martin Galland at the ECPS for their support and assistance in preparing this report.

* gilles.ivaldi@sciencespo.fr, **emilia.zankina@temple.edu

Ivaldi, Gilles & Zankina, Emilia. (2023). “Introduction to the report on the impact of the Russia–Ukraine War on right-wing populism in Europe.” In: *The Impacts of the Russian Invasion of Ukraine on Right-wing Populism in Europe*. (eds). Gilles Ivaldi and Emilia Zankina. European Center for Populism Studies (ECPS). March 8, 2023. Brussels. <https://doi.org/10.55271/rp0034>

and Ukrainian grain. This has triggered a significant slowdown in economic growth in the Eurozone and an energy crisis over the winter (Celi et al., 2022; International Monetary Fund, 2022; Smit et al., 2022). Furthermore, European countries have used considerable resources to provide welfare assistance, temporary housing, and organizations to welcome refugees fleeing the conflict (Liadze et al., 2022). The economic repercussions of the war have resulted in a looming recession due to the interconnected nature of the global economy (Smit et al., 2022; Câmpeanu, 2022; Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, 2022; Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, 2022).

Through its many economic, cultural and political ramifications, the war in Ukraine has dramatically impacted Europe both on the individual member states and at the European Union level, creating new constraints and opportunities for political actors in the different parts of the bloc. While parties across the political spectrum—both within and outside the mainstream—may have been affected by the war, this report focused closely on the pan-European populist Radical Right, which is a party family that has long enjoyed close ties with Russia in general and Vladimir Putin’s regime in particular. With the Kremlin now an international pariah, questions arise about how the Ukraine war has affected such parties across Europe.

In this introduction, we briefly explain the rationale for this focus on the European populist Radical Right party family and the questions that all our national experts and contributors to the report have addressed. We then chart the topography of contemporary radical right-wing populism in Europe and briefly outline the cases included in the analysis. The findings of this cross-national examination and the main takeaways of the analysis are summarized and discussed in the conclusion.

A cross-national study of radical right-wing populism in the context of the Ukraine war

Defined as a “thin ideology” (Mudde, 2004), populism in Europe has manifested across the political spectrum and can be found in a range of left-wing, right-wing, and centrist-technocratic variants (Ivaldi et al., 2017; Ivaldi, 2020). Its most dominant and persistent strain in the past decades has been the populist Radical Right, which is marked by a commitment to *nativism* and authoritarianism (Mudde, 2007; Halikiopoulou & Vlandas, 2022).



The contemporary wave of the populist Radical Right has been characterized by the mainstreaming and, increasingly, the political normalization of these parties (Mudde 2022), as more and more populist Radical Right parties are represented in parliaments, even forming governments. As a result, these parties have become a well-established political force in many European party systems. Moreover, they currently represent the most electorally successful “brand” of populism, enjoying substantial levels of popular support across Europe.

Moreover, these parties are widely considered the principal agents of illiberal politics, supporting discriminatory nativist and authoritarian policies, while rejecting the fundamental European liberal values of minority rights and the rule of law. Nativism has traditionally represented a core ideological feature of the European Radical Right. It includes a combination of nationalism and xenophobia, which “comes in a number of guises, from the mobilization of socioeconomic anxieties to the appeal to racial prejudices” (Betz, 2017, p. 347). *Welfare chauvinism* is another typical characteristic of this party family and follows logically from nativism, xenophobia, the rejection of minority rights, and support for excluding migrants and domestic minorities from accessing national welfare systems (Greve, 2019). Far Right parties frame immigration as a threat to the welfare and cultural fabric of Western societies (Mudde, 2022).

Most parties of the populist Radical Right are also strong opponents of European integration and supranationalism more generally (Vasilopoulou, 2011, 2018). They often manipulate Eurosceptic frames to mobilize voters (Gómez-Reino & Llamazares, 2013; Rohrschneider & Whitefield, 2016). However, many of those parties have recently toned down their Euroscepticism. Looking at the recent period, Taggart (2019) notes that most Eurosceptic parties have moderated their position vis-à-vis the European Union (EU), switching to a more reformist rhetoric, and arguing that they would change the EU from within. As suggested by Brack (2020), “against the background of the difficult and unclear Brexit negotiations, most parties softened their position, and few of them still openly advocate for their country’s exit from the EU” (p. 6). An empirical study by Braun et al. (2019) demonstrates that such changes in the tone of Far Right parties toward the EU are primarily determined by the EU-related evaluation – the polity mood – of the national citizenry and the level of public support for EU integration at the domestic level.

In contemporary Far Right politics, Eurosceptic stances are associated with the idea of protecting the nation, which is expressed in claims to preserve or regain

national sovereignty (Basile & Mazzoleni, 2020; Heinisch et al., 2020). Populist Radical Right parties such as the Rassemblement National in France and Lega in Italy portray themselves as champions of national values and defenders of national interests against supranational institutions, and they all assume the primacy of the nation-state as a means of re-establishing the people's sovereignty (Ivaldi & Mazzoleni, 2020).

Finally, most populist Radical Right parties have been admirers of Russia in general and Vladimir Putin's regime in particular. The relationship between radical right-wing populist parties and Russia has been amply documented in the literature (Shekhovtsov, 2018). As early as the 1990s, there were some attempts at cooperation between populist right-wing parties in Europe and the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR), headed at the time by Far Right politician Vladimir Zhirinovskiy (Futàk-Campbell, 2020). More recently, there have been growing links between Russian actors and Radical Right activists, publicists, ideologues, and politicians in the West. Such ties between the Kremlin and the European populist Radical Right have grown stronger over the last decade, reflecting what has been deemed a "marriage of convenience" based on converging interests (Makarychev, 2018). As Shekhovtsov (2018) suggests, Moscow has begun to support particular populist radical right political forces to gain leverage on European politics and undermine the liberal democratic consensus in the West.

Overall, then, European radical right-wing populists are generally "admirers" of Putin's regime based on their shared nativism, authoritarianism, and, increasingly, illiberal politics, as well as, for some of those parties, their rejection of NATO and what is deemed American imperialism. Additionally, Moscow and radical right-wing populist actors converge on their shared opposition to the EU (Makarychev & Terry, 2020). Many European populist Radical Right parties have also established formal links with Russia, and some of these parties, such as the French Rassemblement national and Italian Lega, have even received funding from the Kremlin (Futàk-Campbell, 2020).

In 2014, most European populist radical right-wing parties justified the annexation of Crimea by Russia by adopting the Kremlin's rhetoric and strong criticism of the Ukrainian state. In so doing, they parroted Kremlin talking points about the so-called "reunification" of Crimea with Russia through the supposed self-determination of the "people of Crimea", as expressed in the Crimean referendum of March 16, 2014.



The war in Ukraine has cast into sharp relief Russia's hybrid war for control and influence over Europe and the so-called "fifth column", the network of Far Right political parties and movements in Europe that Russia has been cultivating and explicitly supporting. These Far Right parties, Guide (2017) argues, "are capitalizing on economic and security crises in Europe to build popular support and now operate as a fifth column that is undermining the Western liberal order from within" (pp. 1–2). Russia's objective in this "war" is ultimately to establish a new world order that, in the words of Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, "is multipolar, just, and democratic" (France24, 2022).

At a more practical level, Russia aims to undermine the unity of the Euro-Atlantic Alliance and within the EU and establish bilateral relations with individual countries (the same strategy China has been using with its Belt and Road Initiative). Doing so would give Russia much more leverage in bilateral negotiations but also in dealing with the EU, where individual countries (such as Hungary) could be creating obstacles to any decisions not favourable to Russia.

In its hybrid war, Russia has utilized several tactics: 1) gas dependencies (over 40% for the EU, but over 60% for some EU member states such as Italy, and over 90% of countries such as Bulgaria and North Macedonia); 2) investments and oligarchs (the UK has been the prime destination for Russian oligarchs and investments and those seeking "golden passports", but other European countries have also been welcoming); 3) disinformation (through social media and paid trolls); 4) intelligence and spies (poisoning cases), and, last but not least; 5) the funding of nationalist parties. These tactics can be traced in many European countries, from France and Britain to Bulgaria.

Russia has long been accused of funding populist Radical Right parties in Europe, from the Front National and Lega to Austria's FPÖ and Hungary's Jobbik (Pabst, 2014; Rettman, 2017; Weiss, 2020). Russia has also created some open ties with anti-EU parties, inviting their leaders to various conferences and symposia organized by Kremlin's close associates (Futàk-Campbell, 2020; Rettman, 2017). One such forum in 2015 proved the biggest gathering of Europe's Far Right parties, with representatives of Radical Right parties from several European countries, including Golden Dawn (Greece), the National Democratic Party (Germany), Ataka (Bulgaria), the Lombardy League (Italy), the Alliance for Peace and Freedom (EU-wide), New Force (Italy), the British National Party (United Kingdom), National Democracy (Spain), the Party of the Swedes (Sweden), and the Danish

Party (Denmark). Indeed, Far Right parties have been good allies to the Kremlin, voting in ways favourable to Russia both at home and in the European Parliament on issues such as Ukraine, human rights in Russia, Association Agreements with post-Soviet states, and more (Wesslau, 2016).

The 2022 invasion of Ukraine by Russia has, on the other hand, presented new challenges for Kremlin-backed radical right-wing populist parties, putting many of them under strain for their association with Russia and admiration of Putin's regime and forcing them to adapt to the new context produced by the war in Ukraine, thus raising specific concerns about how such parties have navigated this new context and the impact that the war may have had on them, both nationally and at the EU level.

Questions addressed in the report

This report examines the impact of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on the state of the populist Radical Right in Europe. Country experts were asked to tackle different questions in relation to radical right-wing populist parties and the Ukrainian crisis. More specifically, special attention was paid to the reactions of right-wing populist parties to this war and the political and electoral consequences of the conflict for such parties.

Let us note here that while the report focuses primarily on right-wing populism, national experts were also invited to look at other populist parties in their country where deemed relevant. The scholarship on populism and foreign policy suggests that populist parties and leaders generally adopt anti-American and pro-Russian positions (Chrysosgelos, 2010, 2011; Balfour et al., 2016). This makes such analysis of the broader group of non-Radical Right populist actors also relevant to this report, most notably in countries such as Italy and France, where populists of both the Left and Right have competed with one another in recent elections, as well as countries such as Bulgaria and Slovakia where mainstream parties have had traditionally strong pro-Russian views and positions.

By looking at both the “supply” and “demand” side of radical right-wing populism in the context of the Ukraine war across over 20 European countries, this reports provides an in-depth examination of the diversity of such actors concerning their positions vis-à-vis Russia, NATO, and the EU before the war, and the different ways in which these parties have “performed” the war in Ukraine, the type of



arguments and rhetoric they used, and how they may have exploited war-related issues (e.g., energy, prices, climate, and defence). As Moffit (2015) suggests, crises such as the Ukraine war are never “neutral” phenomena but are mediated and “performed” by populist parties. In return, while many of these parties have sought to evade accusations of sympathy for Russia since the outbreak of the war, their political opponents have used their previous ties with Moscow, which is another significant aspect of the analysis in this report.

Turning to the “demand” side, we asked how the invasion may have affected the public perception of radical right-wing populist parties and leaders in the mass public, the impact the war may have had on the popularity or electoral support for those parties, and how that support fits with the public opinion at large on the war. The association with Russia was used to delegitimize the democratic viability of these Far Right populist parties, but only for a relatively short while, as none of the parties achieved worse results in the elections which took place in 2022. Far from the heralded end of the “Age of Populism” (Douthat, 2022), some radical right-wing populist parties have succeeded more than ever in Europe.

Recent elections in France, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, and Sweden have attested to the electoral vitality of the Far Right parties. In the 2022 French presidential election, Marine Le Pen, the leader of the National Rally, won 41.5% of the second-round runoff against incumbent president Emmanuel Macron, which marked a new culmination of the Far Right in France. In Hungary, Viktor Orbán reasserted the dominance of Fidesz and his ever-more authoritarian rule, gaining even more seats in parliament. In Latvia, two new populist Radical Right parties gained 20 seats in the 100-seat parliament. In Italy, Giorgia Meloni’s post-fascist Brothers of Italy have topped the 2022 general election, making Meloni the country’s new (and first female) prime minister. In Sweden, a former extreme right party with links with neo-Nazi movements, the Sweden Democrats, won over 20% of the vote in the 2022 elections, and the party has officially become part of the right-wing governing coalition.

Finally, each country chapter assesses the invasion’s temporary and potentially permanent effects on right-wing populist politics, allowing for the broader conclusions discussed in this report’s final section.

The topography of European radical right-wing populist parties

According to Pirro (2022), the Far Right refers to “all those ultranationalist collective actors sharing a common exclusionary and authoritarian worldview—predominantly determined on sociocultural criteria—yet varying allegiances to democracy” (p. 3). The “populist Radical Right” refers to a specific subset of parties within the wider “Far Right” party family, in which typical Far Right features are associated with a populist ideology and illiberal rather than anti-democratic tendencies (Mudde, 2019; Pirro, 2022). Pirro notes that populism is primarily associated with the Radical Right. Through their anti-establishment profile, such parties “glorify ‘the people’ and consider it the linchpin of any rightful political goal and decision, at the same time criticizing ‘the elite’ as responsible for all the ills of the world” (Pirro, 2022, p. 6).

While any taxonomy of political parties may be the subject of disagreement among scholars, there is a relatively sizeable academic consensus about which parties may be included in the broad European ‘Far Right’ party family and, more specifically, in the populist Radical Right cluster of parties (Mudde, 2022; Halikiopoulou & Vlandas, 2022).

In this report, the relevant cases of populist Radical Right parties were identified by the national experts based on their extensive knowledge of radical right-wing populism in their country, including the more recent developments in a somewhat fluid and rapidly evolving political phenomenon – see for instance the recent rise of new Far Right actors in Bulgaria, France, Latvia, the Netherlands, Norway and Finland, and not necessarily yet considered in the comparative literature on the topic.

Table 1 below shows the main parties included in the analysis. As already noted, experts have sometimes included populist parties that may not strictly fall within the Radical Right category, but whose reactions to the war are relevant to the focus of this research.



Table 1. A summary of populist Radical Right parties included in the report

Country	Party	% of votes last general election	Date of last general election
Austria	Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ)	16.2	Sep 2019
Belgium	Vlaams Belang (VB)	11.9	May 2019
Denmark	Danish People's Party (DF) New Right (NB)	2.6 3.7	Nov 2022
Finland	Finns Party Blue Reform	17.5 1.0	Apr 2019
France	Rassemblement National (RN) Reconquête!	18.7 4.2	Jun 2022
Germany	Alternative for Germany (AfD)	10.3	Sep 2021
Italy	Brothers of Italy (Fdi) Lega Forza Italia (FI)	26.0 8.8 8.1	Sep 2022
Norway	Progress Party (FrP)	11.6	Sep 2021
Portugal	Chega	6.1	Jan 2022
Spain	Vox	15.1	Nov 2019
Sweden	Sweden Democrats (SD)	20.5	Sep 2022
The Netherlands	Freedom Party (PVV) Forum for Democracy (FvD) Juist Alternative 2021 (JA21)	10.8 5.0 2.4	Mar 2021
Bulgaria	Ataka Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization (VMRO) National Front for Salvation of Bulgaria (NFSB) Revival (Vazrazhdane)	0.30 - 0.81 0.14 10.18	Oct 2022
Croatia	The Croatian Party of Rights (HSF) The Croatian Pure Party of Rights (HCSP) The Authentic Croatian Party of Rights (A-HSP) The Croatian Party of Rights 1861 (HSP 1861)	0.44 - 0.32 -	Jul 2020
Czech Republic	Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD)	10.64	Oct 2021
Estonia	Estonia Conservative People's Party (EKRE)	17.76	Mar 2019
Hungary	Fidesz	49.27	Apr 2022
Latvia	For Each and Everyone (KuK) For Stability (SI) Latvia First (LPV) National Alliance (NA)	3.67 6.80 6.42 9.40	Oct 2022
Lithuania	Lithuanian Family Movement (LŠS) The National Alliance (NA) Union for Nation and Justice (TTS)	- 2.21 -	Oct 2020
Romania	Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR)	9.17	Dec 2020
Serbia	DSS Dveri Sovereignists Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) SRS Zavetnici	5.54 3.92 2.34 44.27 2.22 3.82	Apr 2022
Slovakia	L'SNS Republika SMER	8.04 - 18.29	Feb 2020
Turkey	Justice and Development Party (AKP)	42.56	Jun 2018

Overall, the analysis in this report concerns a total of 37 populist Radical Right parties across 12 West European and 10 East European countries, plus Turkey. This report is divided into 23 country chapters. Their principal findings are discussed

comparatively in the conclusion.

Our findings suggest substantial variability in the international agenda of populist Radical Right parties in Europe. Such heterogeneity is found in their foreign policy positions towards NATO, the EU, and Russia before the war, but we also find variation in those parties' performances during the Ukraine crisis after the outbreak of the war. Moreover, the cross-national analysis shows that radical right-wing populist parties have varied in the set of arguments and rhetoric that they have used since the beginning of the Russian invasion to try and sustain their electoral appeal and maintain credibility with voters by evading accusations of sympathy for Russia or, in some cases, by showcasing their support for Russia. Such variability is observed across countries but also within them (Carlotti, 2023) and, in some cases, within the populist Radical Right parties themselves, which suggests that they should not necessarily be considered unitary actors despite what is often deemed a highly centralized organization and strong leadership.

Both external and internal factors may account for different responses by populist Radical Right parties to the Ukraine war. Externally, we find country-specific factors related to different histories, foreign policy traditions, and economic factors. Among these, we can count each particular country's level of dependence on Russian oil and gas, as well as trade relations. We also see some factors relating to party system dynamics and party competition in our countries of interest, particularly regarding the strategy of "normalization" that some populist Radical Right parties have pursued over time to become more acceptable to voters and to broaden their electoral appeal.

Internally, the different responses to the war by radical right-wing populist parties in Europe may be accounted for by those parties' ideologies and policy positions across the socioeconomic and cultural dimensions of competition. Our findings suggest a possible line of division between the more welfare chauvinist of those parties, which have essentially focused on the domestic and socioeconomic impact of the war, emphasizing the interests of their "people", and those which, on the other hand, have adopted a broader cultural and civilizational approach in their performance and interpretation of the current Ukraine crisis. Finally, the changes that we observe in attitudes of radical right-wing populist parties towards Russia illustrate the malleability of populism and its "chameleon-like" characteristics, suggesting a good deal of adaptability and the capacity of these parties to "read the room" and quickly adapt to shifts in public opinion (Albertazzi, 2022; Carlotti, 2023).



References

- Albertazzi, D., Favero, A., Hatakka, N., & Sijstermans, J. (2022). Siding with the underdog: Explaining the populist Radical Right's response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. *LSE European Politics and Policy (EUROPP) Blog*. http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/114727/1/europpblog_2022_03_15_siding_with_the_underdog_explaining_the.pdf
- Ali, A.A., Azaroual, F., Bourhriba, O., & Dadush, U. (2022). *The economic implications of the war in Ukraine for Africa and Morocco (Policy Brief No. 11/22)*. Policy Center for the New South.
- Balfour, R., Emmanouilidis, J. A., Grabbe, H., Lochocki, T., Mudde, C., Schmidt, J.,... & Stratulat, C. (2016). Europe's troublemakers: The populist challenge to foreign policy. *European Policy Centre*. https://www.epc.eu/content/PDF/2016/Europe_s_troublemakers_complete_book.pdf
- Basile, L. & Mazzoleni, O. (2020). Sovereignist wine in populist bottles: An introduction. *European Politics and Society*, 21(2): 151–162. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23745118.2019.1632576>
- Basso, D. (2022, January 20). Le Pen wants EU to be “association of free nations”. *Euractiv*. <https://www.euractiv.com/section/elections/news/le-pen-wants-eu-to-be-association-of-free-nations/>
- Boungou, W., & Yatić, A. (2022). The impact of the Ukraine–Russia war on world stock market returns. *Economic Letters*, 215, 1–3. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.econlet.2022.110516>
- Bourguignon, J., Demertzis, M., & Sprenger, E. (2022). EU enlargement: Expanding the Union and its potential. *Intereconomics: Review of European Economic Policy*, 57(4), 205–208.
- Brack, N. (2020). Towards a unified anti-Europe narrative on the right and left? The challenge of Euroscepticism in the 2019 European elections. *Research & Politics*, 7(2). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2053168020952236>
- Braun, J.A., Coakley, J.D., & West, E. (2019). Activism, advertising, and Far-Right media: The case of sleeping giants. *Media and Communication*, 7(4), 68–79. <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v7i4.2280>
- Câmpeanu, V. (2022). The effects of the war In Ukraine–The global food crisis becomes more real. *Euroinfo*, 6(1), 3–15.
- Carlotti, B. (2023). A divorce of convenience: exploring Radical Right populist parties' position on Putin's Russia within the context of the Ukrainian war: A social media perspective. *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, Advance online publication, 1 –17. [10.1080/14782804.2023.2171969](https://doi.org/10.1080/14782804.2023.2171969)
- Celi, G., Guarascio, D., Reljic, J., Simonazzi, A., & Zezza, F. (2022). The asymmetric impact of war: Resilience, vulnerability and implications for EU policy. *Interecono-*

- mics: Review of European Economic Policy*, 57(3), 141–47.
- Chrysosgelos, A-S. (2010). Undermining the West from within: European populists, the US and Russia. *European View*, 9(2), 267–77. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12290-010-0135-1>
- Chrysosgelos, A-S. (2011). Old ghosts in new sheets: European populist parties and foreign policy. *Centre for European Studies*. https://www.martenscentre.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/old_ghosts.pdf
- Douthat, R. (2022, March 16). Will the Ukraine war end the Age of Populism? *New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/16/opinion/ukraine-russia-populism.html>
- Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP). (2022, May). *The war in Ukraine: Impacts, exposure and policy issues in Asia and the Pacific (Policy Brief)*. ESCAP. <https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12870/4433>
- Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC). (2022, June 3). *Repercussions in Latin America and the Caribbean of the war in Ukraine: How should the region face this new crisis?* United Nations. <https://hdl.handle.net/11362/47913>
- Farrell, N. (2022, March 19). The war in Ukraine may benefit the populist right. *The Spectator*. <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/the-war-in-ukraine-may-benefit-the-populist-right/>
- Fiott, D. (2022). The fog of war: Russia's war on Ukraine, European defence spending and military capabilities. *Intereconomics: Review of European Economic Policy*, 57(3), 152–156.
- France24. (2022, March 30). *Russian FM hails China as part of emerging “just world order”*. <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20220330-russian-fm-hails-china-as-part-of-emerging-just-world-order>
- Futàk-Campbell, B. (2020) Political Synergy: How the European Far-Right and Russia Have Joined Forces Against Brussels. *Atlantisch Perspectief*, 44(1), 30–35. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48600543>
- Gómez-Reino, M., & Llamazares, I. (2013) The populist Radical Right and European integration: A comparative analysis of party–voter links, *West European Politics*, 36(4), 789–816. DOI: 10.1080/01402382.2013.783354
- Greve, B. (2019). *Welfare, populism and welfare chauvinism*. Bristol University Press.
- Guide, K. (2017, March 15). Russia's 5th column. *Center for American Progress*. <https://www.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/GudeRussia5thColumn-report.pdf>
- Hadj-Abdou, L., & Pettrachin, A. (2022). Attitudes towards Ukrainian refugees. *LSE European Politics and Policy (EUROPP) Blog*. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2022/03/09/explaining-the-remarkable-shift-in-european-responses-to-refugees-following-russias-invasion-of-ukraine/>



- Halikiopoulou, D., & Vlandas, T. (2022). Understanding right-wing populism and what to do about it. *Friedrich Ebert Stiftung*. <https://democracy.fes.de/topics/right-wing-populism>
- Heinisch, R., Werner, A., & Habersack, K. (2020). Reclaiming national sovereignty: The case of the conservatives and the Far Right in Austria. *European Politics and Society*, 21(2), 163–181. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23745118.2019.1632577>
- International Monetary Fund (IMF). (2022). *Regional economic outlook Europe: War sets back the European recovery*. <https://www.imf.org/-/media/Files/Publications/REO/EUR/2022/April/English/text.ashx>
- Ivaldi, G. (2020). Populist voting in the 2019 European elections. *Totalitarianism and Democracy*, 17(1), 67–96. <https://doi.org/10.13109/tode.2020.17.1.67>
- Klassen, A. J. (2017, September 25–27). *Economic Performance, Government Finances, and Satisfaction with Democracy* [Conference presentation]. Australian Political Studies Association 2017 Conference, Melbourne, Australia. <https://researchers.cdu.edu.au/en/publications/economic-performance-government-finances-and-satisfaction-with-de>
- Legrain, P. (2022, April 19). Can anti-EU populism survive Putin's war? *Project Syndicate*. <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/putin-ukraine-war-discredits-populism-and-unites-europe-by-philippe-legrain-2022-04>
- Leonard, M. (2022). A blueprint for Europe. *Journal of Democracy*, 33(2), 162–166. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2022.0025>
- Liadze, I., Macchiarelli, C., Mortimer-Lee, P., & Sánchez-Juanino, P. (2022). *The economic costs of the Russia–Ukraine conflict* (Policy Paper No. 32). National Institute of Economic and Social Research (NIESR). <https://doi.org/10.1111/twec.13336>
- Lika, I. (2022, April 11). Analysis: Ukraine war and right-wing populism in Europe. *Anadolu Agency*. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/analysis/analysis-ukraine-war-and-right-wing-populism-in-europe/2560689>
- Macchiarini, D., & Blockmans, S. (2022). The EU's Ukraine watershed: Fast forward to European defence union. *Intereconomics: Review of European Economic Policy*, 57(3), 138–39.
- Makarychev, A. (2018). National conservative parties in Baltic–Nordic Europe: No countries for Putin's men. In T. Hoffmann & A. Makarychev (Eds.), *Russia and the EU: Spaces of interaction* (pp. 93–110). Routledge.
- Makarychev, A., & Terry, G. S. (2020). An estranged “marriage of convenience”: Salvini, Putin, and the intricacies of Italian–Russian relations. *Contemporary Italian Politics* 12(1), 23–42. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23248823.2019.1706926>
- Mazzoleni, O., & Ivaldi, G. (2022). Economic populist sovereignism and electoral support for radical right-wing populism. *Political Studies*, 70(2), 304–326. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0032321721000000>

org/10.1177/0032321720958567

- Smit, S., Hirt, M., Buehler, K., White, O., Greenberg, E., Mysore, M., Govindarajan, A., & Chewning, E. (2022, March 17). *War in Ukraine: Lives and livelihoods, lost and disrupted*. McKinsey & Company. <https://www.mckinsey.com/capabilities/strategy-and-corporate-finance/our-insights/war-in-ukraine-lives-and-livelihoods-lost-and-disrupted>
- McMahon, R. (2022). Is Alt-Europe possible? Populist Radical Right counternarratives of European integration. *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 30(1), 10–25. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14782804.2021.1919865>
- Moffitt, B. (2015). How to perform crisis: A model for understanding the key role of crisis in contemporary populism. *Government and Opposition*, 50(2), 189–217. <https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2014.13>
- Mondon, A., & Winter, A. (2020). *Reactionary democracy: How racism and the populist Far Right became mainstream*. Verso.
- Mudde, C. (2002). The populist zeitgeist. *Government and Opposition*, 39(4), 542–563. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1477-7053.2004.00135.x>
- Mudde, C. (2019). *The Far Right today*. Polity Press.
- Mudde, C. (2022). The Far-Right threat in the United States: A European perspective. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 699(1), 101–115. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00027162211070060>
- Orhan, E. (2022). The effects of the Russia–Ukraine war on global trade. *Journal of International Trade, Logistics and Law*, 8, 141–146. http://jital.org/index.php/jital/article/view/277/pdf_150
- Pabst, S. (2014, November 29). United against... Europe. *DeutscheWelle*. <https://www.dw.com/en/is-the-kremlin-financing-europes-right-wing-populists/a-18101352>
- Pereira, P., Bašić, F., Bogunovic, I., & Barcelo, D. (2022). Russian-Ukrainian war impacts the total environment. *Science of the Total Environment* 837, 1–7. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.scitotenv.2022.155865>
- Pirro, A. L. P. (2022). Far right: The significance of an umbrella concept. *Nations and Nationalism*, Advanced online publication, 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1111/nana.12860>
- Rawtani, D., Gupta, G., Khatri, N., Rao, P.K., Mustansar-Hussain, C. (2022). Environmental damages due to war in Ukraine: A perspective. *Science of the Total Environment*, 850, 1–7. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.scitotenv.2022.157932>
- Rettman, A. (2017, April 21). Illicit Russian billions pose threat to EU democracy. *EUobserver*. <https://euobserver.com/foreign/137631>



- Rohrschneider, R., & Whitefield, S. (2016). Responding to growing European Union-skepticism? The stances of political parties toward European integration in Western and Eastern Europe following the financial crisis. *European Union Politics*, 17(1), 138–161. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1465116515610641>
- Shekhovtsov, A. (2018). *Russia and the Western Far Right*. Routledge.
- Szumski, C. (2022, October 18). Swedish parliament approves Far-Right-backed government amid Liberal discontent. *Euractiv*. https://www.euractiv.com/section/all/short_news/swedish-parliament-approves-far-right-backed-government-amid-liberal-discontent/
- Taggart, P. (2019). Party-based hard Euroscepticism in the 2019 European Parliament elections. In N. Bolin, K. Falasca, M. Grusel, & L. Nord (Eds.), *Euroreflections: Leading academics on the European elections 2019 (Demicom Report No. 40)* (pp. 26–27). Mittuniversitetet.
- Vasilopoulou, S. (2011). European integration and the Radical Right: Three patterns of opposition. *Government and Opposition*, 46(2), 223–244. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1477-7053.2004.00135.x>
- Vasilopoulou, S. (2018). The party politics of Euroscepticism in times of crisis: the case of Greece. *Politics*, 38(3), 311–326. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263395718770599>
- Weiss, A.S. (2020, February 27). With friends like these: The Kremlin's Far-Right and populist connections in Italy and Austria. *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/02/27/with-friends-like-these-kremlin-s-far-right-and-populist-connections-in-italy-and-austria-pub-81100>
- Wesslau, F. (2016, June 23). Russia sanctions and magical thinking. *European Council on Foreign Relations*. http://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_european_sanctions_and_magical_thinking_7049



AUSTRIA



The Case of the Austrian Radical Right and Russia During the War in Ukraine

Reinhard Heinisch and Diana Hofmann** University of Salzburg*

Abstract

The right-wing, populist Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) has viewed Putin's Russia as an effective constraint on what the Radical Right regards as a liberal cultural and economic agenda pursued by the European Union and the United States. The FPÖ remained a supporter of Kremlin policies, even after Moscow's annexation of Crimea in 2014, and even signed a cooperation agreement with Putin's United Russia party in 2016. Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the FPÖ has been careful not to be seen defending Moscow's aggression. Instead, it has resorted to populist framing that casts the Austrian people as victims of national and Western political elites. Concretely, the party leadership claims that the country's policies toward Russia are counterproductive and have been decided without the consent of the people. This approach is an extension of the FPÖ's traditional Euroscepticism and anti-establishment positioning. It also appeals to Austrians' longstanding preference for neutrality. According to polling data, the FPÖ is well positioned to outperform all other parties in the current issue environment.

Keywords: *populist Radical Right, Euroscepticism, neutrality, anti-establishment positioning, anti-Americanism*

* reinhard.heinisch@plus.ac.at

** dianalucia.hofmann@plus.ac.at

Heinisch, Reinhard & Hofmann, Diana. (2023). "The Case of the Austrian Radical Right and Russia During the War in Ukraine." In: *The Impacts of the Russian Invasion of Ukraine on Right-wing Populism in Europe*. (eds). Gilles Ivaldi and Emilia Zankina. European Center for Populism Studies (ECPS). March 8, 2023. Brussels. <https://doi.org/10.55271/rp001311>



The Austrian Radical Right has its roots in pan-Germanic nationalism and has traditionally been anti-Slavic (in general) and anti-Russian (in particular). Especially after the Second World War, the populist Radical Right Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) held strong anti-Soviet and anti-communist positions. But as the FPÖ has grown increasingly concerned with the progressive cultural and liberal economic agenda of Washington and Brussels, it has come to view Putin's Russia as an effective curb on Western liberalism. The FPÖ signed a formal cooperation agreement with Putin's party United Russia in 2016 and became a defender of Kremlin policy. It has generally blamed Western political elites for the deterioration of international relations and the conflict in the region, including Ukraine. The FPÖ has repeatedly called on the Austrian government to adopt a neutral stance, criticized Western sanctions on Russia, and labelled Ukraine a corrupt state. Especially on the Radical Right, the current conflict is seen as part of a broader contest between liberal and anti-liberal agendas.

Why the Austrian case matters

The Austrian case is particularly illuminating as it differs from other European countries in three important respects. First, Austria enjoys a close relationship with Russia. The FPÖ's ties with the Kremlin are particularly strong. The second is Austria's traditional neutral foreign policy, enshrined in the 1955 State Treaty ending the Four Power occupation. Indeed, Austria stayed outside the European Union (EU) until after the end of the Cold War and is not a NATO member. A third factor is Austria's considerable dependence on Russian energy supplies, especially natural gas, and the extensive commercial ties between the two countries. Indeed, President Putin received a warm welcome in Vienna from Austrian political and economic elites in June 2014, just a few months after Russia's annexation of Crimea. Thus, while all major political parties in Austria have supported maintaining good relations with Russia, the FPÖ has stood out in seeking closer political ties with the Kremlin for ideological reasons.

The political positioning of the populist Radical Right Freedom Party

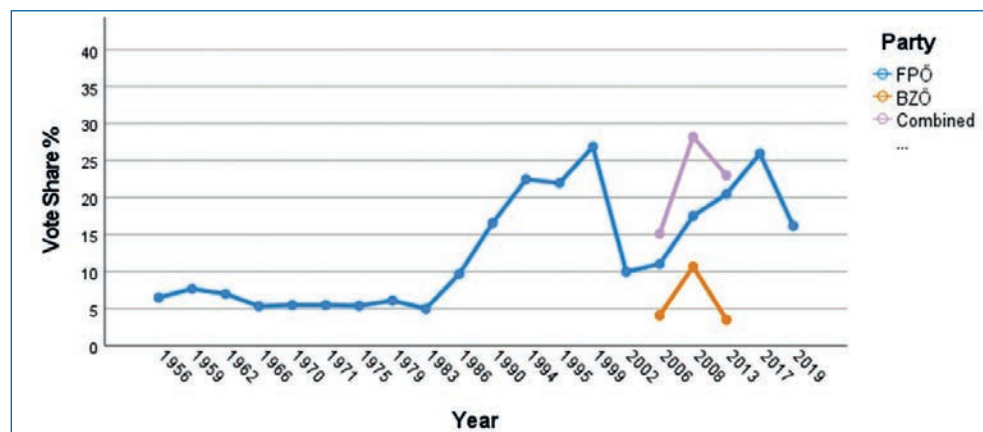
A closer look at the Freedom Party's electoral performance since 1956 reveals a clear pattern (see Figure 1). For decades, the party's vote share languished at around 5%, and it played only a marginal role in Austria's de facto two-party system, in which

the Christian conservative Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) and the Social Democrats (SPÖ) dominated. Until the 1980s, the FPÖ primarily recruited from pan-German nationalists, former Nazis, and war veterans. Then, in the mid-1980s, it transformed into a populist Radical Right party under the leadership of its flamboyant young leader, Jörg Haider, and began to actively court working-class and socioeconomically disadvantaged voters. It appealed to people fed up with the existing political arrangements and frustrated by being left behind in Austria's economic development.

Under Haider's leadership, the party embraced an "Austria-first" agenda that included opposition to immigration and globalization, as well as Euroscepticism and populist anti-elitism. While the FPÖ vowed to defend Christian civilization against Islam in sociocultural terms, its socioeconomic positions increasingly drifted leftward. Another appeal of the party was the strong and charismatic leadership displayed by Haider and his successors Heinz-Christian Strache and later Herbert Kickl (Heinisch, 2017; Belafi, 2017).

On two occasions, in 2000 and 2017, the FPÖ formed governing coalitions with the ÖVP. In both instances, the party failed in public office due to massive internal problems, subsequently losing large shares of its electorate (Heinisch, 2003; Heinisch, 2017; Belafi, 2017). In 2005 a party split saw a smaller, more moderate Haider-led faction called Alliance for the Future of Austria (BZÖ) break away from the FPÖ. While competing directly with the FPÖ, the BZÖ did not survive long as a successful populist alternative after Haider's unexpected death in 2008 (Belafi, 2017). Figure 1 shows the electoral support for the BZÖ as well as the combined vote share of the FPÖ and BZÖ before most of the latter's members gravitated back to the FPÖ after 2013.

Figure 1. National vote share of the FPÖ and BZÖ (1956-2019)

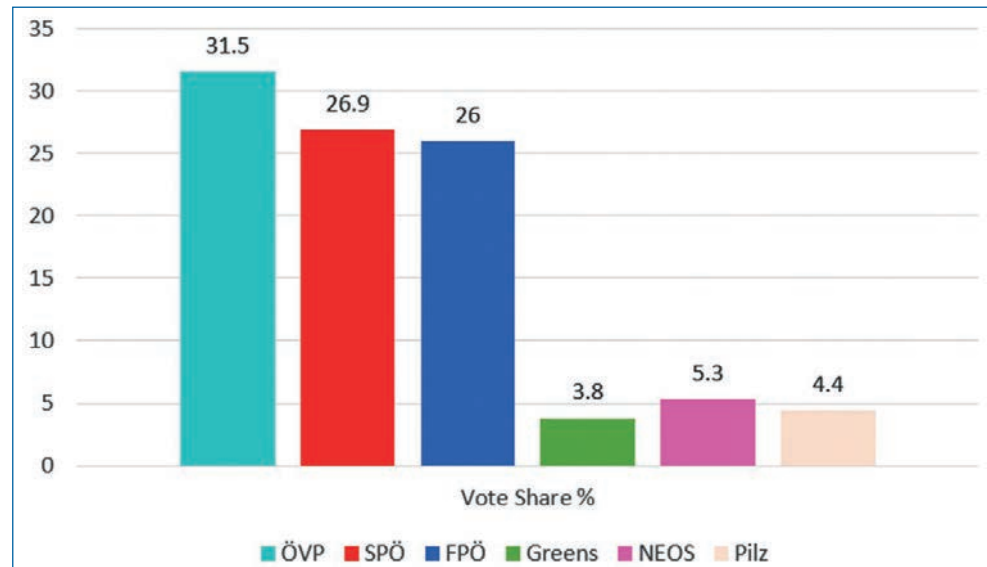


Source: Compiled by the author with data from BMI (n.d.).



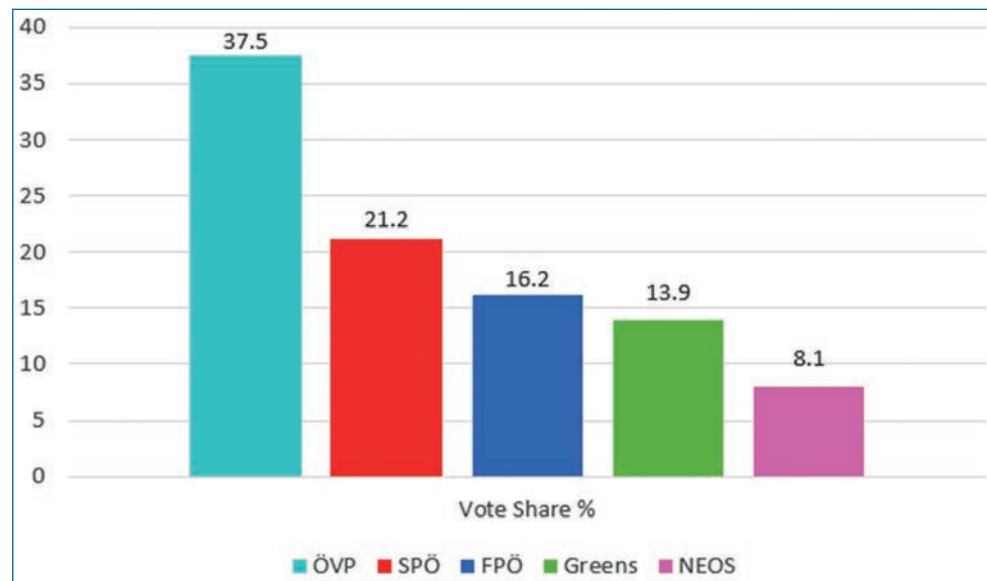
After the second ÖVP–FPÖ government failed in 2019, the Freedom Party suffered significant electoral losses. Figures 2 and 3 present the general election results (vote shares of the major parties) in 2017 and 2019, respectively, indicating a decline in voter support of about ten percentage points for the FPÖ in the space of just two years.

Figure 2. National election results in 2017



Source: Compiled by the author with data from BMI (2017).

Figure 3. National election results in 2019



Source: Compiled by the author with data from BMI (2019).

Moreover, the political scandal that forced the FPÖ out of government in 2019

implicated not only its leader, Heinz-Christian Strache but also Johann Gudenus, the party's point man for relations with Russia (Baumgärtner et al., 2019). With Strache and Gedenus leaving the field, Herbert Kickl —an ideological hardliner — was able to take the reins of the party in 2021 and push it once again further to the anti-establishment Right.

The Freedom Party and Austrian-Russian relations

The 1955 State Treaty between Austria and the so-called Four Powers, including the Soviet Union, enabled Austria to regain full sovereignty after the Second World War and served as the basis for relations between Austria and Russia (Weiss, 2020). An associated voluntary commitment to permanent neutrality in military conflicts has been a cornerstone of Austrian foreign policy ever since. As a result of close economic ties dating back to the Cold War, Austria's dependence on Russian energy supplies has steadily increased. It is far above the level of other Western countries (APA, 2022; Weiss, 2020).

Before the invasion, the FPÖ maintained close political relations with Russia and President Putin based on shared anti-liberal ideological positions (Weiss 2020, Weidinger et al. 2017). Members of the FPÖ openly praised and admired the Russian regime for its aversion to western liberal principles and shared Moscow's criticism of Brussels during the refugee crisis. The FPÖ condemned the EU's sanctions against Moscow and defended Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. This position was reinforced by a formal partnership agreement between Putin's party, United Russia and the FPÖ in 2016 (Weiss, 2020; Cede & Mangott, 2023). Although the FPÖ under Kickl publicly distanced themselves from this agreement, the party let the deadline for terminating the accord pass, thereby allowing it to be renewed until 2026 (Die Presse, 2021). Nevertheless, as Cede and Mangott (2023) note, no Austrian government opposed extending sanctions against Russia over the annexation of Crimea in 2014, including the one in which the FPÖ was a coalition partner from 2017 to 2019. Moreover, the FPÖ has been careful not to be seen as defending Moscow's conduct of the war but rather reframe the conflict in ways that fit the party's political narrative.

Reframing the conflict to fit the political agenda

On social media, the FPÖ frames the Ukraine conflict differently from the other



Austrian parties (and official Austrian policy). In the FPÖ's narrative, the conflict is a struggle between opposing sides in pursuit of clashing agendas rather than as a war of aggression launched by a large state against its smaller neighbour. According to this view, Austria would do well to remain neutral. The party directs its ire not at Moscow but at Brussels' sanctions against Russia, emphasizing how these have damaged the Austrian economy. High inflation, spikes in energy prices, and bottlenecks are attributed to the actions of the EU and the West more broadly (FPÖ, 2022d, 2022b, 2022d).

Overall, the party directs its criticism at the United States and the Biden administration by claiming that Washington stands to gain the most from the conflict. The party insinuates that the "true goal" is to weaken Russia and make Europe more dependent on Washington. This sentiment was clearly expressed in a speech given in the Austrian parliament by Susanne Fürst, a Freedom Party member of the Austrian parliament, in July 2022:

[The government] fails to recognize or understand [...] that there are different interests between the EU and the US, that the US is not playing it entirely straight, that it naturally has interests in weakening Russia, in weakening Russia's economy. So it's good [for them] if the war lasts a little longer than necessary. They want to disrupt coexistence and, above all, economic cooperation between Russia and Europe. (*Applause from the FPÖ*). (Parlament Österreich, 2022a).

Similarly, the FPÖ spokesperson on foreign policy Axel Kassegger described President Biden's policy as follows:

Just yesterday, Biden reiterated that he does not want to talk to Putin. His only response to Russia is to make ineffective threatening gestures, as can be seen in the current developments in Ukraine, which are causing great suffering to the Ukrainian people. (Heute, 2022)

Kassegger also hinted that the United States might be behind the attacks on the Nord Stream 2 pipeline (OTS, 2022a). The FPÖ studiously avoids denying that Russia is an aggressor or that the Ukrainian people are not also suffering. But its framing feeds into a traditional scepticism toward Brussels and Washington, whose motives are routinely questioned by mainstream political actors. Not surprisingly, the header on the FPÖ's Facebook page shown in Figure 4 depicts party leader Kickl in front of an Austrian flag, claiming that "[s]ecuring wealth means defending neutrality!"

Figure 4: Banner from the Freedom Party's Facebook page



Source: FPÖ (n.d., a)

Instead of sanctioning Russia, Austria should stay true to its tradition of neutrality (FPÖ, n.d. a, FPÖ, 2022b), as this would safeguard the country's wealth and guarantee security in the current crisis and an uncertain world. The FPÖ disparages the sanctions as “Knieschuss-Sanktionen”, meaning that by imposing them, the EU is shooting itself in the foot (FPÖ, 2022e). This discourse implies that Austria is forced to bear the consequences of decisions made by others and is thus another victim of the conflict. The perpetrator, in this case, is not Moscow but rather the political elites in Brussels (or the West in general). This underscores the populist framing of “the people” versus “the elite” that the Freedom Party applies to this conflict. A telling example are the party's frequent references to the “US armaments industry” that seeks to extend the war (OTS, 2022b). This also forms the basis for the FPÖ's calls for a referendum on the sanctions against Russia (FPÖ, 2022a).

The FPÖ also supports other actors in the EU who challenge the bloc's common foreign policy toward Russia, especially the Hungarian leader Viktor Orbán as shown in Figure 5. The FPÖ applauded him on Facebook for blocking an EU aid package for Ukraine: “Bravo Viktor Orbán! Put an end to this EU warmongering!” (FPÖ, 2022c). Thus, the sanctions against Russia and aid packages for Ukraine are both framed as breaches of Austrian neutrality. Herbert Kickl and other leading FPÖ officials have repeated these lines of criticism in parliamentary speeches (Parlament Österreich, 2022b). However, despite the FPÖ's stance on neutrality

Figure 5: FPÖ Facebook post about Orbán's blocking an EU aid package for Ukraine



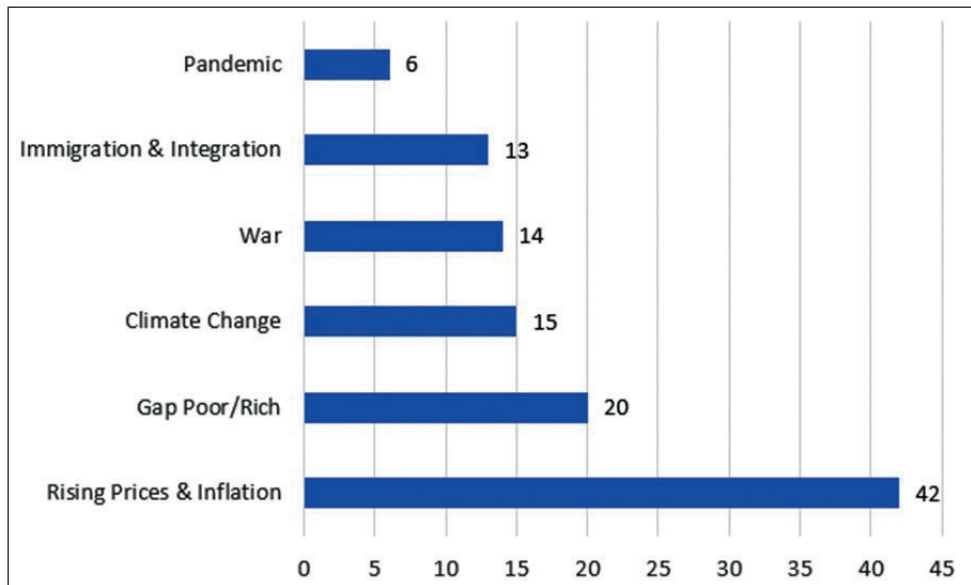
Source: FPÖ (2022c)

Voter preferences and support for the Freedom Party

Since the FPÖ has called for both early elections and a referendum on sanctions against Russia, the question remains about how relevant this stance is for voters. In August 2022, the Austrian daily *Der Standard* reported that the public is split along party lines — supporters of the mainstream and centrist parties back sanctions on Russia, while FPÖ sympathizers are overwhelmingly opposed. However, the overall majority in support was small and thus vulnerable to further adverse developments, such as new spikes in energy prices or even energy shortages and power outages (Seidl, 2022b). In addition, political circles in Austria feared that a severe winter would significantly erode public support.

This view is confirmed by polling data in Figure 6, showing that the central concerns for many Austrians are rising prices and the widening gap between poor and rich, followed by climate change and the war in Ukraine (SORA, 2022). These sentiments are closely connected with expressions of anger about the current political situation, which is often directed against those in power (ibid.).

Figure 6: Important issues for Austrian voters, 2022

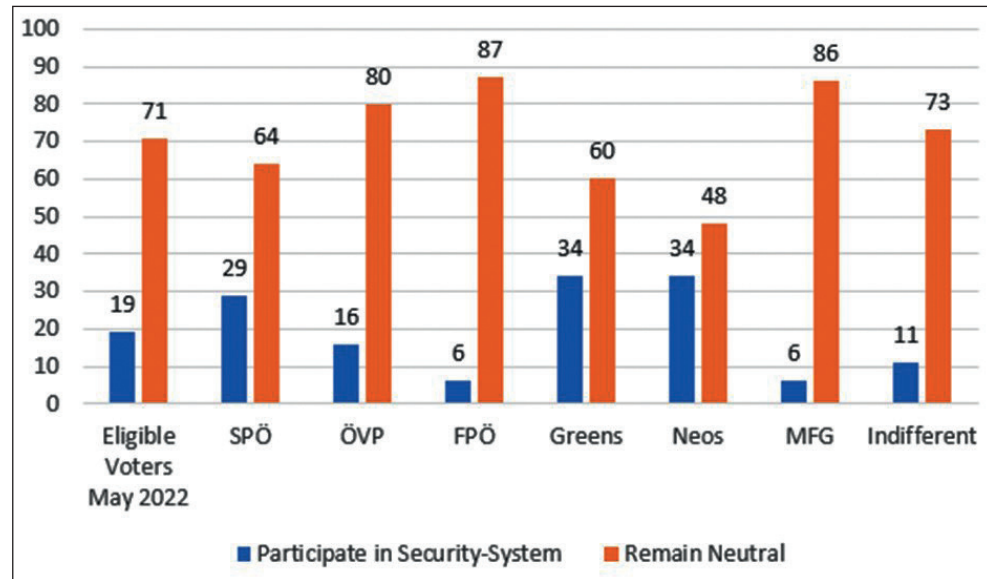


Source: Compiled by the authors based on data from SORA (2022, p. 8).

As Figure 7 shows, growing geopolitical insecurity has also not shaken the traditional preference for Austria's policy of neutrality (Seidl, 2022a), which, according to a survey by the Austrian Institute for European Politics (ÖGfE), is favoured by 9 out of 10 Austrians (ÖGfE 2022a). Similarly, most respondents reject the idea of joining NATO or even participating in a common European security system (Seidl, 2022a).

In fact, FPÖ voters and those of the small populist anti-vaccination party (MFG) are most in favour of neutrality over participating in a Europe-wide security system. Still, neutrality is also preferred by a large number of ÖVP and SPÖ voters. Only Greens and NEOs voters, who presumably support the internationalist outlook of those parties, oppose neutrality in large numbers. Nonetheless, there is no overall majority in Austria for abandoning neutrality in favour of joining the European security system. This isolationist streak among Austrians makes the FPÖ's position potentially attractive beyond its core constituency (i.e., ÖVP and SPÖ supporters).

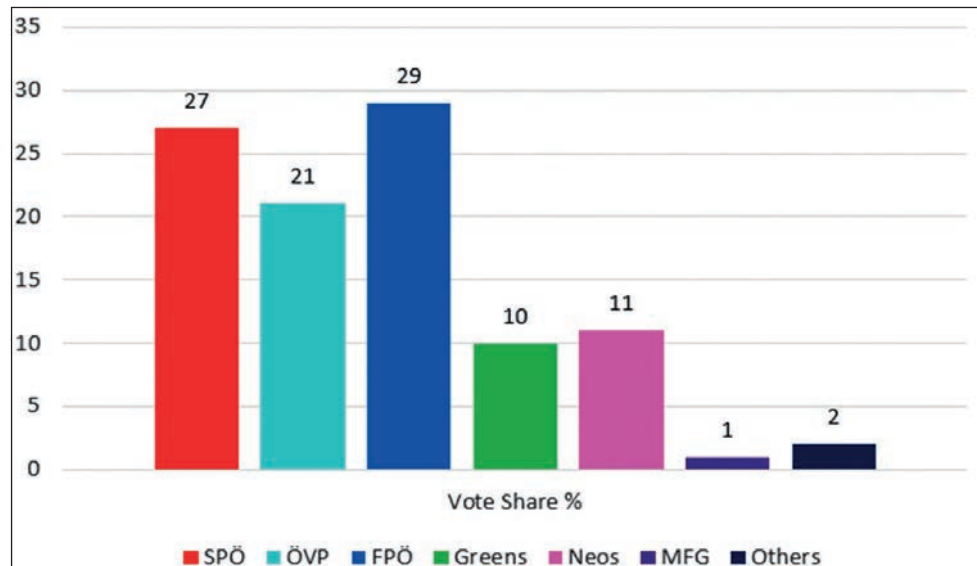
Figure 7: Austrian voters' attitudes towards neutrality in 2022



Source: Compiled by the authors based on data from Seidl (2022a)

Additionally, polling commissioned by Der Standard in December 2022 suggested that the FPÖ would either share first place with the SPÖ or win outright if an election were held the following week (Seidl, 2022c). In fact, as Figure 8 indicates, the FPÖ had 29% of support — ahead of the SPÖ and all centrist parties (Seidl, 2022c) — a 13 percentage-point increase in the space of three years.

Figure 8: Party support among Austrian voters, December 2022



Source: Compiled by the authors based on data from Seidel (2022c).

Conclusion

The Austrian Freedom Party has avoided defending Russia's war of aggression outright but applies populist framing that presents Austrians as victims of the policy machinations of unaccountable national and Western political elites. These policy decisions vis-à-vis Russia are portrayed as ineffective and counterproductive and blamed for contributing to the escalation of the conflict. The FPÖ accuses the EU of adopting its Russia policy without popular consent and lays the blame on Brussels for rising prices and deteriorating living standards (FPÖ, 2022a, 2022e). This approach is an extension of the FPÖ's traditional Euroscepticism (Heinisch et al., 2021) and anti-establishment positioning, which has underpinned the party's traditional support base of about one-quarter of the electorate.

The FPÖ seeks to further broaden this appeal by emphasizing Austria's traditional policy orientation of neutrality in military conflicts and recalling the benefits of close economic relations with Russia. Moreover, by attributing negative economic news to the EU sanctions, the FPÖ can distinguish itself from all other parties in parliament and deflect criticism for its historical pro-Putin positioning.

Support for Ukraine among Austrians has remained lower than elsewhere in the EU (Mory, 2022). Nonetheless, Russian atrocities, including the indiscriminate shelling of civilians, the frequent military setbacks of the Russian army, and the Kremlin's general ineptitude in conducting the war, have left their mark on Austrians. As a result, the FPÖ must be careful not to appear too extreme in its positions. The FPÖ has worked tirelessly to overcome its erstwhile Nazi image; it has little desire to be seen all too obviously as Moscow's stooge.



References

- Baumgärtner, M., Deleja-Hotko, V., Knobbe, M., Mayr, W., Rojkov, A. and Wiedmann-Schmidt, W. (2019). *Ist Österreichs Vizekanzler käuflich?* Der Spiegel. <https://www.spiegel.de/politik/heinz-christian-strache-fpoe-ist-oesterreichs-vizekanzler-kaeufllich-a-000000000-0002-0001-0000-000163955864>
- Belafi, M. (2017). Der Erfolg der FPÖ: Österreichs Parteien- und Regierungssystem unter Druck. *Zeitschrift für Politik*, 64(3), 364–383.
- BMI. (n.d.). *Nationalratswahlen: Historischer rückblick*. Bundesministerium für Inneres. Retrieved February 12, 2023, from https://www.bmi.gv.at/412/Nationalratswahlen/Historischer_Rueckblick.aspx
- BMI. (2017). *Nationalratswahl 2017*. Bundesministerium für Inneres. https://www.bmi.gv.at/412/Nationalratswahlen/Nationalratswahl_2017/start.aspx
- BMI. (2019). *Nationalratswahl 2019*. Bundesministerium für Inneres. https://www.bmi.gv.at/412/Nationalratswahlen/Nationalratswahl_2019/start.aspx
- Cede, F., & Mangott, G. (2023). Die Außenpolitik gegenüber Russland. In M. Senn, F. Eder, & M. Kornprobst (Eds.). *Handbuch Außenpolitik Österreichs* (pp. 555–576). Springer VS.
- Die Presse (2021). *FPÖ lässt Kooperation mit Putin-Partei auslaufen*. <https://www.diepresse.com/6071894/fpoe-laesst-kooperation-mit-putin-partei-auslaufen>
- Der Standard (2022). *Österreich nur mehr zu 21 Prozent von russischem Gas abhängig*. <https://www.derstandard.at/story/2000141036888/oesterreich-nur-mehr-zu-21-prozent-von-russischem-gas-abhaengig>
- FPÖ (n.d. a). *Home* [Facebook page]. Facebook. Retrieved February 12, 2023, from <https://de-de.facebook.com/fpoe>
- FPÖ (n.d. b). 7) *Sicherheit*. Retrieved February 20, 2023, from <https://www.fpoe.at/themen/parteiprogramm/sicherheit/>
- FPÖ (2022a, August 21). *Die Menschen sollen endlich befragt werden, ob sie die schwarz-rot-grün-pinken Russland-Sanktionen überhaupt befürworten* [Image attached] [Post]. Facebook. <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=678296226992175&set=pb100044354113071.-2207520000.&type=3>
- FPÖ (2022b, October 15). *Im Jahr 1955 hat sich Österreich zur immerwährenden Neutralität verpflichtet. In den letzten Wochen und Monaten ist diese Neutralität durch den Einstieg Österreichs in einen Wirtschaftskrieg gegen Russland stark ramponiert worden*. [Image attached] [Post]. Facebook. <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=723510005804130&set=pb.100044354113071.-2207520000.&type=3>
- FPÖ (2022c, November 9). *Bravo Viktor Orbán! Schluss mit dieser EU-Kriegstreiberei!* [Image attached] [Post]. Facebook. <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=744768127011651&set=pb.100044354113071.-2207520000.&type=3>

- FPÖ (2022d, December 1). *Brüssel erkennt endlich die Folgen seiner US-Hörigkeit*. <https://www.fpoe.at/artikel/bruessel-erkennt-endlich-die-folgen-seiner-us-hoerigkeit/>
- FPÖ (2022e, December 16). *Anhaltender Regierungs-Verrat an der Bevölkerung macht Neuwahlen unumgänglich*. <https://www.fpoe.at/artikel/anhaltender-regierungs-verrat-an-der-bevoelkerung-macht-neuwahlen-unumgaenglich/>
- Heinisch, R. (2003). Success in opposition–failure in government: Exploring the performance of the Austrian Freedom Party and other European right-wing populist parties in public office. *West European Politics*, 26(3), 91–130.
- Heinisch, R. (2017). Demokratiekritik und (Rechts) Populismus: Modellfall Öster. In L. Helms & D. M. Wineroither (Eds.), *Die österreichische Demokratie im Vergleich* (pp. 449–477). Nomos Verlag.
- Heinisch, R., McDonnell, D., & Werner, A. (2021). Equivocal Euroscepticism: How populist Radical Right parties can have their EU cake and eat it. *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, 59(2), 189–205.
- Heute (2022, February 25). *Putins Krieg – die FPÖ geht auf die USA los*. <https://www.heute.at/s/putins-krieg-die-fpoe-geht-auf-die-usa-los-100192477>
- Mory, F. (2022, December 14). Unterstützung für Ukraine in Österreich geringer als EU-weit. Der Standard. <https://www.derstandard.at/jetzt/livebericht/2000141776822/redcontent/1000291371?responsive=false>
- ÖGfE (2022). *ÖGfE-Umfrage: Österreicher:innen für verstärkte europäische Zusammenarbeit in Sicherheit und Verteidigung*. Österreichische Gesellschaft für Europapolitik. <https://www.oegfe.at/umfragen/oegfe-umfrage-oesterreicherinnen-fuer-verstaerkte-europaeische-zusammenarbeit-in-sicherheit-und-verteidigung/>
- OTS (2022a, September 27). *FPÖ – Kassegger: Planen die USA Sabotage der europäischen Versorgung mit russischem Gas?* https://www.ots.at/presseaussendung/OTS_20220927_OTS0103/fpoe-kassegger-planen-die-usa-sabotage-der-europaeischen-versorgung-mit-russischem-gas
- OTS (2022b, November 16). *FPÖ – Kickl/Steger: Mitfinanzierung des Ukraine-Kriegs und der US-Rüstungsindustrie durch Österreich muss sofort gestoppt werden!* https://www.ots.at/presseaussendung/OTS_20221116_OTS0206/fpoe-kicklsteger-mitfinanzierung-des-ukraine-kriegs-und-der-us-ruestungsindustrie-durch-oesterreich-muss-sofort-gestoppt-werden
- Parlament Österreich (2022a, July 1). *Nationalrat, XXVII. GP 8. Juli 2022 169. Sitzung / 1*. https://www.parlament.gv.at/dokument/XXVII/NRSITZ/169/A_-_16_41_32_00274351.pdf
- Parlament Österreich (2022b, September 21). *Parlamentskorrespondenz Nr. 983 vom 21.09.2022*. https://www.parlament.gv.at/PAKT/PR/JAHR_2022/PK0983/index.shtml#



- Seidl, C. (2022a, 22 June). Österreichs Bevölkerung setzt weiter auf Neutralität. *Der Standard*. <https://www.derstandard.at/story/2000136462710/oesterreichs-bevoelkerung-setzt-weiter-auf-neutralitaet>
- Seidl, C. (2022b, 23 August). Nur knappe Mehrheit steht hinter EU-Sanktionen gegen Russland. *Der Standard*. <https://www.derstandard.at/story/2000138470821/nur-knappe-mehrheit-der-oesterreicher-steht-hinter-eu-sanktionen>
- Seidl, C. (2022c, 9 December). FPÖ deutlich vor der ÖVP, knapp vor der SPÖ. *Der Standard*. <https://www.derstandard.at/story/2000141593553/fpoe-deutlich-vor-der-oevp-knapp-vor-der-spoe>
- SORA (2022). Österreichischer demokratie monitor. *SORA Institute for Social Research and Consulting*. https://www.demokratiemonitor.at/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/2022_SORA_Praesentation_Demokratiemonitor.pdf
- Weidinger, B., Schmid, F., and Krekó, P. (2017). *Russian Connections of the Austrian Far-Right*. Political Capital, Budapest.
- Weiss, A. S. (2020). *With friends like these: The Kremlin's Far-Right and populist connections in Italy and Austria*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.



BULGARIA



Pro-Russia or anti-Russia: political dilemmas and dynamics in Bulgaria in the context of the war in Ukraine

Emilia Zankina* Temple University

Abstract

The war in Ukraine has had a serious impact on Bulgaria, both politically and economically. Bulgaria shares historically strong ties with Russia, and at least a third, if not half, of Bulgarians harbour deeply rooted pro-Russian sentiments. Although Sofia eventually supported sanctions against Moscow, sent humanitarian and military aid to Kyiv, and accepted Ukrainian refugees, key political actors in Bulgaria have vehemently opposed such decisions. Particular opposition has come from the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), the successor to the communist party, Bulgaria's incumbent president, and at least one populist Radical Right party—Vazrazhdane or Revival—whose support has grown significantly since the start of the war. In the process, Revival and its leaders have managed to capitalize on the nationalist vote and pro-Russian attitudes in the country, almost entirely wiping out voter support for the more established Far Right parties.

Keywords: *populism; Radical Right; Russia–Ukraine war; Bulgarian politics; pro-Russian attitudes; Revival.*

* emilia.zankina@temple.edu

Zankina, Emilia. (2023). "Pro-Russia or anti-Russia: Political dilemmas and dynamics in Bulgaria in the context of the war in Ukraine." In: *The Impacts of the Russian Invasion of Ukraine on Right-wing Populism in Europe*. (eds). Gilles Ivaldi and Emilia Zankina. European Center for Populism Studies (ECPS). March 8, 2023. Brussels. <https://doi.org/10.55271/rp0012>



Introduction

The war in Ukraine has had a serious impact on Bulgaria, both politically and economically. In the past two years, the country has struggled with political uncertainty and turmoil, having undergone four parliamentary elections (a fifth is scheduled for April 2023) and having been governed for the most part by caretaker governments.

Against the backdrop of domestic political instability, the war in Ukraine has required Bulgarian politicians and the public to address several complex questions at once, including whether Bulgaria should join the EU sanctions and whether it ought to send aid to Ukraine, and if so, what type: humanitarian, financial or military? Bulgarians have also had to decide whether or not to accept Ukrainian refugees and, if so, what type of support it should provide and for how long. In addition, the issue of energy security—and specifically whether the country ought to continue to count predominantly on Gazprom deliveries or diversify its supply of gas—has been front and centre. Finally, the government has had to grapple with the issue of Russian propaganda and intelligence activity in the country.

Such questions pose serious dilemmas in a country where 58% of the population reported positive attitudes towards Russia and Putin before the start of the war (see table 4). Given such public attitudes and the country's seemingly endemic political instability, it is hardly surprising that public opinion and government policy on the war has been inconsistent and frequently changing or that political parties have been quick to exploit public sentiment to gain electoral advantage. Although Sofia eventually supported sanctions against Moscow, dispatched humanitarian and military aid to Ukraine, and accepted Ukrainian refugees fleeing the war, prominent political actors in Bulgaria have vehemently opposed these decisions and sought to leverage them for political gain. Particular opposition has come from the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), the successor to the communist party, which ruled the country from 1946 until 1989, Rumen Radev, Bulgaria's president, and the country's newest populist Radical Right party—Vazrazhdane or Revival—whose support has grown significantly since the start of the war (Lavchiev, 2022).

The remainder of the report proceeds as follows. Next, I offer a brief outline of the political context in which the current debate on Russia, Vladimir Putin, and the war in Ukraine has taken place in Bulgaria. I then detail the constellation of populist Radical Right parties in Bulgaria and their various reactions to the war.

Finally, I detail public attitudes towards the conflict and how such attitudes appear to have shifted since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

The Russian “brothers” and their defenders

Bulgaria has a long history of close ties with Russia, and Russians are generally seen and referred to as “brothers” and “liberators”. Following five centuries of Ottoman rule, in the late nineteenth century, a period of national renewal started, which led to a series of national uprisings against the Ottomans, culminating in the Russo-Turkish War of 1877–78. This paved the way to Bulgarian independence, which was finally achieved in 1908. During the war of 1877–78, Bulgarian and Russian soldiers fought side by side, and to this day, Bulgarians commemorate the Russian soldiers who fell as “liberators” in that conflict. In addition to Russia’s role in Bulgaria’s independence, ethnic Bulgarians and Russians share a common cultural heritage, including a Slavic language and origin and Orthodox Christian religion.

Following the war, a provisional administration was instituted under Russian control, whose aim was to assist Bulgaria in establishing state structures and institutions. While most Bulgarians saw Russia as a liberating force, not all political circles were happy with Russian control over the provisional administration. Consequently, ever since independence, a division has remained in Bulgarian society and among political elites between Russophiles and Russophobes. The latter have sought to distance Bulgaria from the Russian sphere of influence and orient the country toward Western Europe, including by soliciting two kings from European noble families to rule the country. In contrast, Russophiles have sought to nurture and preserve Bulgaria’s ties with Russia and defend Russian interests in the country.

The end of the Second World War brought a Soviet-imposed communist regime. In a few short years, Bulgaria instituted a Soviet-type regime of one-party rule, a fusion of party and state, a centrally planned economy, nationalization of property, collectivization of agriculture, control over cultural and social life, and repression (Zankina, 2022). Throughout nearly five decades of communist rule during the Cold War, Bulgaria was the most trusted Soviet ally. In fact, the country’s communist dictator, Todor Zhivkov, twice requested that Bulgaria be admitted as the sixteenth republic of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (Crampton, 2007). Communist rule and Zhivkov’s doctrine of “total integration” with the Soviet



Union (Kolrova & Dimitrov, 1996, p. 179) ensured that anti-Russian and anti-Soviet sentiments in the country were uprooted through whatever means necessary.

With the collapse of communism, Bulgaria once again faced the question of relations with Russia and whether it should remain close to Moscow or seek integration with the West. Although today Bulgaria is a member of both NATO and the European Union, such a trajectory was by no means assured when looking at political dynamics in the 1990s. As the successor of the vehemently pro-Soviet communist party, the BSP remained a bulwark of Russian interests in the country, strongly opposing a pro-Western geostrategic orientation and arguing for a dual foreign policy that would preserve close ties with Russia while also developing relations with the West. Leading four coalition governments since 1990 and being a junior coalition partner in one, the BSP has always sought to protect Russian interests in Bulgaria.

Although the BSP's support has significantly decreased in the past two years (see table 1), for a long time, the BSP attracted at least a third of the votes, representing many of those pro-Russian voters. While today the BSP has embraced EU and NATO membership, it opposes every decision that might hurt Russian interests in the country, from advocating Russian technology for a controversial nuclear power plant and opposing the purchase of American weapons to protesting the NATO bases in the country and protecting reliance on Russian gas. As part of the short-lived coalition government of Kiril Petkov (December 2021–August 2022), the BSP did not support the government's position and the vote in Parliament on joining the EU sanctions against Russia. It also refused to join the condemnation of the referenda in Donetsk and Lugansk and their illegal incorporation into the Russian Federation, and it has avidly opposed sending military aid to Ukraine. Instead, the BSP's leader Kornelia Ninova has been advocating for an end to the sanctions against Russia, as in her view, they hurt primarily Bulgarian and European households, and reinstating Gazprom gas deliveries (Veleva, 2022b).

In addition to the BSP, the Bulgarian president Roumen Radev – an independent candidate, general and former military pilot who was first elected to the post in 2016 with the BSP's backing – has frequently taken a pro-Russian position, including declaring that Crimea is legitimately a Russian territory (Lavchiev, 2022). Within the context of the war in Ukraine, Radev has vehemently argued that sending military aid to Ukraine would effectively involve Bulgaria in the war. He has sided with Hungary's Viktor Orbán in arguing that more weapons would only

prolong the conflict and that what is needed instead is negotiation and diplomacy. In the absence of a stable government for most of the past two years, Radev has already appointed several caretaker governments, thus exercising a lot more power than envisioned in the Bulgarian constitution and having significant influence and opportunity to push his pro-Russian views. BSP's leader Kornelia Ninova, President Radev, and the leader of the populist Radical Right party, Revival, Kostadin Kostadinov, have been the most vehement pro-Russian voices in Bulgaria and strong opposition to any actions against Russia (Lavchiev, 2022).

The policy response to the war

At the time of the outbreak of the war, Bulgaria was administered by a coalition government that included four parties with different ideological orientations. Despite this ideological heterogeneity and the presence of the BSP in the governing coalition, the government of Kiril Petkov has taken a clear anti-Russian position and pushed several decisions in support of Ukraine through the Parliament. In March 2021, Bulgaria supported the EU sanctions on Russia, despite strong opposition from the BSP and Revival. In April, a Bulgarian delegation headed by Prime Minister Petkov visited Ukraine. In May, the Parliament voted for humanitarian, financial and military-technical assistance (including repair of military technology) to Ukraine but came short of approving the supply of weapons. This limited support reflected the BSP's strong opposition to sending military aid and its ability to exercise influence within the coalition. In the meantime, Petkov fired the defence minister, Stefan Yanev (who had served as prime minister in a previous caretaker government), for parroting the Kremlin line that the invasion was a "special operation", a move that was approved by a majority of the Bulgarian population (Alpha Research, 2022). In June, the Petkov government expelled 70 Russian diplomats from the country over espionage concerns. In contrast to the sacking of Yanev, this move drew strong public criticism.

One of the thorniest issues that Petkov has had to deal with is Russian gas supplies. Bulgaria has depended heavily on Russian gas, which supplied 77% of the country's needs at the outset of the war (Popov, 2022). The rhetoric of the BSP and Revival highlighting the dire consequences of stopping Russian gas supplies instils understandable anxiety in large portions of the population. Despite continuing to meet its contractual obligations towards Gazprom, the Russian gas giant suddenly



stopped deliveries to Bulgaria (and Poland) in April 2021. The EU decried this decision and labelled it blackmail. Consequently, Bulgaria was forced to rapidly diversify its gas supplies, and today receives gas from Azerbaijan through the Greek connector, Turkey, and other regional suppliers.

Despite fears of a change of direction, the current caretaker government of Galab Donev has renewed the commitment to bolster its humanitarian aid to Ukraine with new streams of assistance. In December, Parliament voted to provide Ukraine with weapons and other forms of lethal assistance, including military technology. The BSP and Revival requested a review of this decision before the Constitutional Court. As of December 2022, Bulgaria has provided €225 million in aid to Ukraine and has welcomed 150,000 Ukrainian refugees.

As Ivan Bedrov, head of the Bulgarian service of Radio Free Europe, has recently outlined, one year after the start of the war, we can identify three main consequences of the war for the country. First, the war has shed light on Russian interests and influence in Bulgaria and the political actors supporting them. Second, the conflict has become one of the two main dividing lines in Bulgarian society, splitting political actors and the public once again into pro-Russian and anti-Russian camps (the other division concerns attitudes towards corruption and the mainstream parties). Finally, the conflict has proven that Bulgaria is not by default dependent on Russia, including for the supply of energy (Bedrov, 2023).

Populist Radical Right parties in Bulgaria

Since the 2005 elections, populist Radical Right parties have gained parliamentary representation and established a more or less permanent political presence. Before 2005, nationalist discourse was almost entirely monopolized by the BSP, a feature of many former communist countries in which nationalism is driven from the Left. Bulgaria's sizeable ethnic Turkish and Roma minorities, as well as a string of migration crises in Europe, have provided fertile ground for nationalist rhetoric and mobilization. Some of those actors are clearly anti-elite, anti-West, and even anti-democracy, while others claim to represent small business, portraying ethnic minorities as a threat to these interests, but are not explicitly anti-EU or even anti-NATO. Kristen Ghodsee explains Bulgarian nationalism best when she describes it as "left wing, right wing, everything" (Ghodsee, 2008, p. 26). Like many other nationalist parties in Europe, some Bulgarian Radical Right parties are explicitly pro-Russian—a position that became even more evident with the war in Ukraine—

and have relied on Russian support.

Thus, geopolitical issues have been intertwined with attacks on domestic minorities, welfare chauvinism, and patriotic appeals. Migration has remained secondary in this rhetoric and is discussed through the prism of national ethnic minorities (i.e., Muslim migrants radicalizing domestic Muslim minorities) (Rashkova & Zankina, 2017). Populist Radical Right parties in Bulgaria attract more than just the disenfranchised, with an average of 10% of the vote (see table 1 and figure 1) and appeal to left- as well as right-wing voters, a phenomenon typical of former communist countries that has been referred to as the “red-brown” electorate (Ishiyama, 2009). In the last decade, we have witnessed overpopulation and crowding of the political space with parties from the national populist milieu (Krasteva, 2016, p. 170), resulting in the fragmentation of the nationalist vote.

Table 1: Parliamentary election results in Bulgaria, 2017-2022

Type	Party	Mar-17			Apr-21			Jul-21			Nov-21			Oct-22		
		Votes	%	MPs	Votes	%	MPs	Votes	%	MPs	Votes	%	MPs	Votes	%	MPs
Established/ Mainstream	GERBgvb	1,147,292	33.5	95	837,707	26.18	75	642,165	23.51	63	596,456	22.7	59	634,575	25.3	67
	BSP	955,490	27.9	80	480,146	15.01	43	365,695	13.39	36	267,817	10.2	26	232,942	9.3	25
	DPS	315,976	9.24	26	336,306	10.51	30	292,514	10.71	29	341,000	13	34	344,621	13.8	36
Other/hybrid	Volia	145,637	4.25	17	75,926*	2.13*	0	85,795*	3.14*	0	7,067	0.27	0			
	RB+/DB	107,407	3.14	0	302,280	9.45	27	345,331	12.64	34	166,968	6.37	16	186,493	7.44	20
	DaBG/DG	101,177	2.96	0												
New parties/ protest parties	ITN				565,014	17.66	51	657,829	24.08	65	249,743	9.52	25	96,071	3.83	0
	ISMV				150,940	4.72	14	136,885	5.01	13	60,055	2.29	0	25,207	1.01	0
	PP										673,170	25.7	67	505,985	20.2	53
	BV													115,858	4.63	12
Nationalist/PRR	VMRO				116,434	3.64	0				28,322	1.08	0	20,177	0.81	0
	NFSB	318,513	9.7	27	75,926*	2.13*	0	85,795*	3.14*	0	8,584	0.33	0	3,520	0.14	0
	Ataka				15,659	0.49	0	12,585	0.46	0	12,153	0.46	0	7,593	0.3	0
	Revival	37,896	1.11	0	78,414	2.45	0	82,147	3.01	0	127,586	4.86	13	254,808	10.2	27
Voter turnout		3,682,151	54.1		3,334,283	50.61		2,775,410	42.19		2,669,260	40.2		2,601,963	39.4	

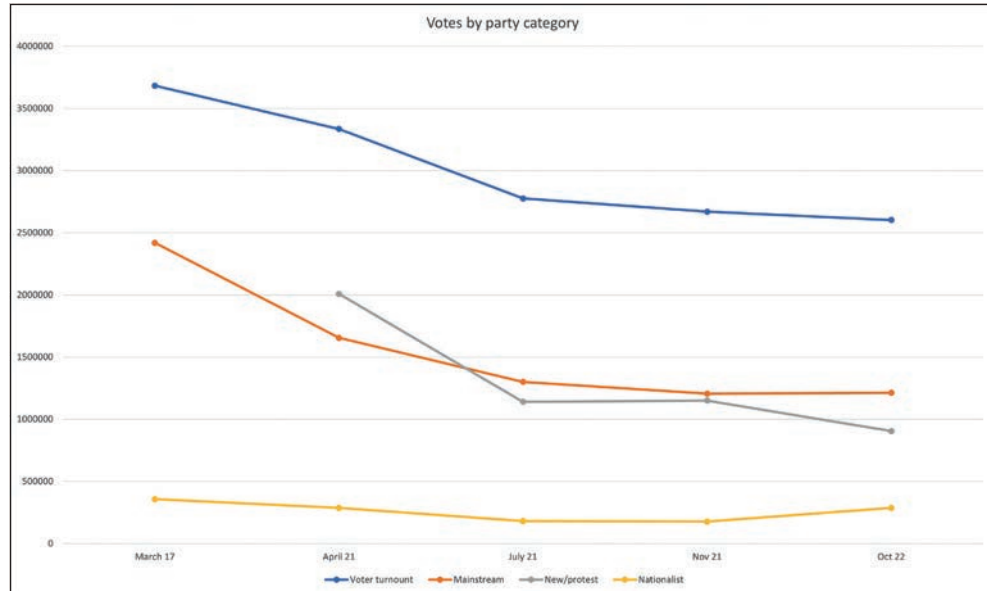
Source: Compiled by the author with data from the National Electoral Commission (<https://www.cik.bg>). Note: Asterix (*) indicates parties campaigning as part of an electoral coalition.

This fragmentation has been coupled with the diversification of Radical Right actors and discourses (Krasteva, 2016, p. 176). While Radical Right parties have established a continuous presence in Bulgaria’s Parliament and beyond, no individual party has been impervious to threats from across the political spectrum, especially new parties. A range of populist Radical Right parties have been represented in Parliament and—between 2017 and 2021, even in government—including Ataka (“Attack”), the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization (Vatreshna Makedonska Revolyuzionna Organizaciya, VMRO), the National Front for Salvation of Bulgaria (Nazionalen Front za Spasenie na Bulgaria, NSFB), and



the aforementioned Revival. Revival is thus only the newest and currently the most preeminent of these populist outfits.

Figure 1: Votes by party category in Bulgarian parliamentary elections, 2017-2022



Source: Source: Compiled by the author based on data from the National Electoral Commission (<https://www.cik.bg>).

Ataka entered Parliament in 2005, the first populist Radical Right party to do so. Its eccentric leader, Volen Siderov, appealed to disenfranchised voters from across the political spectrum, but most importantly to those disillusioned with the transition to democracy and the elites who dominated politics in this period. Drawing on both neo-nationalist and neo-totalitarian elements, Ataka mixes welfare chauvinism and nostalgia for the communist past (Ghodsee, 2008) with clericalism and irredentism (Pirro, 2015). Ataka's rhetoric is explicitly pro-Russian and xenophobic, openly attacking Bulgaria's relations with its transatlantic partners and Turkey, in particular, while promoting close ties with Russia. At one point, Ataka was the fourth-largest party in Parliament, and its electoral support peaked in the 2007 European Parliament elections when it took 14.2% of the vote. However, the party has lost ground electorally in recent years (see table 1). Siderov's pro-Russian interpretation of the war in Ukraine has not gained much attention, as another eccentric populist leader, Kostadin Kostadinov, has managed to steal the limelight.

One of the oldest political organizations in Bulgarian history, the VMRO traces its origins back to 1893 and the struggle for Macedonian liberation from Ottoman rule. The organization has gone through numerous phases since then, including terrorist activities in the interwar period (Crampton, 2007), championing cultural preservation during communist rule, and electoral competition as a political party

since the transition to democracy in 1989. In the 1990s, the VMRO supported the broad anti-communist coalition and sent representatives to Parliament. In the 2000s, its rhetoric became increasingly nationalistic, especially after Ataka burst onto the political stage. With each election, the VMRO has shifted its political alliances, and its coalition policies have been highly opportunistic and chaotic, while its political identity has remained ambiguous. Although claiming to be patriotic, it has allied itself with political actors with diverse views on nationalism, from those eschewing nationalist rhetoric altogether to moderate nationalists to those on the extreme nationalist end of the spectrum (Krasteva, 2016, p. 176).

The Radical Right formula has proved the most successful for the VMRO. In 2014, the party registered big successes, both in the European Parliament and national elections, sending one MEP to Brussels and 8 MPs to the national Parliament. In the 2017 governing coalition, VMRO leader Krasimir Karakachanov was appointed deputy prime minister and minister of defence. While the VMRO's MEP, Angel Dzambaski, has been criticized more than once for outrageous behaviour, including giving a Nazi salute in the European Parliament (Gotev, 2022), Karakachanov has maintained a moderate tone. He has publicly condemned Putin and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, supported Bulgaria acquiring F-16 fighter jets from the United States and criticized Europe for not doing enough to help Ukraine. Despite adopting such mainstream positions, the VMRO has been so far unable to claw back voter support.

The National Front for Salvation of Bulgaria (NFSB) split from Ataka in 2011. The NFSB adopts patriotic and exclusionary rhetoric, defending Bulgarian culture, traditions, language, and sovereignty, but it is less populist and leader-centred than Ataka. During the 2014 parliamentary elections, the NFSB and the VMRO campaigned together in the so-called Patriotic Front (PF). Due to its more constructive and less populist stance, the largest party, Citizens for European Development (GERB), reached out to the PF for a supply-and-confidence arrangement that gave the PF no ministerial posts but nonetheless significant parliamentary influence.

For the 2017 elections, the NFSB and the VMRO joined Ataka in the United Patriots (UP) electoral coalition. The UP took 9.3% of the vote (more or less the same as in 2014), which was a considerable disappointment, given their much higher expectations. However, the configuration of seats in the new Parliament meant the GERB had to appeal to the alliance in order to form a government.



Consequently, for the first time in Bulgaria's post-communist history, the government formally included a party of the Radical Right. The UP alliance were given five portfolios in the Council of Ministers, and VMRO and the NFSB were awarded deputy premierships.

By the April 2021 parliamentary elections, the former partners each thought they could do better on their own, and they ran individually, with none passing the 4% threshold. None of the parties has since recovered, and all have ceded their votes to Revival and other new parties. As the war has unfolded, NFSB's leader Valeri Simeonov has focused on protecting the right of ethnic Bulgarians in Ukraine, advocating for self-governance and exemption from military service.

As the newest populist Radical Right party in Bulgaria, Revival has managed to attract a sizeable share of votes. Founded in 2017, the party and its controversial leader, Kostadin Kostadinov, have only adopted a nationalist, anti-EU, anti-NATO and pro-Russian discourse since 2022. Kostadinov is hardly new to politics. Indeed, he is something of a "serial party switcher" in Bulgaria, having sought a home wherever the opportunity has arisen. He has appeared on candidate lists or served in the party executive of all the major Radical Right parties – Ataka, the NSFB, and the VMRO. He has also appeared on the candidate lists of centre-right and centre-left parties. His rhetoric has similarly shifted in the same opportunistic manner.

The COVID-19 pandemic provided a great opportunity for Kostadinov and his party to capitalize on widespread frustration and discontent. In this context, Revival took an anti-vaccine stand, denying the existence of the pandemic and mobilizing numerous protests (Veleva, 2022a). Government subsidies, as well as anti-vax, anti-NATO and anti-EU rhetoric, have helped the party gain momentum so that by the third parliamentary election in 2021, it passed the threshold and sent 11 MPs to Parliament (see table 1). Some of the factors outlined for this success include the political turmoil in 2021 and the inability of parliamentary parties to form a government, the incumbent government's poor management of the COVID-19 pandemic (exacerbated by strong anti-vax and anti-restriction sentiment in the population), and the pronounced pro-Russian attitudes in Bulgaria that translate into anti-NATO and anti-EU positions (Cholakov, 2021).

The war in Ukraine has provided an unprecedented opportunity for Kostadinov to broadcast his pro-Russian views and stage eccentric performances. Shortly after the start of the war, Revival supporters staged an ugly protest action at the 2022

celebrations of Bulgaria's independence, throwing snowballs in the face of the Bulgarian prime minister and waving Russian flags. In fact, Russian flags are an indispensable attribute to the frequent protests staged by Revival in the past couple of years. While older nationalist parties have all but lost parliamentary support, Revival and its controversial leader Kostadin Kostadinov grew its support from just over 1% in 2017 to over 10% in the most recent October 2022 election.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine and Russia's energy politics have heightened divisions in Bulgarian society, given the strong historical ties between Bulgaria and Russia, and have fuelled support for Revival. Kostadinov has been repeatedly accused of links to Russia, which he has not denied. A brief overview of his public appearances and statements shows clear allegiance to Russian interests. Before him, Volen Siderov played such a role, defending Russia in many of his public statements. Social networks have further amplified Russian propaganda in Bulgaria, which has been taken at heart by supporters of Radical Right parties, as well as by many BSP voters. According to a report from the Human and Social Studies Foundation in Sofia (HSSF), Russian online propaganda has increased ten-fold since the start of the war (Gigov, 2022).

Radical Right parties have established a strong presence in Bulgarian politics, with continuous representation in Parliament and frequent access to government positions both at the local and national levels. At the same time, there has not been a growth in the nationalist vote. On the contrary, in 2021, Radical Right parties lost a big chunk of their vote to various new parties of different ideological identification, and the latest success of Revival is a result of capitalizing on the votes of other Radical Right parties (see table 1 and figure 2). This development makes us pause and think about the stability of the nationalist vote in Bulgaria. This vote looks pretty volatile and not nationalist at its core, but rather anti-establishment and directed against mainstream parties. In the past couple of years, the Radical Right discovered that new political players could easily hijack its territory and discourse and that their support was based more on the mood of the day than on lasting nationalist attitudes.

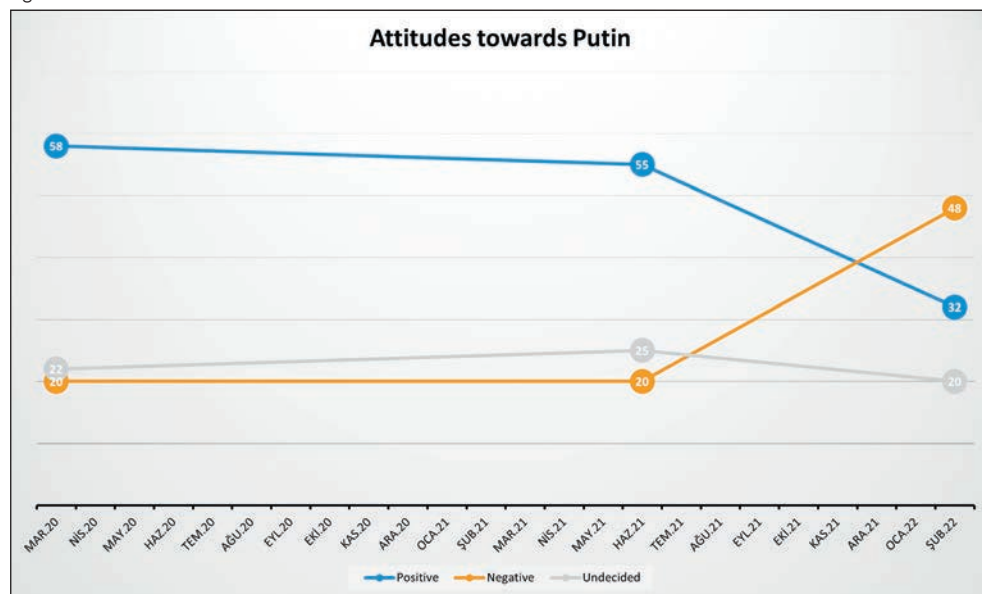
Public attitudes towards the war in Ukraine

The war in Ukraine has led to an immediate and radical change in public attitudes towards Russia and Putin. A study conducted by Alpha Research in late February 2022 concluded that the Russian invasion of Ukraine resulted in a drop in support



for Putin and an increase in solidarity with European countries. The report indicates that Putin lost half of his popularity among Bulgarian citizens in the first four days of the war alone. Furthermore, 63% of respondents reported approval of EU-wide sanctions against Ukraine, 61% found the invasion unjustified, only 16% saw it as justified, 68% agreed that Bulgaria must accept Ukrainian refugees, and only 16% were against it (Alpha Research, 2022). Another study by Research Center Trend (2022) indicates that 40% of respondents report an adverse change in attitudes towards Russia. However, the same study finds a slight increase in support for Revival.

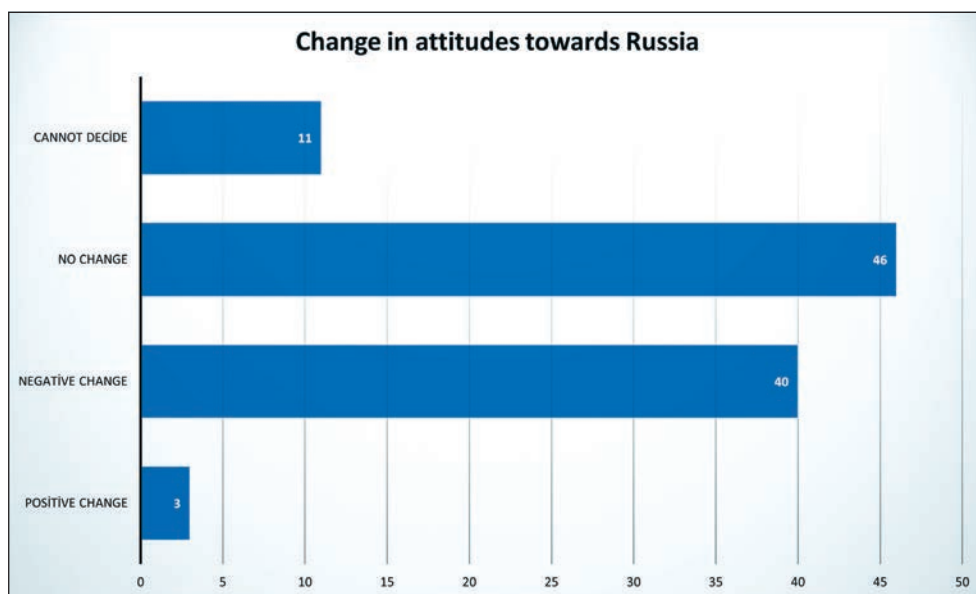
Figure 2: Attitudes towards Putin over time



Source: Compiled by the author based on data from Alpha Research (2022)

The protraction of the war conflict combined with worsening economic conditions led to a change in public attitudes by November 2022. A survey by Estat in November 2022 found 20.7% of Bulgarians sympathize with Russia (a decline from 23.6% in April 2022) and 23.1% with Ukraine (a decline from 32.4% in April) (Estat Research and Consultancy, 2022). Furthermore, 67.5% of respondents think Bulgarian should have a neutral position in the conflict, and 19% have a negative attitude towards Ukrainian refugees, whereas those with a positive view have decreased from 38% in April 2022 to 25.8% in October 2022 (ibid.).

Figure 3: Change in attitudes towards Russia after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine



Source: Compiled by the author based on data from Research Center Trend (2022)

At the same time, there are signs of hope. Despite the rise in nationalist sentiments and pro-Russian attitudes, nationalist and anti-EU parties have but marginal support. If anything became evident in the numerous recent elections, it is that Bulgarians are mostly pro-European. While voters are divided on the party of their particular choice, the majority harbour pro-EU attitudes and support Ukraine in the war conflict. Even the divided 48th Parliament (October 2022–February 2023), which could not agree on a government, has taken several important, clearly pro-European decisions, voting to send arms to Ukraine, purchase F-16 fighter jets, and confirm Bulgaria's entry into the Eurozone in January 2024.

Similarly, Bulgarians came in large numbers to commemorate one year since the start of the war and to express their support for Ukraine. While the war has strengthened the ever-present divide between Russophiles and Russophobes, it has also helped reaffirm democratic values and support for the Euro-Atlantic alliance. If anything, the reactions and the effects of the war are diverse and not unidirectional.

References

- Alpha Research. (2022, February), *The Russia–Ukraine war: A radical change in public attitudes towards the Russian president and an increase in solidarity with European countries*. <https://alpharesearch.bg/post/995-voinata-rusia-ukraina-radikalna-promiana-v-obshtestvenite-naglasii-kum-ruskia-prezident-i-rust-na-solidarnost-s-evropeiskite-strani.html>
- Bedrov, I. (2023, February 22). Три очевидни последици, които войната на Путин донесе в България. *Svobodnaevropa*. <https://www.svobodnaevropa.bg/a/32274239.html>
- Cholakov, P. (2021, November 18). “Или България ще загине”: защо толкова българи харесват Костадинов и “Възраждане”. *Deutsche Welle*. <https://www.dw.com/bg/a-59852845>
- Crampton, R. J. (2007). *Bulgaria*. Oxford University Press.
- Estat Research and Consulting. (2022, November 10), Общественото мнение за войната в Украйна. <https://www.estat.bg/files/richeditor/ukraine-2022-11-10-fin.pdf>
- Ghodsee, K. (2008). Left wing, right wing, everything: Xenophobia, neo-totalitarianism and populist politics in Bulgaria. *Problems of Post-Communism*, 56 (3), 26–39. <https://doi.org/10.2753/PPC1075-8216550303>
- Gigov, L. (2022, July 3). Russian online propaganda in Bulgaria. *Bulgarian News Agency (BTA)*. <https://bta.bg/en/news/bulgaria/290850-russian-online-propaganda-in-bulgaria>
- Gotev, G. (2022, February 17). Bulgarian MEP gives Nazi salute in European Parliament. *Euractiv*. <https://www.euractiv.com/section/elections/news/bulgarian-mep-gives-nazi-salute-in-european-parliament/>
- Ishiyama, J. (2009). Historical legacies and the size of the red–brown vote in post-communist politics. *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, 42(4), 485–504. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.postcomstud.2009.10.004>
- Kolorova, R., & Dimitrov, D. (1996). The roundtable talks in Bulgaria. In J. Elster (Ed.), *The roundtable talks and the breakdown of communism* (pp. 178–212). University of Chicago Press.
- Krasteva, A. (2016). The post-communist rise of national populism: Bulgarian paradoxes. In G. Lazaridis, G. Campani, & A. Benveniste (Eds.), *The rise of the Far Right in Europe: Populist shifts and “Othering”* (pp. 161–200). Palgrave MacMillan.
- Lavchiev, N. (2022, April 1). “Просто не е вярно”. Въвлича ли се България във война, ако изпрати военна помощ на Украйна”. *Svobodnaevropa*. <https://www.svobodnaevropa.bg/a/31779773.html>

- Pirro, A. (2015). *The populist Radical Right in Central and Eastern Europe: Ideology, impact, and electoral performance*. Routledge.
- Popov, B. (2022, February 6). България – сред най-зависимите от руски газ в Европа. *Investor.bg*. <https://www.investor.bg/a/91-analizi/345290-balgariya-sred-nay-zavisi-mite-ot-ruski-gaz-v-evropa>
- Rashkova, E. R., & Zankina, E. (2017). Are (populist) Radical Right parties *Männerparteien*? Evidence from Bulgaria. *West European Politics*, 40(4), 848–868. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2017.1285580>
- Veleva, D. (2022a, January 13). Защо популистите често вършат обратното на това, което говорят. *Svobodnaevropa*. <https://www.svobodnaevropa.bg/a/31649743.html>
- Veleva, D. (2022b, September 15). БСП в огледалото. Как социалистите в Европа и България говорят за Русия и санкциите. *Svobodnaevropa*. <https://www.svobodnaevropa.bg/a/32034041.html>
- Research Center Trend. (2022, March 5–12). *Нагласи на българите спрямо основните институции, формации и войната в Украйна (март 2022)*. https://rctrend.bg/project/Attitudes/March_2022
- Zankina, E. (2022). Bulgaria: History. In Europa Publications (Ed.), *Central and South-Eastern Europe 2023* (pp. 110–115). Abingdon.



BELGIUM



The impact of the Russia–Ukraine War on ties between the Vlaams Belang in Belgium and the Putin regime

Teun Pauwels Flemish Ministry of Education and Training*

Abstract

The populist Radical Right party, Vlaams Belang (VB), has consistently proved itself a successful electoral competitor in Belgian politics. Already in 2004, the party obtained 24% of the vote in Flanders, focusing on issues such as immigration, Flemish nationalism, crime and law and order. As of 2007, however, the party faced increasing competition from the Flemish nationalist party Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie (N-VA), which has been able to present itself as a democratic alternative to the populist VB. In recent years, the VB has tended to radicalize rather than moderate its tone to differentiate itself from competitors. While foreign policy has not been a salient issue within VB ideology, various party members have developed close ties to the Putin regime since 2010. For example, Filip Dewinter, a prominent member of the VB, has met Russian officials and appeared in Russian media. Following the invasion of Ukraine, the VB was forced to shift its position on Putin's regime. The current leader, Tom Van Grieken, has admitted he was seriously mistaken about Putin. Even Dewinter has strongly condemned Putin. At the same time, the VB remains sceptical about sanctions against Russia.

Keywords: *Vlaams Belang, Belgium, Russia–Ukraine war, nationalism, Flanders, Populist Radical Right*

* teunpauwels@hotmail.com

Pauwels, Teun. (2023). "The impact of the Russia–Ukraine War on ties between the Vlaams Belang in Belgium and the Putin regime." In: *The Impacts of the Russian Invasion of Ukraine on Right-wing Populism in Europe*. (eds). Gilles Ivaldi and Emilia Zankina. European Center for Populism Studies (ECPS). March 8, 2023. Brussels. <https://doi.org/10.55271/rp0013>



Introduction

The Vlaams Belang (Flemish Interest, VB) has consistently been one of the most successful populist Radical Right parties in Europe. In its early years, the VB was a real fringe party focusing almost exclusively on the goal of an autonomous Flemish state. As a result, only its leader Karel Dillen, who previously had shown sympathy towards the collaboration movement during German occupation, managed to gain representation in the national parliament when he was elected in 1978. However, after ideological and organizational changes, the party made its electoral breakthrough at the 1991 general elections (also known in Belgium as “Black Sunday” due to the VB’s success), gaining more than 10 % of the votes in Flanders.

In the south of Belgium, the Front National (FN) tried to reproduce the success of its French counterpart led by Jean-Marie Le Pen in the 1990s and 2000s. Despite some occasional successes, the Belgian FN failed to break through. Led by the erratic Daniel Féret, who was unable to organize the party in a coherent way, the Belgian FN is no longer represented in the national parliament. Using evidence from interviews with media practitioners, De Jonge (2019) suggests that in the absence of a credible right-wing populist challenger, media practitioners in Wallonia adhere to a strict demarcation, whereas the Flemish media have become gradually more accommodating to the populist Radical Right. Since the populist Radical Right has been only successful in the Flemish part of Belgium, this report will focus entirely on the VB.

The structure of this report is as follows. First, we will briefly provide an overview of the ideology of the VB before turning to the organizational and electoral development of the party over time. The final section explores the relationship with the Putin regime and the impact of the war with Ukraine on VB’s ties with the Kremlin.

The ideology of the Vlaams Belang

The VB can be considered a textbook example of a populist Radical Right party focusing on *nativism*, *populism* and *authoritarianism*. Therefore, it is worth briefly outlining what each of these themes means and how they apply in the case of the VB.

Nativism is an ideology that holds that states should be inhabited exclusively by members of the native group (“the nation”) and that non-native people and ideas

are fundamentally threatening to the homogenous nation-state (Mudde, 2007). Since the Flemish “nation” does not coincide with the state (Belgium), it has been evident to the VB that the artificial Belgian state should cease to exist and that the Flemish and the Walloons should go their separate ways. An independent Flemish republic has always been the principal goal of the VB. With the challenge of immigration, the VB has come to further underscore the need for internal homogenization. In 1992, Filip Dewinter developed a seventy-point programme, which provided an operational plan for the guided repatriation of non-European foreigners to their countries of origin (Mudde, 2000). These harsh stances have been softened throughout the years, and by 2003, Dewinter admitted that the plan was no longer realistic. Today the VB sees non-European immigrants and particularly Muslims, as one of the main threats to the nation. The party stresses the fundamental and irreconcilable antagonism between Islam and Western values and argues that Muslims increasingly impose their values upon the Flemings.

Even though the party featured elitist viewpoints in its early phase, the VB has increasingly presented itself as *populist* since the 1990s. The “pure people” is the equivalent of the common Fleming, who is honest, works hard and pays taxes but is politically quiescent. These people, the VB alleges, have been betrayed by a corrupt political class, which is willing to sell the Flemish cause due to self-interest. This corrupt mechanism is reinforced by the media, which is dependent upon subsidies (and is hence biased). Like other populist parties, the VB favours *direct democracy* to remove power from the establishment and give it back to the people.

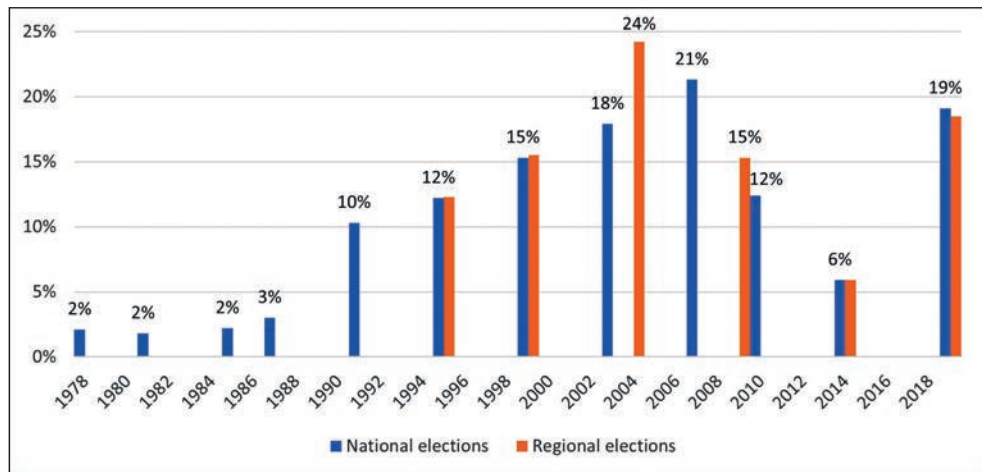
Consistent with its nationalist–populist ideology, the VB thinks the individual cannot be separated from tradition and can only develop within his ethnic community. The traditional family, consisting of a heterosexual couple whose duty is to contribute to the continuity of the Flemish people, is considered the smallest unit of a harmonious, organic society. The party favours the promotion of traditional values to combat what it sees as an ongoing process of moral decay. In line with traditional ethics, it is argued that human life is only possible in a well-ordered community focusing on law and order (*authoritarianism*).



The development of the party over time

Figure 1 shows the electoral results of the VB in national and regional elections from 1978 until 2019. It reveals that the party has gone through roughly four phases: (1) party development at the margin of the Belgian party system (1978–1990); (2) electoral breakthrough (1991–2004); (3) new competitors causing electoral decline (2005–2014); and (4) renewal and electoral comeback (2015–present).

Figure 1: Electoral results for the Vlaams Belang in regional (Flemish) and national (Belgian) elections, 1978-2019



Source: Pauwels, 2014; Vlaams Parlement, 2019; Note: Figures represent the share of the vote the VB achieved in Flanders at each election (national and regional)

Phase I: Early developments at the margin of the party system (1978–1990)

The Vlaams Blok (Flemish Bloc) emerged in 1978 following rising dissatisfaction with the Flemish nationalist Volksunie (VU). In the second half of the 1970s, the VU's perceived overly moderate and left-leaning stances drew increasing criticism from the Flemish movement. This frustration peaked when the VU signed the so-called Egmont Pact, which envisioned a reform of the Belgian state leading to autonomy for the regions while also granting the French-speaking population in the periphery of Brussels some privileges. As a result, one VU member, Lode Claes, quit the party and established the Vlaamse Volkspartij (VVP). At the same time, Karel Dillen founded the Vlaams-Nationale Partij (VNP). The two parties decided to participate in the federal elections of 1978 under the name Vlaams Blok (VB). Against expectations, Dillen, and not Claes, was elected. The latter decided to leave politics, and Dillen absorbed the nationalist wing of the VVP. In May 1979, the VNP was dissolved, and the VB was officially established. The VB remained a small fringe party dominated by Dillen in its early years. Its programmatic focus was almost entirely directed against the Egmont Pact while striving for an independent Flemish state.

Phase II: Cordon sanitaire, breakthrough and electoral peak (1991–2004)

At the end of the 1980s, Dillen started a project to “rejuvenate” the party, promoting several young VB members within the party. As a result, a youth organization called Vlaams Blok Jongeren (VBJ) was established by, among others, Dewinter and Frank Vanhecke. However, these changes provoked internal tensions as a group of committed VB members accused the VBJ group of sidelining the Flemish cause in favour of the anti-immigrant issue in 1988. Dillen supported the VBJ, leading to the exit of the dissatisfied VB members and strengthening Dewinter’s position (Mudde, 2000). As a result, the VB gradually started to evolve into a modern populist Radical Right party.

The ideological and organizational changes started to pay off at the end of the 1980s. At local elections in 1987, the VB showed its electoral potential by gaining 17.7% of the vote in the city of Antwerp. The party’s national breakthrough came in 1991 when it secured 10.3% of the Flemish vote in the general election (corresponding to 6.6% of the national vote) (see Figure 1). “Black Sunday”, as the election came to be known, alarmed all the other Belgian parties, who agreed to construct a *cordon sanitaire* around the VB by pledging not to cooperate with it under any circumstances and on any political level. In 1996, Vanhecke — widely considered a consensus figure between the Flemish nationalist wing (symbolized by Gerolf Annemans) and the anti-immigrant wing (represented by Dewinter) — replaced Dillen as VB leader.

In 2004, the Court of Appeal in Ghent condemned several VB organizations for violating Belgium’s Anti-Racism Law, passed in 1981. Consequently, the party changed its name from Vlaams Blok to Vlaams Belang. The party also moderated its discourse somewhat, indicated by Dewinter’s admission that his infamous seventy-point plan was no longer realistic. Still, the changes were acknowledged as more about tone than substance. At the 2004 party conference, Vanhecke confirmed that the VB changed its name but not its identity. Still, the court’s ruling significantly increased the party’s visibility in the media and enabled the VB to present itself as the “victim” of the established parties. A few months after the 2004 conference, the VB polled its best result ever, taking 24% of the vote at regional and European elections in June (Pauwels, 2014).



Phase III: new competitors causing electoral decline (2005–2014)

The party faced its first electoral setbacks in the elections of 2007 and 2009. This setback cannot be explained by demand-side theories such as shifting public opinion on immigration or political trust, which remained static. Instead, the VB's declining fortunes reflected a shrinking ideological niche for the populist Radical Right (Pauwels, 2011). On the one hand, the party faced competition from the newly established Lijst Dedecker (LDD), a neoliberal populist party that campaigned on a platform of defending hard-working people against corrupt elites and big government. On the other hand, a new party, the Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie (Flemish Nationalist Alliance or N-VA), gained momentum. The party was formed in 2001 as the successor of the VU, which had split because of internal tensions.

After the VU's implosion, the N-VA had a hard time proving its relevance to Belgian voters. Therefore, the party chose an electoral alliance with the Christian Democratic and Flemish party (Christen-Democratisch en Vlaams, CD&V) in 2004. Following the 2007 elections, the CD&V–N-VA alliance promised meaningful state reform but failed to achieve much due to the formidable resistance of most francophone parties. Consequently, the N-VA left the coalition, claiming the Christian Democrats were insufficiently bold in defending Flemish autonomy. As a result, in 2009, the N-VA reprised its traditional role as the anti-establishment party in Belgium. Due to a broadening of its ideological profile and the emergence of Bart De Wever, a wildly popular party member, the N-VA was able to revive its Flemish nationalist credentials among voters at the expense of the VB.

A post-electoral analysis in 2009 showed that the LDD and the N-VA had siphoned off 8 and 15% of VB voters, respectively (Pauwels, 2011: 72). Plagued by internal tensions, the LDD disintegrated rapidly. In contrast, as of 2010, the N-VA had become the largest Flemish party and continued to be successful afterwards. Post-electoral research suggested that at the national elections of 2010, the N-VA picked up 32% of those who had voted for the VB in 2007 (Swyngedouw et al., 2012: 13). At the elections of May 2014, the VB achieved its worst result since 1987. Five months later, the 28-year-old Tom Van Grieken, was elected as party president.

Phase IV: renewal and electoral comeback (2015-current)

After 2015, the VB sought to pursue two opposing strategies. The first was party *mainstreaming*, as advocated by the new party leadership; the second was *radicalization* pushed by a faction led by Dewinter (Van Haute & Pauwels, 2016). The mainstreaming strategy aims to polish the sharp edges of the party programme

in an attempt to get closer to power and overcome the *cordon sanitaire*. On the other hand, Dewinter's strategy to restore the VB's electoral relevance differs as he believes breaking the *cordon* is unrealistic. Instead, for Dewinter, the VB should acquire policy influence by putting pressure on the mainstream parties (the so-called "whip party" doctrine). A good illustration of the tensions inherent in this dual strategy occurred in 2016 when Dewinter and Anke Vandermeersch held a speech for the Greek neo-Nazi party Golden Dawn after which party president Van Grieken openly criticized and sanctioned them (Pauwels and van Haute, 2017).

Despite internal tensions, the VB performed well in the 2019 elections. And according to an opinion poll conducted in November 2022, the VB could secure 26% of the votes making it potentially the largest Flemish party (Knack, 2022). While it is difficult to draw strong conclusions about why the VB gained momentum, two elements might play a role. First, the issues of immigration and terrorism have become more salient. The ongoing refugee crisis and the terrorist attacks in Brussels in 2016 sparked extensive debate on immigration and multiculturalism. Eurobarometer data from 2019 suggest these issues are salient all over Europe; indeed, immigration is the most important concern at the EU level, as mentioned by more than a third of Europeans (European Union, 2019). Second, the N-VA has been part of the governing coalition at the regional (Flemish) level for almost two decades while the VB remained in permanent opposition. It is possible that voters who hold more (radical) right-wing ideas think the N-VA has become too moderate and consensus-seeking and have thus given thought to again voting for the VB.

Ties between the VB and the Putin regime and the impact of the war in Ukraine

Foreign policy has not been a salient part of the VB's ideology. For instance, the party manifestos of 2007 and 2019 devoted just 3.5% and 6.3% of space to the issue, respectively. However, within the foreign policy debate, the EU has become an issue of growing importance. On the one hand, the EU has been recognized as a virtue, creating welfare and peace while providing an opportunity for a "Flemish nation" within a confederal "Europe of fatherlands". At the same time, the VB has a Eurosceptic side that denounces the current European "superstate" for undermining national sovereignty, particularly concerning immigration policy. The bureaucratic nature of the EU and financial transfers within Europe are other targets of party criticism (Abts et al., 2015).



Regarding defence policy, the VB's position could be summarized as "pragmatic" and "neutral", in order to guarantee national security. This pragmatism is illustrated by its stance concerning NATO. Given the lack of a European alternative, the VB supports Belgium's NATO membership at a time of increasing security threats. At the same time, the party is sceptical towards NATO because it makes Europe overly dependent on the United States. The VB, therefore, calls for more military investments and cooperation with Belgium's European allies to create a credible alternative to NATO and gain leverage in the international community. The recent invasion of Ukraine is explicitly mentioned as an illustration of the powerlessness of Europe in this respect (De Wachter, 2022).

While Russia has hardly been an issue in the VB's official party literature, some VB members such as Frank Creyelman, Jan Penris, and Dewinter have been increasingly vocal in their support for the Putin regime, at least before the war in Ukraine. These more radical thinkers inside the party see Russia as an ally against globalization and Islam. For example, Dewinter has applauded Putin for promoting national sovereignty while defending Russia's identity and conservative Christian values. He furthermore stated that "the only good thing about the Iron Curtain is that it has saved Eastern Europe from political correctness, multiculturalism and 'wokeness'", while embracing the dream of an "independent Europe from Vladivostok to the North Sea, separate from America, China and certainly the Arab world" (Verbergt, 2022).

In 2014, three VB members (Creyelmans, Penris and Christian Verougstraete) travelled to Crimea as "observers" of the referendum on Russia's annexation of the region. It should be added that the party president at that time (Annemans) distanced himself from this action and stated that the VB "has no business in Ukraine" (Van Thillo, 2014). For his part, Dewinter has had meetings with, among others, Russia's deputy prime minister and the president of the Russian parliament. He has also appeared several times in Russian media. Nevertheless, whether there are financial links between the VB and Russia has never been substantiated. However, this question has become increasingly relevant, as shown by the liberal Flemish Open VLD party's recent call for an investigation into potential foreign influence and undermining of democracy. In doing so, the liberals focus, among other things, on the foreign financing of political parties and individual politicians (De Boeck, 2022).

Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the VB was forced to shift its position on Putin's regime. Tom Van Grieken has claimed that the party initially considered Russia an ally against multiculturalism but admitted he was seriously mistaken about Putin. Even Dewinter strongly condemned Putin as a dictator who had "totally lost it". Political opponents have used Russia's invasion to attack the VB. In April 2022, Russian consul general Georgy Kuznetsov was reportedly asked to leave Belgium on suspicion of espionage. Dewinter has been publicly seen with Kuznetsov several times and even invited him to the Flemish parliament. When it became known that Kuznetsov was potentially involved in espionage, the socialist party Vooruit (Forward) called on Dewinter to resign as first vice president of the Flemish parliament (which did not happen).

Since February 2022, the VB has distanced itself from Putin, noting that Russia's invasion is a flagrant violation of international law. At the same time, the party remains sceptical about the harsh and "poorly thought out" sanctions against Russia. This scepticism toward sanctions is informed, for the most part, by pragmatic economic arguments. There is the fear that "the Russian bear" might "claw back" in response to the sanctions with severely adverse consequences for already "exploding energy costs" (De Wachter, 2022). This might be surprising given the relatively high support for the current actions taken to respond to Russia's invasion of Ukraine in Belgium as well as in most other European countries (European Union, 2022). In November 2022, the European Parliament adopted a resolution recognizing Russia as a state sponsor of terrorism. While this resolution was adopted by an overwhelming majority of MEPs, the three from the VB chose to abstain.



Conclusion

Despite its ups and downs, the VB has been consistently successful in Belgian politics for over four decades. Foreign policy has not been a significant concern for the party, and when addressing international issues, it has called for a pragmatic or neutral approach to secure national interests. Yet some prominent VB members have developed ties with the Putin regime over time. After Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the party leadership and pro-Russian voices inside the party clearly condemned Putin. At the same time, the VB remains sceptical about "poorly thought out" sanctions against Russia because of the potential (economic) backfiring.

As explained earlier, the VB is doing very well in the polls, and it appears the party's "position switch" on Russia has not harmed it in electoral terms. This is probably because the VB has never been focusing on foreign policy much and is also not associated with this issue by the voters. Instead, the VB remains the issue owner on topics like immigration, which remains a highly visible and contested subject. Combined with a very long governing period at the regional level of its rival N-VA, it seems that the populist Radical Right remains an attractive electoral alternative in the Flemish part of Belgium.

References

- Abts, K., Van Craen, M., & Swyngedouw, M. (2015). Eigen volk eerst in een Europa der volkeren. *Samenleving en Politiek*, 12(9), 11–22.
- De Boeck, A. (2022, April 4) Krijgen Vlaamse partijen geld uit Rusland? Open Vld wil het laten onderzoeken. *De Morgen*, <https://www.demorgen.be/nieuws/krijgen-vlaamse-partijen-geld-uit-rusland-open-vld-wil-het-laten-onderzoeken-ba5b36f2/>
- De Jonge, L. (2019). The Populist Radical Right and the media in the Benelux: Friend or foe? *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 24(2), 189–209.

- De Wachter, J. (2022, April) Oorlog in Oekraïne: Russische agressie en Westerse zwakte. Vlaams Belang Magazine, <https://www.vlaamsbelang.org/magazines/jaargang-19-nr-4-april-2022>
- European Union (2019). *Public opinion in the European Union (Eurobarometer 91)*. <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/api/deliverable/download/file?deliverableId=70922>
- European Union (2022). *Public opinion in the European Union (Eurobarometer 97)*. <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/api/deliverable/download/file?deliverableId=83378>
- Knack. (2022, December 2) *Peiling: Vlaams Belang de grootste partij, Conner Rousseau de populairste politicus*. <https://www.knack.be/nieuws/belgie/politiek/peiling-vlaams-belang-de-grootste-partij-conner-rousseau-de-populairste-politicus/>
- Mudde, C. (2000). *The ideology of the Extreme Right*. Manchester University Press.
- Mudde, C. (2007). *Populist Radical Right parties in Europe*. Cambridge University Press.
- Pauwels, T. (2011) Explaining the strange decline of the populist Radical Right Vlaams Belang in Belgium: The impact of permanent opposition. *Acta Politica*, 46(1), 60–82.
- Pauwels, T. (2014). *Populism in Western Europe: Comparing Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands*. Routledge
- Pauwels, T. & van Haute, E. (2017) Caught between mainstreaming and radicalisation: Tensions inside the populist Vlaams Belang in Belgium, *European Politics and Policy*, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2017/01/11/tensions-inside-vlaams-belang-belgium/>
- Swyngedouw, M., Abts, K. and Billiet, J. (2012). *De verschuivingen in het stemgedrag 2007–2010 voor de kamer in Vlaanderen*, <https://soc.kuleuven.be/ceso/ispo/downloads/ISPO%202012-1%20De%20verschuivingen%20in%20het%20stemgedrag%202007-2010.pdf>
- Van Haute, E., & Pauwels, T. (2016) The Vlaams Belang: Party organization and party dynamics. In R. Heinisch, & O. Mazzoleni (Eds.), *Understanding populist party organisation: The Radical Right in Western Europe* (pp. 49–77). Palgrave.
- Van Thillo, J. (2014, March 14) Parlementsleden Vlaams Belang reizen naar Krim. *De Standaard*. https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20140314_01024205
- Vlaams Parlement (2019) *Vlaanderen kiest*, <https://vlaanderenkiest.be/verkiezingen2019/#/parlement/02000>
- Verbergt, M. (2022, March 1) Droom van Europa ‘van Noordzee tot Vladivostok’ gaat in rook op. *De Standaard*. https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20220228_98215003



CROATIA



The repercussions of the war in Ukraine on Croatia's Far Right

Vassilis Petsinis* Corvinus University

Abstract

This report deals with the repercussions of the war in Ukraine on the national conservative parties, as well as the radical and extremist right, in Croatia. It focuses closely on these actors' attempts to draw parallels between the conflict in Ukraine and Croatia's war of independence in the 1990s, known as the "Homeland War" (Domovinski rat). It also seeks to place into context what, if anything, is so "specific" about the activism of this party family concerning the war in Ukraine – including any "dissident" stances in comparison to the political mainstream. This report covers the most established parties of the Croatian Far Right but focuses most closely on the national conservative Homeland Movement (Domovinski Pokret). This report clarifies how this party: 1) seeks to draw a linkage between the developments in Ukraine and the identity and memory politics of the Homeland War; and 2) utilizes this process in its endeavour to antagonize Croatia's ruling party, the Croatian Democratic Union.

Keywords: *national conservatism; Radical Right; Croatia; Ukraine; Yugoslav Wars; Russia–Ukraine war*

* vassilis.petsinis@uni-corvinus.hu

Petsinis, Vassilis. (2023). "The repercussions of the war in Ukraine on Croatia's Far Right." In: *The Impacts of the Russian Invasion of Ukraine on Right-wing Populism in Europe*. (eds). Gilles Ivaldi and Emilia Zankina. European Center for Populism Studies (ECPS). March 8, 2023. Brussels. <https://doi.org/10.55271/rp0014>



Introduction

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has been generating shockwaves across Central and Southeastern Europe. Andrej Plenković, Croatia's prime minister and chairman of the ruling centre-right, conservative Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ), has pledged that his government will continue to demonstrate solidarity with Ukraine and provide material support to the Ukrainian refugees hosted in Croatia (Jutarnji, 2023). Opposition parties such as the centre-left Social Democrat Party (SDP) and the Green–Left coalition Možemo ("We Can!") have backed the government, asserting that the Croatian state should, within its capacities, provide Ukraine with the technological expertise and the logistical equipment required to withstand Russia's invasion (Pavelic, 2013).

This report concentrates on the repercussions of the war on the national conservative parties, as well as the Radical Right, in Croatia. It focuses closely on these actors' attempts to draw parallels between the conflict in Ukraine and Croatia's war of independence in the 1990s, known as the "Homeland War" (*Domovinski rat*). It also seeks to place into context what, if anything, is so "specific" about the activism of this party family concerning the war in Ukraine – including any "dissident" stances in comparison to the political mainstream.

It begins by analysing the reactions to the conflict in Ukraine among the most established political parties of the Croatian Far Right, all of which claim to descend from Croatia's original Party of Rights, founded by two nationalists, Ante Starčević and Eugen Kvaternikin, in 1861—namely, the Croatian Party of Rights (HSP), the Croatian Pure Party of Rights (HČSP), and the Authentic Croatian Party of Rights (A-HSP). The analysis also touches on minor parties like the Croatian Party of Rights 1861 (HSP 1861)—which, as the name suggests, also claims lineage from the original party—as well as grassroots and paramilitary actors. However, the principal focus is how the current war has been framed and interpreted by Croatia's national conservative Homeland Movement (Domovinski Pokret), which emerged as the third-largest party in the Croatian Parliament (the Sabor) after the June 2020 elections. The report asks how and to what extent this party: 1) seeks to draw a linkage between the developments in Ukraine and the identity and memory politics of the Homeland War and 2) utilizes this process in its endeavour to antagonize the ruling HDZ.

The findings of the report emerge from qualitative content analysis (Schreier,

2012). The primary material consists of official documents such as party programmes, statements, and declarations issued by the parties under study, complemented with quotations of leading members of these parties, monitored in the Croatian and international press, expert reports, and public surveys.

Croatia's "Homeland war" (1991-95): National imageries and political appropriations

The "Homeland War" refers to the conflict over Croatian independence fought by the country's armed forces, first against the Yugoslav military (1991-92) and then the forces of the self-proclaimed Republika Srpska Krajina in 1992-95. The interpretations of the war vary and are subject to the cleavages across Croatia's party spectrum (Cvikić et al., 2014; Banjeglav, 2012).

However, these diverse understandings converge in recognizing the Homeland War as a landmark event in consolidating Croatian statehood (Šuligoj & Rudan, 2022). Of greater significance here is nationalist political actors' utilization of the war and its symbolism. Notably, the eastern Slavonian town of Vukovar has been awarded the status of "master symbol" in the nationalist imageries of the Homeland War due to the fierce resistance that the Croatian forces put up against Yugoslav and Serb auxiliary units there from August to November 1991. More recently, between 2013 and 2016, a series of mass protests against the public use of the Serb Cyrillic script took place in Vukovar (Pavelic, 2013). The organizers of these demonstrations had deemed it unacceptable that the Serb Cyrillic script would be officially used in a town with such traumatic memories and a centrality in the symbolism of the Homeland War (Koska & Matan, 2017).¹

Croatia's Far Right and the war in Ukraine: Reactions by the established actors

The Croatian Party of Rights (HSP)

Dobroslav Paraga and Ante Paradžik established the HSP in February 1990. The leadership pledged commitment to the legacy of Starčević and Kvaternikin, the

1. In Vukovar and other parts of Slavonia where the ethnic Serb population meets the 30% threshold prescribed by Croatian law, the official use of the Serb Cyrillic script has not been implemented largely due to public opposition.



nineteenth-century nationalists who founded the Party of Rights and laid the ground for modern Croatian nationalism. The HSP has no seats in the national parliament (the Sabor). However, the party controls the town halls of Popovača (City of Popovača, 2023) and Gospić. The mayor of Gospić is the former party chairman, Karlo Starčević (Gradonačelnik, n.d.).

Between 1991 and 1993, the HSP dispatched its paramilitary unit to Slavonia and Herzegovina (Petsinis, 2022). Between 2013 and 2016, the HSP participated in protests against the public use of the Serb Cyrillic script in Vukovar. In the “Vukovar Declaration” of 2018, the party condemned “all those political forces who obstructed, prevented, or falsified the investigation process for the war crimes committed (by the Yugoslav and Serb paramilitary forces) during the Homeland War” (Hrvatska Stranka Prava, 2018).

As soon as Russia commenced its invasion on February 24, 2022, the HSP leadership expressed its unequivocal support for Ukraine by emphasizing that “what is defended with blood is not given away easily” (Hrvatska Stranka Prava, 2022). However, neither the party website nor the issues of the official HSP magazine, *Hrvatsko Pravo (Croatian Right)*, nor any other declarations published between late February and December 2022 made any additional references to the war in Ukraine. Instead, the principal focus of the HSP’s official publications was internal party matters, anti-corruption themes and the function of Croatia’s judicial system, the veneration of selected historical figures (e.g., Ante Starčević and Rafael Boban²), the situation of the ethnic Croat communities in Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, and the obligation to safeguard the symbolism of the Homeland War (Hrvatska Stranka Prava, n.d.). Meanwhile, no evidence exists that the HSP organized demonstrations or other public events supporting Ukraine during that period.

The Authentic Croatian Party of Rights (A-HSP)

The A-HSP was established in 2005. Like the HSP and the HČSP, it operates as an extra-parliamentary actor, having won no seats in the 2020 election (see Table 1). An ideological difference between the A-HSP and the HSP or the HČSP consists in the greater stress placed by this party on the purported “cultural exceptionalism of the Croatian nation” in relation to the Slavic, Germanic, and

2. Rafael Boban was a military commander in the fascist Ustaše (“Insurgents”) militia under the rule of the Nazi puppet state in Croatia (NDH) created in 1941. He disappeared in 1945 but a right-wing cult grew up around him in subsequent years.

Latin realms of cultural influence. This party has been accused of inciting hatred against the ethnic Serb minority (HINA, 2018).

On February 25, 2022, the A-HSP chairman, Dražen Keleminec, wholeheartedly voiced his solidarity with the struggle of the Ukrainian nation against “the new Hitler, Vladimir Putin [...] and his endeavour to erase Ukrainian statehood” (Autohtona–Hrvatska Stranka Prava, 2022). Keleminec also drew a linkage between Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and “the invasion of Croatia by Putin’s allies, the Serbs, in the 1990s” and contended that “Ukrainians and Croats share the same ancestry from the ‘White Croats’ of the Middle Ages” (ibid.). Despite its marginality, the A-HSP has been more active and consistent than the HSP and the HČSP in its promotion of pro-Ukraine themes through the official website and other media. The party leadership has been repeatedly comparing the war in Ukraine with Croatia’s Homeland War (Hrvatska Desnica, 2022a). Furthermore, the A-HSP dubbed Croatian President, Zoran Milanović,³ a “man in the service of the Kremlin” (Hrvatska Desnica, 2022b) and has been warning about the alleged “recruitment of Croats among the ranks of KGB spies” (Hrvatska Desnica, 2022c).

The Croatia Pure Party of Rights (HČSP)

The HČSP (founded in December 1992) claims continuity from the original Croatian Pure Party of Rights established in 1895 (Hrvatske Čiste Stranke Prava, n.d. a). The leadership pledges commitment to the legacies of Starčević and has equally been accused of historical revisionism and attempts at rehabilitating the fascist wartime Ustaše movement and the Nazi puppet state in Croatia during the Second World War (Vidov, 2015). Nevertheless, this party is even weaker than the HSP, without a single deputy in the Sabor (see Table 1) or any municipality under its control. In its extensive programme, the HČSP pledges to protect the dignity of the Homeland War and its legacy (Hrvatske Čiste Stranke Prava, 2021).

The HČSP leadership was quick on their feet to draw parallels with the Homeland War and grant its categorical support to Ukraine as soon as Russia invaded the country in late February 2022. In a more extensive declaration in comparison to the one issued by the HSP, the party underlined that “no one can be allowed to impose their will on a sovereign nation through violence [...] in these difficult times we voice our solidarity to the Ukrainian people and the brave

3. Zoran Milanović is said to have maintained a controversial stance on Ukraine. On this issue, see Trkanjec (2022) and Radosavljevic (2022).



Ukrainian defenders who fight for their homeland” (Hrvatske Čiste Stranke Prava, n.d. b). The HČSP also expressed its anxieties over a potential “spill over” of the conflict to neighbouring regions. At the same time, in accordance with its programmatic apprehension vis-à-vis the Euro-Atlantic institutions, the party leadership castigated the “so-called allies” of Ukraine for “responding to Russia’s aggression only with economic sanctions and not with more drastic and urgently required measures” (ibid.).

Nevertheless, in a similar vein as the HSP, HČSP’s official website and the other party publications prioritize topics such as the operation of the party’s local committees across Croatia (Hrvatske Čiste Stranke Prava, 2022b); the commemoration of the Homeland War in its major sites (Hrvatske Čiste Stranke Prava, 2022c), and the veneration of leading figures from the NDH period, including Ante Pavelić (Hrvatske Čiste Stranke Prava, 2022a). Furthermore, there is no evidence that the party has coordinated any protests or other public manifestations in support of Ukraine since late February 2022.

A ‘dissident’ outlier? The case of the Croatian Party of Rights 1861

Dobroslov Paraga, a formerly leading member of the HSP, established the HSP 1861 in 1995. This party is not represented in the Sabor (See Table 1). The programmatic principles of the HSP 1861 converge with those of the HČSP and the A-HSP along their criticism of NATO. However, with specific regard to the war in Ukraine, the HSP 1861 went several steps ahead the other two parties. In early March 2022, the party leadership contended that “Croatia is in greater danger from its NATO membership than from Russian aggression” and estimated that “Ukraine will opt for military neutrality” (Hrvatsko Pravo, 2022).

The HSP 1861 condemned the Russian invasion and acknowledged the yearning of the Ukrainian nation for freedom, democracy, and independence. However, the party argued that this cannot be achieved through Ukraine’s membership of NATO and accused the alliance of having “provoked” Russia to invade the country. The party dubbed, Ukrainian president, Volodymyr Zelenskyy a “NATO puppet who did nothing to implement the terms of the Minsk Agreement (2015)” and drew an indirect parallel between he and Ivo Sanader (ibid.).⁴ The party underlined that “Ukraine must be a bridge between Russia and the EU and

not an apple of discord between Russia and NATO” (ibid.).⁵ This party’s principled and integral opposition to NATO brings the HSP 1861 close to the outlooks of parties such as “Our Slovakia” (Ľudová Strana Naše Slovensko, 2022) and “Greeks for the Homeland” (Kasidiaris, 2022) on the war in Ukraine.

The role of grassroots and paramilitary actors

Since 2014, there are allegations that small numbers of Croatian extreme right-wingers had fought on an individual basis with the Azov Movement in eastern Ukraine. A prominent part in the recruitment of these individuals was played by Denis Seler, a former leader of FC Dinamo Zagreb’s “Bad Blue Boys” ultras (Colborne, 2019). In March 2022, sources from the Russian defence ministry claimed that 200 Croatian citizens had gone to fight in Ukraine. Nevertheless, the ministry rejected those allegations (Grgurinovic, 2022). Moreover, the Croatian branch of the extremist “Blood and Honour” coalition is said to have been maintaining links to likeminded groupings in Ukraine. However, “Blood and Honour” did not issue any statements regarding the war in Ukraine (Kuloglija, 2022).

Ambitious contenders from the right and the war in Ukraine: The Homeland Movement

The Homeland Movement (DP) was established in February 2020 by former singer and TV host Miroslav Škoro. In the parliamentary elections of July 2020, the DP garnered 10.89% of the vote, sending 16 deputies to the Sabor (out of 151 seats), and took the third spot after the HDZ and SDP (Table 1). The party benefited from the weakening of the HDZ’s “right-wing faction” on the municipal and local levels, especially in the war-ravaged territories of Slavonia (Hrvatski Sabor, 2020). This was largely the case with the departure of Vukovar’s mayor and current leader of the DP, Ivan Penava, from the HDZ in May 2020 and his decision to join forces with the DP (Dnevik, 2020). In 2016, Penava had played a pivotal part in the coordination of the demonstrations against the public use of the Serb Cyrillic script (Petsinis, 2022).

4. Ivo Sanader is a former Croatian prime minister (2003–09) and member of the HDZ who is serving a sentence in prison on corruption charges. Croatia was admitted into NATO in 2009 at the end of his term in office.

5. One should add that, as early as the Euromaidan protests in 2014, the HSP 1861 had been accusing the West of “Byzantine policies towards Ukraine” and had detected “geopolitical games of the global powers highly reminiscent of those in Croatia” (Hrvatsko Pravo, 2014).



On February 24, 2022, Ivan Penava stated that “our party expresses its firm solidarity with Ukraine and the Ukrainian people [...] we hope that this conflict will last as shortly as possible with as few human and material losses as possible” (Domovinski Pokret, 2022a). The same politician urged the state authorities to organize the accommodation of Ukrainian refugees in Croatia and allocate the material resources required in an efficient manner. In addition to highlighting the commonalities between the Homeland War and the developments in Ukraine, Penava cast doubts on the competence of the government to manage a migration crisis in Croatia (ibid.) Furthermore, on April 6, 2022, the party’s MP Stipo Mlinarić praised Volodymyr Zelenskyy for dealing with the ‘fifth column’ in Ukraine and lamented the fact that “the HDZ-led government has not done the same with the “fifth column” that operates from within the Serbian Democratic Independent Party (Domovinski Pokret, 2022b).⁶

Since 2020, the primary objective of the DP has been to antagonize the HDZ and the ruling party’s more nationalistic and socially conservative “right-wing faction” with which the DP shares core principles on identity politics (e.g., ethnic minority issues, gender-related themes, and the informal partnership between the Catholic Church and the state). So far, there is no evidence that the emphasis on the war in Ukraine alone has assisted the party to augment its appeal vis-à-vis the HDZ. On the contrary, as indicated in several public surveys, conducted by the Promocija Plus, 2X1 Komunikacije, and Ipsos polling agencies between March and December 2022, the DP has been lagging behind both Možemo and the centre-right Bridge List according to Europe Elects (<https://europeelects.eu/croatia/>).

To reverse this decline in popularity, the DP has been putting simultaneous stress on the rapidly increasing cost of living and the government’s alleged incompetence to harness the galloping inflation (Domovinski Pokret, 2022c). In this light, the strategy of the DP appears to resemble the policymaking patterns of populist and radical right-wing parties—such as Estonia’s Far Right party, EKRE (ERR, 2022a, 2022b)—which have prioritized the deteriorating economic situation since the autumn of 2022.

6. The SDSS is the largest political party among the ethnic Serb minority in Croatia. It currently participates as a coalition partner in the Croatian government together with the HDZ.

Table 1. Vote share selected parties in the Croatian parliamentary elections (July 2020)

Party	Vote share (%)	Seats won
HDZ	37.26	66
Restart (SDP-led) coalition	24.87	41
DP	10.89	16
Bridge List	7.39	8
Green-Left (Možemo)	6.99	7
HSP	0.44	0
A-HSP	0.32	0
Others	11.84	13
Total	100	151

Source: Compiled by the author with data from the Croatian State Electoral Commission (<https://www.izbori.hr/arhiva-izbora/index.html#/app/parlament-2020>). Note: Parties in shaded rows are Far Right. Neither the HCSP nor the HSP 1861 participated in the 2020 elections.

Conclusion

Several actors in the far right spectrum of Croatian politics have sought to draw linkages between the war in Ukraine and the Homeland War. Among the older parties of the radical and extremist right, the HSP, the HCSP, and the A-HSP converge along their unconditional support for Ukraine, whereas the HSP 1861 prioritizes its geopolitical opposition to NATO. Nevertheless, as a result of their marginality, all these parties place a disproportionately higher emphasis on domestic politics than on the developments in Ukraine since late February 2022. Meanwhile, the DP, as a more ambitious actor, does not seem to have capitalized sufficiently on the conflict in Ukraine as a trajectory towards boosting their appeal, either. As a closing remark, I would note that both the DP and the forces of Croatia's Radical Right appear to converge on the prioritization of themes such as anti-corruption and dealing with the increasing energy costs and the cost of living in general in their political discourses.



References

- Autohtona–Hrvatska Stranka Prava (2022, February 25). *Podrška Ukrajini i ukrajinskom narodu!* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=od98-hIVGfA>
- Banjeglav, T. (2012). Conflicting memories, competing narratives, and contested histories in Croatia's post-war commemorative practices, *Politička Misao*, 49(5), 7–31. <https://hrcak.srce.hr/file/146490>
- City of Popovača. (2023). *Gradonačelnik*. <https://www.popovaca.hr/ustrojstvo/gradonacelnik>
- Colborne, M. (2019, July 18). Croatia key to Ukrainian Far-Right's international ambitions. *Balkan Insight*. <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/07/18/Croatia-key-to-ukrainian-far-rights-international-ambitions/>
- Cvikić, S., Živić, D., & Žanić, M. (2014). Vukovar 1991: Battle and cultural memory. *Kultura/Culture*, 5, 71–80. <http://cultcenter.net/journals/index.php/culture/article/view/64>
- Domovinski Pokret (2022a, February 24). *Penava: Domovinski pokret iskazao solidarnost s Ukrajinom i ukrajinskim narodom*. https://www.dp.hr/blog/Penava_Domovinski_pokret_iskazao_solidarnost_s_Ukrajinom_i_ukrajinskim_narodom/544
- Domovinski Pokret (2022b, April 6). *Mlinarić: Za razliku od Ukrajine, mi se još nismo obračunali sa svojom petom kolonom*. https://www.dp.hr/blog/Mlinaric_Za_razliku_od_Ukrajine_mi_se_jos_nismo_obracunali_sa_svojom_petom_kolonom/553
- Domovinski Pokret (2022c, September 8). *Kada je država skupa i neučinkovita, nema te mjere koja je može spasiti!* https://www.dp.hr/blog/Kada_je_drzava_skupa_i_neucinkovita_nema_te_mjere_koja_je_moze_spasiti/593
- ERR (2022a, June 6). *Helme: Consumption taxes should be lowered to reduce inflation's impact*. <https://news.err.ee/1608621295/helme-consumption-taxes-should-be-lowered-to-reduce-inflation-s-impact>
- ERR (2022b, August 18). *Opposition demands electricity reform, EKRE threatening mass unrest*. <https://news.err.ee/1608689173/opposition-demands-electricity-reform-ekre-threatening-mass-unrest>
- Gradonačelnik (n.d.). *Karlo Starčević*. Retrieved February 25, 2023, from <https://gradonacelnik.hr/gradonacelnici/karlo-starcevic/>
- Grgurinovic, M. (2022, March 4). Russia summons Croatian attaché over reports of “mercenaries” in Ukraine. *Balkan Insight*. <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/03/04/russia-summons-croatian-attache-over-reports-of-mercenaries-in-ukraine/>
- HINA. (2018, April 22). *Keleminac krenuo za Jasenovac, ali uhićen je uz primjenu sile*. *Vecerni List*. <https://www.vecernji.hr/vijesti/keleminac-krenuo-za-jasenovac-ali-uhicen-je-uz-primjenu-sile-1240692>

- Hrvatska Desnica. (2022a, March 4). *Ukraina kao Hrvatska 1991* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=prZQ4C0AtCA>.
- Hrvatska Desnica. (2022b, May 2). *Zoran Milanović, ruski čovjek!* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-v9geZ57AVw>
- Hrvatska Stranka Prava. (n.d.). *Kategorija: Hrvatsko parvo*. Retrieved February 28, 2023, from <https://hsp.hr/category/hrvatsko-pravo/>
- Hrvatska Stranka Prava. (2018, October 13). *II. Vukovar Declaration of HSP 2018*. <https://hsp.hr/ii-vukovarska-deklaracija-hsp-a-2018/>
- Hrvatska Stranka Prava. (2022, February 24). "Što se krvlju brani, ne pušta se lako..." *Podrška Ukrajini!* [Status update] Facebook. <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=250360787286965>
- Hrvatska Čista Stranka Prava (n.d. a). *History*. Retrieved February 27, 2023, from <https://hcsp.hr/povijest/>
- Hrvatska Čista Stranke Prava (n.d. b). *Hrvatska i Hrvati prošli su tu kalvariju devedesetih godina prošlog stoljeća od sličnog agresora!* Retrieved February 25, 2023 from <http://hcsp.hr/hrvatska-i-hrvati-prošli-su-tu-kalvariju-devedesetih-godina-prošlog-stoljeća-od-sličnog-agresora/>
- Hrvatska Čista Stranka Prava (2021, October 8). *Programme*. <https://hcsp.hr/program/>
- Hrvatska Čista Stranka Prava (2022a, July 14). *Hčsp 133. Obljetnica rođenja našeg poglavnika Dr. Ante Pavelića 14. 07. 1889*. <http://hcsp/http://hcsp.hr/133-obljeticna-rodenja-naseg-poglavnika-dr-ante-pavelica-14-07-1889/>.
- Hrvatska Čista Stranka Prava (2022b, November 11). *Održana redovna XXV. sjednica glavnog stana hčsp-a*. <http://hcsp.hr/odrzana-redovna-xxv-sjednica-glavnog-stana-hcsp-a/>
- Hrvatska Čista Stranka Prava (2022c, November 18). *Hčsp odala počast Žrtvama Vukovara, Škabrnje, nadina, lovasa i ovčare*. <http://hcsp.hr/hcsp-odala-pocast-zrtvama-vukovara-skabrnje-nadina-lovasa-i-ovcare/>
- Hrvatsko Pravo (2014, January 30). *Bizantska politika zapada prema ukrajini*. <http://www.hsp1861.hr/vijesti2014-1/30012014-1.html>
- Hrvatski Sabor. (2020, July 22). *10th session of the Parliament of Croatia (4th constituency)*. <https://www.sabor.hr/hr/zastupnici/iv-izborna-jedinica-10-saziv-hrvatskoga-sabora>
- Hrvatsko Pravo (2022, March 5). *Hrvatska ugrožena članstvom u NATO više nego Ruskom prijetnjom*. <http://www.hsp1861.hr/vijesti2022-3/05032022-1.html>
- Hrvatska Desnica. (2022c, June 5). *Denis Šeler kaže da među ruskim špijunima ima Hrvata!* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nIBZgXYOE-BA&t=84s>



- Jutarnji (2023, January 12). *Plenković i Kallas: "Nastavljamo pomagati Ukrajinu, rat je daleko od toga da bude gotov"*. <https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/svijet/plenkovic-i-kallas-nastavljamo-pomagati-ukrajini-rat-je-daleko-od-toga-da-bude-gotov-15294872>
- Kasidiaris, I [@IliasKasidiaris]. (2022, March 4). *My geostrategic analysis, on the war in #Ukraine, the evolution of business, the new status quo that is being created in the world, and what should be Greece's position in the events* [Video attached] [Tweet]. Twitter. <https://twitter.com/iliaskasidiaris/status/1499661169610604544>
- Koska, V., & Matan, A. (2017). Croatian citizenship regime and traumatized categories of Croatian citizens: Serb minority and Croatian defenders of the Homeland War. *Politička Misao*, 54(1–2), 119–149.
- Kuloglija, N. (2022, November 14). *Music mobilisation: The concerts connecting Neo-Nazis in Croatia*. *Balkan Insight*. <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/11/14/music-mobilisation-the-concerts-connecting-neo-nazis-in-croatia/>
- Ludová strana Naše Slovensko (2022, February 25). *Vyhlasenie Ludovej strany Naše Slovensko k udalostiam na Ukrajine* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9GUEwOOftU>
- Pavelic, B. (2013, September 2). Croatia war veterans trash Cyrillic signs in Vukovar. *Balkan Insight*. <https://balkaninsight.com/2013/09/02/Vukovar-bilingualism-introduce-faces-violent-resistance/>
- Petsinis, V. (2022). Croatia turning to the Right: The right-wing faction and hot-button issues. In N. Mörner (Ed.), *The many faces of the Far Right in the post-communist space, A comparative study of Far-Right movements and identity in the region* (pp. 76–83). Foundation for Baltic and East European Studies (Östersjöstiftelsen). <http://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1640388/FULLTEXT01.pdf>
- Schreier, M. (2012). *Qualitative Content Analysis in Practice*. SAGE.
- Radosavljevic, Z. (2022, October 25). *Croat president snubs international Ukraine summit in Zagreb*. Euractiv. https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/president-milanovic-no-war-atrocities-committed-in-ukraine/
- Šuligoj, M., & Rudan, E. (2022). Media-generated characteristics of Homeland War-related commemorations in Croatia. *Memory Studies*, Advance online publication, 1–18, <https://doi.org/10.1177/17506980221126608>
- Trkanjec, Z. (2022, April 1). *President Milanović: No war atrocities committed in Ukraine*. Euractiv. https://www.euractiv.com/section/all/short_news/croat-president-snubs-international-ukraine-summit-in-zagreb/
- Vidov, P. (2015, November 5). *Milanović: U HDZ-ovoj koaliciji su obožavatelji Ante Pavelića*. Faktograf. <https://faktograf.hr/2015/11/05/milanovic-u-hdz-ovoj-koaliciji-su-obo-zavatelji-ante-pavelica/>



CZECH REPUBLIC



Our people first (again)! The impact of the Russia-Ukraine War on the populist Radical Right in the Czech Republic*

*Vlastimil Havlík** Masaryk University and
Alena Kluknavská*** Faculty of Social Studies, Masaryk University*

Abstract

The report examines the impact of the war on the Czech populist Radical Right Freedom and Democracy Party (SDP) and its reaction to the war. Among the countries of the European Union (EU), the Czech Republic has become one of the most outspoken supporters of Ukraine, creating specific discursive opportunities for populist Radical Right actors. The paper investigates the supply and demand side of populist Radical Right politics, focusing on how the party positioned itself to attract support facing the challenge of reading and accommodating new public sentiments. We use qualitative analysis of the social media posts of the party leader Tomio Okamura to show that after the initial hesitant rejection of the Russian invasion, the party (re-)turned to pro-Russian narratives, incorporating the war into its populist nativist discourse and driving the ideas of welfare chauvinism and economic protectionism. Using data from the representative public opinion surveys, we show that the party supporters criticize economic support for Ukraine and the refugees and have the most positive attitudes towards Russia compared to the rest of the electorate. We discuss the potential long-term consequences on the position of the Czech populist Radical Right stressing the economic difficulties and war-related grievances.

Keywords: *populism, Radical Right, anti-populism, Czech politics, polarization, Tomio Okamura*

** havlik@fss.muni.cz, *** Alena.Kluknavska@fss.muni.cz.

Havlík, Vlastimil & Kluknavská, Alena. (2023). "Our people first (again)! The impact of the Russia-Ukraine War on the populist Radical Right in the Czech Republic." In: *The Impacts of the Russian Invasion of Ukraine on Right-wing Populism in Europe*. (eds). Gilles Ivaldi and Emilia Zankina. European Center for Populism Studies (ECPS). March 8, 2023. Brussels. <https://doi.org/10.55271/rp0015>

* This research was supported by the NPO "Systemic Risk Institute" project number LX22NPO5101, funded by the European Union–Next Generation EU (Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, NPO: EXCELES).



Introduction

Among the member states of the European Union (EU), the Czech Republic has been one of the most vocal supporters of Ukraine since the Russian invasion of February 2022. Petr Fiala of the Civic Democratic Party (ODS)—the Czech prime minister since September 2021—was among the first high-ranking politicians to visit Kyiv (in March 2022), alongside Poland’s Jarosław Kaczyński (then deputy prime minister) and Slovenian prime minister, Janez Janša. Moreover, the Czech Republic has also provided Ukraine with extensive military support and implemented an open border policy for Ukrainian refugees, who have been provided both asylum and extensive social support (including financial and housing assistance). Almost half a million Ukrainians (equivalent to 5% of the entire population of the Czech Republic) have entered the country since the outbreak of the war, making Czechia home to one of the largest populations of displaced Ukrainians in the EU.

This paper examines the impact of the war on populism in Czechia through the prism of the Radical Right Freedom and Democracy Party (Svoboda a přímá demokracie, SPD) and its reaction to the war. We focus on the supply and demand side of their politics, showing how the SPD has positioned itself to attract support facing the challenge of reading and accommodating new public sentiments. On the supply side, we evaluate how the SPD has communicated the war in its political messages through qualitative analysis of the social media posts of party leader Tomio Okamura (Okamura, n.d.). We show that after the initial hesitant rejection of the Russian invasion, the SPD (re-)turned to pro-Russian discourse. The party successfully incorporated the war and related issues, such as the energy crisis and inflation, into its nativist–populist discourse, mainly as a way to drive the ideas of welfare chauvinism and economic protectionism. On the demand side, the electoral support of the SPD has increased modestly since the beginning of the war. Using data from public opinion surveys, we show that party supporters criticize economic support for Ukraine and the refugees coming to the country and have the most positive attitudes towards Russia compared to the rest of the electorate.

Populist Radical Right parties in the Czech Republic

The Radical Right populist “Rally for the Republic” or the Republican Party of Czechoslovakia was founded in 1989 during the transition to democracy; after some parliamentary success in the 1990s, the party fell out of national political

favour (Hanley, 2012). Aside from several minor parties whose support seldom exceeded 1% (such as the Workers Party or the Republican Party), the Czech party system lacked a significant Far Right presence through the first decade of this century, diverging from most other European party systems. It was not until the 2013 general election that a populist Radical Right party crossed the electoral threshold and entered the parliament.

Tomio Okamura's Dawn of Direct Democracy was established shortly before the 2013 general election, in which it scored almost 7% of the vote and 14 seats (out of 200). The party, led by a well-known entrepreneur and sitting senator⁴ of Czech-Japanese-Korean descent, Tomio Okamura, was built around strong anti-elitist and anti-corruption slogans. The political context was favourable for such a strategy: already low public trust in established political parties was compounded by a series of political crises and deteriorating macroeconomic conditions (Havlík, 2015). During the initial phase of the party's existence, Dawn was not focused primarily on issues preoccupying the Radical Right except for occasional exclusionist anti-Roma statements. After intra-party disputes about the party's future direction and Okamura's alleged embezzlement of party funds, he was expelled from Dawn. Shortly after, in 2015, Okamura founded the SPD.

Unlike Dawn, the SPD immediately embraced Radical Right rhetoric. It employed a stanch anti-Muslim and anti-immigration discourse, taking advantage of the unfolding refugee crisis and the prevailing anti-refugee xenophobic attitudes among the public. In economic terms, the SPD combined right-wing (low taxation) and leftist protectionist measures (decent state-guaranteed pensions) with welfare chauvinism (exclusion of immigrants and Roma people from social security measures). The party also adopted hard-Eurosceptic positions (calling for "Czexit") and drew clear authoritarian and anti-progressive lines, including denying the existence of human-made climate change (Kim, 2020). The party has also forged a programmatic profile similar to populist Radical Right parties elsewhere in Europe. The SPD gained 11% of the vote (and 22 seats) in the 2017 general election and slightly less than 10% (20 seats) in the 2021 general elections. Because the party's populist Radical Right profile hampers its coalition potential, the SPD has spent all its parliamentary presence in opposition.

4. The Czech Republic has a bicameral parliament made up of the Chamber of Deputies (the lower and more important chamber) and the Senate.



The supply side: Freedom and Democracy's populist framing of war-time conditions

After 2015, the SPD was among the few pro-Russian or pro-Putin political parties in the Czech parliament (alongside the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia, which is no longer in the parliament). The SPD's discourse on Russia integrated anti-liberal, anti-EU, anti-American, and xenophobic narratives, depicting Putin and his regime as guardians of "traditional" values and Christianity. In his social media posts, Okamura endorsed Putin's disparaging rhetoric on issues such as migration, same-sex marriage, and the role of the West and the United States in international relations. The party also shared the Russian narrative about the annexation of Crimea and the conflict in the Donetsk and Luhansk areas as the logical Russian reaction to Ukraine's 2014 "Revolution of Dignity" (also known as the Maidan Revolution). The party representatives recognized the referendum in Crimea as legitimate, described it as a decision made by the Ukrainian citizens, and even compared it to the foundation of Czechoslovakia in 1918 (Hrbáček, 2018, p. 31).

Shortly before the invasion, Okamura downplayed the risks of Russia attacking Ukraine. During the weeks after February 2022, the party only rarely commented on the war. When public reactions became more readable after the initial shock of Russia's war of aggression, the SPD developed a coherent discourse about the war. The party's communication revolved around three main points: (1) a general and abstract anti-war narrative; (2) an overarching socioeconomic framing of the war combined with nativism (welfare chauvinism), and (3) persistent anti-elitism.

The underlying frame of the war-related communication of SPD can be best characterized as an abstract anti-war narrative. This narrative named generalized "aggression in Ukraine" as the problem to be addressed (omitting Russia's criminal liability as the aggressor) based on an oversimplified version of reality in which there would be no war if only the conflict were resolved with "peaceful, diplomatic solutions" (Tomio Okamura - SPD, 2022a). Though this general statement was Okamura's only comment on war published on his social media during the first two weeks following the Russian invasion, it set the tone of the party's principal stance on the war: relativizing Russia's responsibility by attributing part of the blame on Ukraine, and framing of the war as a logical reaction to security threats to Russia posed by Ukraine and the West. This victim-blaming position toward Ukraine replicated the official Russian narrative. The SPD also rejected the economic sanctions imposed on Russia by the EU, the United States, and other countries as

“ineffective” and criticized the military supplies for Ukraine as potentially escalating the conflict and threatening Czech security. The abstract anti-war arguments thus equalled a position *against intervention*, eventually legitimizing the aggressor.

Nonetheless, direct references to war were rare in the SPD’s communication about the conflict. Explicit mentions of Russia and Putin, or the term “invasion”, were almost non-existent in Okamura’s social media posts. Interestingly, older positive mentions of Putin and his regime were deleted from Okamura’s Facebook page (Moláček, 2022), possibly to avoid accusations of direct sympathy for Putin.

The economic difficulties arising from the conflict became the central context in which the war-related issues were presented. The SPD repeatedly pointed to the high inflation in the Czech Republic, one of the highest in the EU, and the threats to energy security (Czechia is highly dependent on gas supplies from Russia) at the beginning of the war. Okamura’s economic messaging reflected the broader Putin-is-not-to-blame framing of the conflict. Although the inflation rate and spiking energy prices were not explicitly linked to Russia’s aggression in Ukraine, the SPD used these as vivid images in a broader narrative exploiting insecurity and the sense of crisis created by the war. More directly, the SPD supported policies that would help Russia economically, especially regarding energy supplies. Legitimizing this approach by pointing to Hungary’s policies and generating fear about the prospect of further inflation driven by spiking gas prices, Okamura advocated purchasing “cheap gas” directly from Russia’s Gazprom instead of through the “expensive” gas market in Germany.

The SPD also skilfully framed the economic impacts of the war through appeals to nativism and welfare chauvinism. In general, welfare chauvinism avoids direct criticism of the welfare state itself and instead focuses on its scope (and expense) by shining a light on the universality of entitlements (De Koster et al., 2013). Thus, policy choices around welfare spending are framed in terms of the prudent allocation of scarce economic resources setting up a competition between the (deserving native) “people” and the (undeserving foreign) “others”.

Initially, Okamura indicated a positive attitude to accepting Ukrainian refugees for “humanitarian reasons” and an “absolutely necessary period of time” (Okamura, 7.3.2022). Soon, however, the SPD leader set substantial financial support for Ukrainian refugees against the backdrop of a worsening macroeconomic situation and the need to shepherd scarce government resources carefully. The party described



the immediate measures and planned public spending on integration as costly and destabilizing for the Czech social and healthcare system. Furthermore, accepting a large number of refugees was presented as a challenge for the job market, the education system, and community safety. The party leader also occasionally (though far less often than in the case of non-European refugees during the 2015 migration crisis) questioned the refugee status of Ukrainians by blaming them for “drawing too many solidarity and humanitarian benefits from our budget” (Okamura, 13.4.2022) and downplayed the severity of the situation by claiming that “there is no war on the majority of Ukraine’s territory” (Wirnitzer, 2022).

The party further created a persistent anti-elitist anti-government narrative. Okamura accused the governing coalition of incompetence, inefficient measures, and not solving the country’s economic troubles (or even deepening them). Against this discursive background, Okamura constructed a nativist divide between the Czech people and Ukrainians, claiming the government was placing the needs of foreigners ahead of its own people. Okamura described Fiala’s cabinet as

The government acts as if it were the Ukrainian government in exile, and not the government of our citizens. It takes care of Ukrainians but not Czech citizens. [...] For example, single mothers or people who are disabled have been waiting for apartments for a long time without success, but priority is given to immigrants, whose arrival is at the same time still supported by the offer of free transport on sleeper trains from Lviv” (Tomio Okamura - SPD, 2022b).

The number of issues the SPD mentioned in this context increased. Still, the main message remained consistent: the government (and the media) was prioritizing Ukrainians and neglecting ordinary Czech people whose already difficult circumstances were deteriorating further in the wake of spiking food and energy prices.

The demand side: Czech voters fed up with rolling crises

The war started just a few months after the October 2021 general election in the Czech Republic. The SPD gained slightly less than 10 % of the vote, a similar result to its 2017 performance. Public opinion polls indicated a modest increase in the popularity of the party and its leader in the wake of Russia’s invasion. According to

data collected by the Czech research agency MEDIAN, the party's support grew from 8.5% in November 2021 to 10% in March 2022 and 14% in August 2022 (iDnes, 2022). Party support then stabilized at around 12%.

Although it is difficult to draw a causal link between the outbreak of the war and support for political parties, we see an interesting pattern. Since the outbreak of the conflict, SPD support has been consistently higher than in the past, when it rarely surpassed 10%. Moreover, we can observe a significant increase in public trust in Tomio Okamura. According to a poll conducted by the Centre for Public Opinion Research (CVVM) in March and May 2022, 34% of respondents expressed trust in Okamura, roughly ten percentage points more than the average recorded in the two years preceding Russia's invasion (Červenka, 2022a).

The increased support for SPD correlates with decreased public support for Ukraine and the Czech government's handling of the war. The CVVM data shows that while almost 60% of voters supported the government's general approach towards Ukraine in the spring of 2022, support had dropped to 40% by the autumn (Červenka, 2022b). A similar decrease was recorded regarding specific policies: 55% of respondents supported financial aid for Ukraine in the autumn (compared to 73% in the spring), and 43% of respondents supported providing Ukraine with military materiel (54% in the spring). Also, the public attitude towards the general approach to Russia "softened" over time. While 63% of respondents were for a "total political and economic isolation of Russia" in the spring, only 49% said so in the autumn.

The assumed linkage between the public perception of the war and the popularity of the SPD is supported by the data on supporters of individual political parties. According to a survey administered by CVVM between November 2022 and January 2023, 80% of the declared voters of SPD did not agree with the government's support for Ukraine, and 70% of them were against accepting Ukrainian refugees to the country. Moreover, when asked about emotions induced by the current political and societal situation, 80% of SPD voters agreed with the statement that they feel fear (CVVM, 2023). Although we do not have hard data uncovering the causal mechanism, the evidence indicates that the SPD has succeeded in seizing the opportunities presented by the crisis to mobilize voters around its pro-Russian populist nativism.



Discussion and perspectives

The Russian invasion of Ukraine profoundly impacted the populist Radical Right in the Czech Republic. In this report, we have focused on the SPD, the only significant populist Radical Right party in the Czech Republic, showing how it adapted crisis communication to the new situation. First, the party discarded messaging that openly supported Putin and Russia or cast Putin as a role model for defending conservative values against the liberal and “decadent” West. SPD leader Okamura even removed pro-Russian social media messages posted before the war. Second, the SPD integrated its communications about the war into the party’s established populist and nativist narratives. Most notably, the party has deployed welfare chauvinist and anti-elitist arguments to contest the Czech government’s financial and military aid for Ukraine. Worsening macroeconomic conditions (especially high inflation) and the volatile energy market helped the party integrate these arguments into its discourse. Moreover, eschewing the cultural xenophobia it had adopted during the 2015 refugee crisis, the SPD instead framed its opposition to government policy on prudential grounds (careful allocation of scarce resources) and national security (pointing to the risk of escalation of the war). Finally, although the SPD stopped short of an explicitly pro-Russian stance, it occasionally downplayed the intensity of the conflict, failed to condemn Putin’s aggression and relativized Russia’s responsibility, eventually taking the Kremlin’s side by supporting vague “peace talks” and “diplomatic solutions”.

The data from public opinion surveys indicate that the war modestly boosted support for the SPD. Not surprisingly, most SPD voters do not support governmental aid for Ukraine, are against accepting Ukrainian refugees, and are most fearful when evaluating the current political and societal situation. By the end of 2022, the war had not lead to the emergence or rise of already existing populist Radical Right parties. As for other populist actors in the system, the centre-left ANO party of the former prime minister, Andrej Babiš, underwent a significant transformation of its attitude to Russia. After taking a clear anti-Russian position and openly supporting the government’s moves after the invasion, the party stepped back somewhat, adopting what we could call a “soft pro-Ukrainian” stance. During his candidacy for the president of the Czech Republic (the election took place in January 2023), Babiš adopted a more Russian posture, stressing the need for peace talks (in a similar way as Okamura). Before the run-off, he also accused his opponent, Petr Pavel, a former general, of warmongering to appeal to the anti-Ukrainian part of the electorate. Pavel based his campaign on anti-populism,

describing Babiš's incompetence and graft as his primary motivation to run, contrasting "chaos and personal gain" with order, calmness, dignity, and civility, the central values of his candidacy. In the second round, Pavel won a landslide victory, taking 58.3% of the vote.

The mainstream parties also used war-related narratives in their communications. In the lead up to the 2021 general election, the two electoral coalitions, the right-wing SPOLU and the centrist Pirates and Mayors and Independents (which eventually formed the government), based their electoral campaign on an anti-populist appeal. This strategy constructed two opposing identities: the populist and extremist camp (consisting of ANO, the SPD, and the communist party on the one side) and the anti-populist democratic camp on the other. One of the defining features of their discursive anti-populism was the construction of a frame in which a pro-Western (and pro-democratic) group was holding the line against an implicitly anti-West and pro-Russian extremist one (Havlík & Kluknavská, 2022). Notably, the anti-populists (predominantly SPOLU) used war-related narratives in their communications before the local election in the autumn of 2022 and anti-populist messages mainly targeted the ANO party. SPOLU built on Babiš's past record of collaboration with the communist secret police, compared him to Putin, and blamed the former prime minister for the Czech Republic's dependence on Russian gas (Koalice SPOLU, 2022).

At the time of writing (February 2023), the end of the war seems nowhere in sight. The populist Radical Right SPD has successfully adapted its discourse to the new conditions and communicated a more or less implicit pro-Russian narrative while leveraging the economic challenges the Czech Republic is facing to appeal to disaffected voters. As the public grows steadily more disposed to the Russian position, space is opened for the populist Radical Right, already rising modestly in the polls, to mobilize voters. Still, an improvement in Czechia's macroeconomic outlook or government assistance targeting the economically most vulnerable groups of the population may blunt the continuing rise of the SPD. It could also mean increasing trust in the democratic system as the SPD is more popular among the less educated and poorer voters, who are disenchanted with politics (Voda & Havlík, 2021). Also, given the change in the communication strategy of the populist ANO, we may witness a discursive (and electoral) competition between the two populist parties trying to take advantage of the war. Regardless of who wins this fight, in the absence of an effective mainstream political opposition, the Czech Republic will likely encounter further polarization between populist and anti-populist forces.



References

- CVVM. (2023). *Výzkum k tématu polarizace v rámci projektu SYRI WP.2.2./PA5 Polarizace a populismus*. Centre for Public Opinion Research, Czech Academy of Sciences. [Data file].
- Červenka, J. (2022a). *Důvěra vrcholným politikům – jaro 2022*. Centre for Public Opinion Research, Czech Academy of Sciences. https://cvvm.soc.cas.cz/media/com_form2content/documents/c2/a5527/f9/pi220603.pdf
- Červenka, J. (2022b). *Česká veřejnost ke konfliktu na Ukrajině – podzim 2022*. Centre for Public Opinion Research, Czech Academy of Sciences. https://cvvm.soc.cas.cz/media/com_form2content/documents/c2/a5587/f9/pm221209.pdf
- De Koster, W., Achterberg, P., & Van der Waal, J. (2013). The new right and the welfare state: The electoral relevance of welfare chauvinism and welfare populism in the Netherlands. *International Political Science Review*, 34(1), 3–20. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192512112455443>
- Hanley, S. (2012). The Czech Republicans 1990–1998: a populist outsider in a consolidating democracy. In C. Mudde, & C. R. Kaltwasser (Eds.), *Populism in Europe and the Americas* (pp. 68–87). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139152365.005>
- Havlík, V. (2015). The economic crisis in the shadow of political crisis: The rise of party populism in the Czech Republic. In H. Kriesi and T.S. Pappas, (Eds.), *European populism in the shadow of the Great Recession* (pp. 199–216). ECPR Press.
- Havlík, V., & Kluknavská, A. (2022). The populist vs anti-populist divide in the time of pandemic: The 2021 Czech national election and its consequences for European politics. *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, 60(S1), 76–87. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.13413>
- Hrbáček, M. (2018). *Zahraničněpolitická orientace SPD Tomia Okamury*. [Bachelor thesis, Masaryk University]. <https://is.muni.cz/th/lhci5/>
- iDnes. (2022, November 15). *Volby by v říjnu vyhrálo ANO, do Sněmovny se podle průzkumu vrací ČSSD*. https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/domaci/predvolebni-pruzkum-agentura-median-volby-poslanecka-snemovna.A221115_065529_domaci_misl
- Kim, S. (2020). Between illiberalism and hyper-neoliberalism: competing populist discourses in the Czech Republic. *European Politics and Society*, 21(5), 618–633. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23745118.2020.1709368>
- Koalice SPOLU [@SPOLUKoalice]. (2022, August 4). *Proč Babiš zvýšil energetickou závislost ČR na Putinově Rusku na téměř 100 %?* [Tweet]. Twitter. <https://twitter.com/SpoluKoalice/status/1555198641442283523?s=20&t=ZlRgGSzm-ol3i9Dkr7Z-Hww>

- Okamura, T. (n.d.). *Tomio Okamura–SPD*. [Facebook page]. Retrieved January 10, 2022, from <https://www.facebook.com/tomio.cz/>.
- Moláček, J. (2022, March 18). Tomio Okamura skryl na Facebooku příspěvky s Putinem. „Naslinil prst,” říká expert na extremismus. *DeníkN*, <https://denikn.cz/840882/tomio-okamura-skryl-na-facebooku-prispevky-s-putinem-naslinil-prst-rika-expert-na-extremismus/>.
- Tomio Okamura – SPD. (2022a, February 24). *Vyjádření Tomio Okamury včetně komentáře poslance Jaroslava Bašty (SPD) k aktuální situaci na Ukrajině. Válka není řešení. Vláda ČR musí* [Video]. Facebook. https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?ref=watch_permalink&v=997970747819679.
- Tomio Okamura – SPD. (2022b, April 20). *Vláda Petra Fialy se musí starat v první řadě o naše slušné a pracující občany! Vážení přátelé, toto je aktuální* [Status update] [Image attached] Facebook. <https://www.facebook.com/hnutispd/photos/a.1040621019302076/5267135113317291/?type=3>.
- Voda, P., & Havlík, V. (2021). The rise of populists and decline of others: Explanation of changes in party support in the Czech Republic. *Problems of Post-Communism*, 68(4), 279–291. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10758216.2020.1869906>
- Wirnitzer, J. (2022, June 15): Okamura: Na většině Ukrajiny není válka. Mapa: Leda pokud za válku nepočítáme rakety a okupaci. *DeníkN*. <https://denikn.cz/900038/okamura-na-vetsine-ukrajiny-neni-valka-mapa-leda-pokud-za-valku-nepocitame-rakety-a-okupaci/>



DENMARK



The impact of the Russia–Ukraine war on right-wing populism in Europe: The case of Denmark

*Susi Meret** Department of Politics and Society, Aalborg University, Denmark

Abstract

At the referendum held on June 1, 2022, two-thirds of the electorate (66.9%) voted to remove Denmark's opt-out from the European Union's (EU) Common Security and Defence Policy. This result was noteworthy and must be understood in light of the uncertainty and instability sparked by the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which followed closely on the heels of the COVID-19 global health crisis. The populist right-wing parties in Parliament were opposed to eliminating the opt-out, arguing Denmark would relinquish decisional control in key military and security domains. Instead, these parties advocate for the strengthening of Denmark's military within the NATO alliance, fiercely opposing further development at the EU level. The impact of the Russia–Ukraine war opens new opportunities for the populist Right, whose electoral support has been waning in recent years. For example, the newly established Denmark Democrats can leverage the current situation to strengthen and consolidate their position. And the New Right and the crisis-ridden Danish People's Party can exploit the situation to gain voters' support, playing on feelings of insecurity and international crisis.

Keywords: *right-wing populism; opt-outs; Danish People's Party; foreign policy; NATO*

* meret@dps.aau.dk

Meret, Susi. (2023). "The impact of the Russia-Ukraine War on Right-Wing Populism in Europe. The case of Denmark." In: *The Impacts of the Russian Invasion of Ukraine on Right-wing Populism in Europe*. (eds). Gilles Ivaldi and Emilia Zankina. European Center for Populism Studies (ECPS). March 8, 2023. Brussels. <https://doi.org/10.55271/rp0016>



Denmark's interventionist agenda

Traditionally, Danish public opinion has been reluctant to concede on the four Danish opt-outs from European Union (EU) law negotiated in the Maastricht Treaty in 1992 and subsequent treaties. The opt-out regarding defence cooperation, also known as Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), epitomizes a deep-seated and symbolically crucial matter, interpreted as a bulwark against yet more power to the EU, particularly on matters considered the sovereign domain of the nation-state. Already in the 1990s, Danes' reluctance to accept "more EU" was capitalized on by the populist Right, which aligned with the Eurosceptic Far Left and with single-issue movements against further EU integration. The populist Right, particularly the Danish People's Party (Dansk Folkeparti, DF), claims that "more EU" implies "less Denmark", leading to more bureaucracy and the loss of Danish national sovereignty. This frame was also reactivated concerning the 2022 referendum triggered by the developments in Ukraine.

Usually a peripheral issue in electoral politics, during the 2022 election campaign, defence matters were covered in 11% of Danish media reports. The corresponding figure in the previous elections was only 1% (Kosiara-Pedersen, 2023). The NATO alliance is generally viewed as a necessary and sufficient military deterrent. This sentiment is confirmed in recent public opinion surveys showing high levels of trust for the NATO alliance among Danes (Andersen et al., 2022). The trust in the NATO alliance is today higher than in the past and significantly higher than people's trust in the EU and the Danish government. Regarding trust, NATO comes just after the judicial system and the police forces. Interestingly, this is the case also across party differences, which have become less polarized on this matter, showing a change in the attitudes of the Far Left (e.g., the Unity List and the Socialist People's Party). The Russian invasion has decreased the opposition towards higher public spending in the military and rearmament, both seen as an inevitable consequence of the war. Gender, rather than party vote, marks a more significant difference. Women are much less supportive than men towards rearmament and more prone to consider diplomacy a better means of resolving the conflict.

Denmark's engagement on the Ukrainian side is almost unconditional (Henley, 2022). The same goes for supporting the sanctions implemented against Russia by the EU and helping Ukraine with weapons and military training. There is limited concern about plans in neighbouring Germany to rearm, which for historical reasons might have otherwise raised fears in Denmark. It is important to underline

that this interventionist turn in foreign policy was by no means a foregone conclusion in the Danish case. Denmark has a specific interest in maintaining peaceful relations with Russia. For one, the area of Arctic cooperation has become increasingly strategic in the past decade, which would counsel keeping military hostilities and diplomatic tensions at a minimum. It also shows that Denmark is not particularly influenced by any “small-state mentality”, which would advocate for neutrality or at least a less interventionist position.

At the same time—and contrary to other EU countries—Denmark does not depend on Russian gas (although the Nord Stream 1 pipeline also runs through Denmark’s Exclusive Economic Zone), nor is Denmark particularly affected by close geographical proximity to Russia as Finland, Sweden and Norway are. Historically the country has entertained relatively good and peaceful diplomatic relations with its neighbour to the east. This is so even with some tensions in the Cold War. Russians occupied the Danish Island of Bornholm in 1945 (after the Nazi occupiers surrendered) and stayed there until 1946 to the alarm of the Danes. And until the end of the Cold War, Denmark was a frontline NATO state in the Nordic region.

Denmark’s foreign and security policy towards Russia became more activist (Mouritzen, 2022) after the Cold War, for instance, in supporting NATO membership for the Baltic countries to secure Europe’s eastern flank and to build a more robust bulwark against any future Russian aggression. This background is essential in explaining Denmark’s unwavering pro-Ukraine support today and the country’s backing of the NATO alliance and the sanctions. However, two major and growing concerns might set the limit for Danes’ interventionism and strong support for Ukraine and could also rekindle the electoral appeal of the populist Right: the use of *nuclear weapons* by Russia and *sustained increases in energy prices* (which might, in turn, fuel further inflation and economic crisis).

Fear about economic insecurity has been exacerbated since the outbreak of the conflict. Danes are generally rather optimistic about their economic prospects and those of Denmark as a whole. Yet concern about how the economic situation will look in the near future is today greater than it was in the aftermath of the financial crisis more than a decade ago. It is particularly high among the population aged between 30 and 50, which is also the cohort more exposed to the effects of inflation, especially higher mortgage costs. Economic uncertainty adds up to an increase in socioeconomic inequality in the country and to grievances about income and decreasing welfare provisions. These perceptions could result in more robust support for populist right-



wing parties and politics, which in recent years has been dwindling. Yet this would unlikely impact the support for Ukraine and the positions towards Russia, but rather on attitudes towards cooperation with the EU on migration and economic policy.

New opportunities for a split populist right-wing in Denmark

Over the years, the EU has adopted several significant measures and initiatives to defend common democratic principles and values. Denmark has actively worked to support this values agenda. However, Danes are less keen when it comes to EU military cooperation and foreign policy issues. The fact that the 2022 referendum abolished a 30-year-old opt-out clause is remarkable. Yet the Eurosceptic populist Right firmly opposes what it claims will only hand more power and sovereignty to the EU. Both the DF and the New Right (Nye Borgerlige, NB) have rallied against “more EU” and against revoking the opt-out. Instead, the two parties plea for stronger support to the NATO alliance as a way to guarantee the country’s military security.

This corresponds to Denmark’s strengthening of the Atlantic dimension in Danish military and foreign policy. In 2018 and again in 2019, the Danish government quickly approved the expansion of defence spending to meet the 2% of GDP floor Washington has long demanded to ensure the alliance’s military readiness. The line is maintained by the incumbent governing coalition formed after the 2022 November elections, which includes the Social Democrats, the Liberal Party (Venstre) and the newly formed Moderates. The new government pursues an interventionist approach. After taking office, it prompted all the opposition parties to support their proposal to fast-track an increase in defence spending. Social Democrat prime minister Mette Frederiksen explained in her New Year’s speech to the nation:

Europe must be stronger on its own. And Denmark must contribute more to NATO. We must bring forward investment in our defence and security [...to] reach the 2 percent that is needed and that we have promised our allies. It will require something from all of us [...]. I sense that the proposal does not have the support of everyone. But hand on heart. We cannot overcome war in Europe, the climate crisis and the challenges at home if we – each and every one of us – are not ready to do more. (Statsministeriet, 2023)

This move, especially as the “something from all of us” entailed scrapping the Day

of Prayer (Storbededag), one of the nation's public holidays, was very unpopular. It triggered strong criticism from the trade unions, the opposition parties, and different segments of the workforce. The electorate sensed the government was simply using the conflict as a pretext to scrap a public holiday. And it did so without consulting the other parties and the unions, as is the tradition in Denmark. The opposition and the unions question whether the additional spending on defence—explained as the need to sacrifice a little to meet the costs of the war and rearmament—cannot be financed through measures other than those currently on the agenda.

These recent developments have contributed to amplifying a set of dilemmas in the country, particularly among the populist right-wing parties, which are the most vocal supporters of the NATO alliance and have always pledged higher public spending in the military and defence. Their dilemma reverts to how to take advantage of the political opportunities opened by the conflict and achieve these goals without imposing additional costs on the electorate.

The topography of Danish right-wing populism

In an update posted on his Facebook profile on February 23, 2022, Morten Messerschmidt, the leader of the DF since early 2022, articulated the party position on the Russia–Ukraine war using these words: “Russia is threatening Europe’s freedom – NATO is the answer”. He further elaborated, arguing that:

If someone ever doubted where the Danish People’s Party stands on Russia and Putin, let me put it boldly here: We stand with the NATO alliance to protect and secure Western freedom, values and ideals [including] all countries’ right to go their own way and make alliances. (Messerschmidt, 2022b)

For Messerschmidt and the DF, only a “strong NATO alliance with the backup of the United States” can provide “a convincing answer to Russian aggression”. Therefore, the party is against any attempt to create an independent EU defence force with its own command structure. This would only contribute “to strengthen the United States’ isolationist tendencies and could be fatal for the EU” (Dansk Folkeparti, n.d.).

Conditions for financing defence should be responsible and take place without a deficit on the yearly state budget. This entails that the Danish military participation should only serve Denmark’s interest and security and not act as “the world’s police



officer” (Dansk Folkeparti, n.d.). Intervention in other countries and regions deemed as strategically nonrelevant should be avoided. The party was, for instance, against the presence of Danish soldiers in Mali joining European special forces.

The party’s position on foreign and security policy above is not new. In the early 2000s, the party programme read: “Denmark should as a sovereign and free nation be part of a strong NATO alliance”, whereas the party declared itself being “against any EU involvement in the military and defence”, contending this field must only be managed at national level (arguing thus for an increase in military and defence spending), and internationally coordinated by the NATO alliance (Dansk Folkeparti, 2001). Morten Messerschmidt reiterated the party standing against Putin and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, thus responding to the two-fold purpose of distancing from politically harmful pro-Russian views within its party and among his European allies, with whom the DF had tried to forge a stronger Far Right alliance during the 2019 European Parliament elections. Uncomfortable, albeit restricted, are the pro-Russian and pro-Putin standpoints uttered publicly by outstanding party MPs, such as Søren Espersen and Marie Krarup. The latter was the most problematic case the party had to deal with since she consistently stood on her pro-Russian positions (Kristensen, 2022) after the invasion and despite going against the party line. Krarup eventually exited the party at the end of February 2022, also because she disapproved of the new party leadership.

The DF’s internal disputes had begun before the Ukraine conflict, triggered by the remarkable drop in voters’ support in 2019 and again at the 2021 elections. These electoral losses provoked mounting dissatisfaction with Kristian Thulesen Dahl’s leadership, ending with his resignation in 2021. The electorate blamed him for not taking government responsibilities after the party’s triumph in the 2015 elections (Meret, 2021b). In this sense, the Russia–Ukraine conflict posed another challenging issue on the agenda of the already internally troubled and divided party. Besides, the relations with some of the parties in the Identity and Democracy European Parliament group, holding ambiguous positions vis-à-vis Putin and Russia (e.g., Lega, the Front National and the Alternative for Germany) contributed to aggravating the picture. From the outside, the DF has since 2019 been in competition with the NB, which coopted stricter positions on asylum and immigration and by the Social Democrats’ turn to the right on immigration (Meret, 2021a).

The DF leadership shift, with Morten Messerschmidt taking the lead amid internal party disagreement and criticism, occurred only a month before the

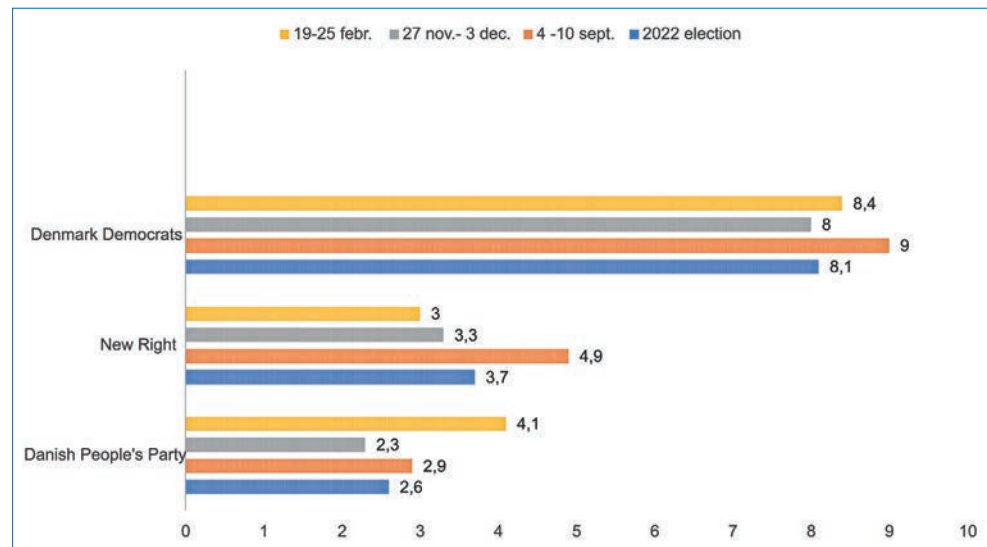
Russian invasion of Ukraine. The DF activated a “reputational shield” to respond to the new crisis, drawing from its long-standing support of the NATO alliance and its opposition to EU military and defence cooperation. Another aspect of the party’s approach to confront Putin’s regime and regain voters’ support was “values”, centred upon preserving liberal democratic values, the principle of sovereignty and Europe’s Christian heritage. The party is also relatively more open towards the need to take in war refugees from Ukraine, bluntly asserting that, despite Ukraine’s proximity, “there is clearly a huge difference if it is Christian Ukrainians who come into Denmark, rather than say [refugees] from Somalia or all other possible good people from a Muslim country” (Volsing, 2022).

The NB is another populist right-wing party in the political opposition in Denmark, but being formed only in 2015, it is much younger than the DF. Apart from the strongly neoliberal agenda, the NB subscribes to similar (albeit not identical) positions as the DF on other issues. On the Russia–Ukraine war, NB arguably holds an even harsher tone in terms of a stronger interventionist conviction and an anti-European policy that still urges Denmark’s exit from the EU. In a blog published on the party website on the day of the Russian invasion on February 24, 2022, today former party leader Pernille Vermund criticized both centre-left and centre-right governments for having “neglected Danish military and defence” over the years, thus preventing the country from meeting the 2% of GDP target pledged to the NATO alliance and, endangering Denmark’s national security and ability to react (Copenhagen Post, 2023). The New Right’s opinion about Russia is straightforward: Russia has developed into a dictatorship with expansionist ambitions that threaten the Baltic and the Arctic regions and, ultimately, Denmark. The only option for the country is to strengthen its position within the NATO alliance.

The newly launched party, the Denmark Democrats (DD), formed in June 2022 by integration minister Inger Støjberg does not yet have a straightforward programme on matters of foreign policy, military, and defence are still unwritten (Krog, 2022). Støjberg is a former Liberal MP, known as a hardliner on immigration and integration politics, who was impeached and later convicted for unlawfully ordering the separation of young asylum-seeking spouses. Nevertheless, her party, the DD, gained a respectable 8% in the 2022 elections. It is believed to be the standby for voters who are discontent and frustrated with the status quo, amongst them several former DF supporters and supporters of former MPs. Støjberg has also expressed her preference for helping Christian Ukrainian rather than Muslim refugees.



Figure 1. Voting intentions for right-wing populist parties in Denmark (2022)



Source: Compiled by the author based on data from Voxmeter (<https://voxmeter.dk/meningsmalinger/>)

Despite being among the most interventionist parties, also the DF, the NB and the DD oppose the government's recent proposal to fund the increase in military spending by eliminating the Day of Prayer (Storbededag) from the Danes' holiday calendar. The decision is sensitive, and while most parties in the opposition agree with the purpose (more money for the military), the means to achieve it has become contentious. For instance, the approval has been made as a condition for accessing the future financial negotiation for the military and defence. Furthermore, the proposal comes just before the 2024 negotiations over collective labour bargains, making it particularly problematic among trade unions and workers who see the costs primarily borne by the working class.

But the abolition of one of the remaining Christian public holidays also speaks directly to the populist right-wing parties, which foreground the apparent waning interest in Denmark's Christian traditions and cultural heritage. This allows right-wing populists to stoke fears about a nation threatened from within (by a detached political elite and a growing Muslim problem) and without (by EU integration, Russian expansionist politics and increasingly unstable global governance). As Morten Messerschmidt articulated on his Twitter account in December 2022 (Messerschmidt, 2022b)

To abolish the Day of Prayer is simply madness. We should not change our traditions and holidays in the name of rationalism. And yes, it is a holy day (!) that replaced the earlier Catholic sacred days. Hands off Danish traditions.

Conclusion

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has triggered long-term consequences on Danish domestic politics by encouraging more interventionist positions and creating the conditions for the future increase of public spending and the reform of the Danish military. However, this came at the cost of welfare standards and levels of trust. The conflict has strengthened the country's support for the NATO alliance, drawing Denmark closer to the United States and its allies. Denmark is a member of both NATO and the EU, yet it has always felt much closer and more loyal to the first on military and defence matters. The result of the 2022 referendum preludes changes in this pattern, likely in the longer term.

But the war in Ukraine also speaks to the right-wing populist voters, to their growing economic and societal concerns and grievances. Primarily it can represent the return to narrower understandings of the nation-state, of safety and to the call to bring forces together to defend the country's borders, security and welfare. However, it also contributes to creating new threats, sparking Russophobia and anti-immigrant sentiments, legitimated by the fear of what the future might bring in terms of economic, societal and cultural crises. These are issues that the populist Right already knows how to mobilize and capitalize upon. In this sense, the European answer will be fundamental to prevent the return of nationalist and protectionist movements.

References

- Andersen, J. G., Hede, A., & Andersen, J. (2022). *Danskerne og Krigen i Ukraine*. Tryghedsmåling, TrygFonden.
- Copenhagen Post. (2023, January 10). Right wing boss to step away from politics. <https://cphpost.dk/2023-01-10/news/right-wing-boss-to-step-away-from-politics/>
- Dansk Folkeparti. (n.d.). *Forsvarspolitik*. Retrieved March 2, 2023, <https://danskfolkeparti.dk/politik/forsvar/>
- Dansk Folkeparti. (2001, September). *Faelles vaerdier–Faelles ansvar: Arbejdsprogram for Dansk Folkeparti*. København.



- Henley, J. (2022, October 14). Westerners in no mood for concessions to Russia in Ukraine, poll finds. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/oct/14/westerners-in-no-mood-for-concessions-to-russia-in-ukraine-poll-finds>
- Indenrigs- og Sundhedsministeriet. (2022). *Folkeafstemning om afskaffelse af forsvarsforbeholdet 2022*. <https://valg.im.dk/valgmyndigheder/folkeafstemning-om-afskaffelse-af-forsvarsforbeholdet-2022>
- Kosiara-Pedersen, K. (2023). New (types of) parties and government: The Danish general election 2022. *West European Politics*, Advanced online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2023.217474220>
- Kristensen, I. (2022, April 5). Marie Krarup vil fjerne sanktioner mod Rusland. *Radio4*. <https://www.radio4.dk/nyheder/marie-krarup-vil-fjerne-sanktioner-mod-rusland/>
- Krog, A. (2022, October 27). Danmarksdemokraterne har ingen forsvarspolitik – og får det heller ikke lige foreløbig. *Altinget*. <https://www.alinget.dk/forsvar/artikel/danmarksdemokraterne-har-ingen-forsvarspolitik-og-faar-det-heller-ikke-lige-foreloebig>
- Meret, S. (2021a). Duties first, rights next! The Danish Social Democrats' right turn on migration politics. In N. Brandal, Ø. Bratberg, & D. E. Thorsen (Eds.), *Yearbook on social democracy in the 21st Century* (pp. 223–244). Emerald Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1108/S0195-631020210000035010>
- Meret, S. (2021b). Denmark. In D. Albertazzi, & D. Vampa (Eds.), *Populism and new patterns of political competition in Western Europe*. Routledge.
- Messerschmidt, M. (2022a, February 22). *Rusland truer Europas Frihed – NATO er svarer* [Status update]. Facebook. <https://www.facebook.com/MortenMesserschmidt/posts/505685260920783>
- Messerschmidt, M. [@Mr Messerschmidt]. (2022b, December 14). *At afskaffe store bededag, er simpelthen det rene vanvid* [Tweet]. Twitter. <https://twitter.com/MrMesserschmidt/status/1602961303311683585>
- Mouritzen, H. (2022). Wide fluctuations in Danish–Russian relations. In M. Kaeding, J. Pollak, & P. Schmidt (Eds.), *Russia and the future of Europe* (pp. 27–29). Springer. https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-030-95648-6_7
- Statsministeriet. (2023, January 1). *Statsminister Mette Frederiksens nytårstale 1. januar 2023*. <https://www.stm.dk/statsministeren/nytaarstaler-siden-1940/mette-frederiksens-nytaarstale-1-januar-2023/>
- Volsing, K. (2022, March 3). Morten Messerschmidt: “Når der sker noget i vores egen baghave, så skal vi selvfølgelig springe til”. *Radio4*. <https://www.radio4.dk/nyheder/morten-messerschmidt-naar-der-sker-noget-i-vores-egen-baghave-saa-skal-vi-selvfoelgelig-springe-til/>



ESTONIA



The impact of the Russia-Ukraine War on right-wing populism in Estonia

Mari-Liis Jakobson and Andres Kasekamp***

Abstract

For years, Estonia was an outlier in the European populist Radical Right scene, with no party being elected to parliament. This changed with the electoral breakthrough of the Estonian Conservative People's Party (EKRE) in 2015. Currently, EKRE is the second-most popular party in Estonia, with roughly 20% support and is expected to achieve a record result in the general election in March 2023. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has created opportunities and challenges for EKRE to increase its support. The war has offered EKRE fresh opportunities on several fronts. First, it has amped up its nativist agenda with claims that "mass immigration" of Ukrainian refugees will make ethnic Estonians a minority in their own land. Second, it has found fertile soil for populist messaging, given voters' economic insecurities, accusing the establishment of incompetence in managing the high inflation and energy prices. EKRE is in the paradoxical situation of being an Estonian nationalist party attempting to appeal to Estonia's sizeable Russian minority, which shares its "traditional family values", Euroscepticism, anti-establishment grievances, and resentment of Ukrainian refugees. Several factors could explain the party's current positioning, including EKRE's interest in blaming the war's economic effects on the government's incompetence, the party's anti-establishment inclination in a context of a broad foreign policy consensus, and its interest in courting Russian-speaking voters.

Keywords: *Estonia; populism; Far Right; Ukraine; Russian minority*

* a30884@tlu.ee

** andres.kasekamp@utoronto.ca

Jakobson, Mari-Liis & Kasekamp, Andres. (2023). "The impact of the Russia-Ukraine War on right-wing populism in Estonia." In: *The Impacts of the Russian Invasion of Ukraine on Right-wing Populism in Europe*. (eds). Gilles Ivaldi and Emilia Zankina. European Center for Populism Studies (ECPS). March 8, 2023. Brussels. <https://doi.org/10.55271/rp0017>



Introduction

Estonia lacked a genuine and electorally competitive populist Radical Right party until 2015, mainly because mainstream right-wing parties had already captured the nationalist segment of the ideological spectrum (Auers & Kasekamp, 2009). However, this began to change in 2012 when the Conservative People's Party of Estonia (Eesti Konservatiivne Rahvaerakond, EKRE) was founded. Shortly before the 2015 general election, the party began to attract attention for its opposition to measures expanding rights for same-sex couples passed by the Estonian parliament. After the election and in view of the unfolding EU “refugee crisis” in the summer of that year, the party's support spiked again. In the 2019 elections, EKRE came in third and, to the surprise of many, joined a governing coalition with the centre-left Centre Party and the conservative Isamaa party that managed to stay in office until early 2021. A month before the 2023 general elections, polls suggest that EKRE's support will make it the second-largest party in the next parliament.

EKRE checks all the ideological boxes that Mudde (2007) specified for a typical Radical Right populist party, including 1) nativism (xenophobia, racism, anti-globalism, Euroscepticism, welfare chauvinism), 2) authoritarianism (strong leadership, tough on crime, emphasis on traditional family values and cultural identity, toxic masculinity), and 3) populism (anti-elitism, distrust of experts, unfulfillable promises, belief in deep state conspiracies). EKRE has also clearly aligned itself with other populist Radical Right actors, being a member of the Identity and Democracy group in the European Parliament and echoing narratives from the right-wing online media space, such as Breitbart News.

In most Eastern European countries, pro-Russian stances have historically been linked with the Left, especially the successors of the former communist parties. While Estonia has no communist party successor to speak of, the centre-left Centre Party has long been seen as pro-Russian, especially under Edgar Savisaar, its populist leader from 1991 to 2016. The party signed a cooperation memorandum with Russia's ruling United Russia party in 2004 (formally terminating it only in March 2022) and has long enjoyed overwhelming support among Estonia's sizeable Russian-speaking minority (reaching more than 75% at its peak). Although support from Russian-speaking voters has been falling since 2016, it remains the most popular party among this group.

The ‘supply side’ of right-wing populism

EKRE began as an ultra-nationalist party whose discursive core was Eurosceptic and anti-Russian (Kasekamp et al., 2019). In the European Parliament, EKRE is in the anti-Russian wing of the Identity and Democracy group (along with the Finns Party and Poland’s ruling party, PiS). The party has generally been pro-NATO, although the party’s former chairman Mart Helme has repeatedly expressed scepticism about the alliance’s fitness for purpose. For example, in 2019, Helme declared NATO “in crisis”, echoing similar observations by Donald Trump and Emmanuel Macron; he has also argued that Estonia should act primarily on its national interests rather than relying on NATO’s common security framework (Voog, 2019).

Unlike many of its Western European counterparts, EKRE has never been an explicitly pro-Russian party. However, in the context of Russia’s aggression in Ukraine, the party’s messaging has become more ambivalent. While EKRE has called for greater defence spending to meet the Russian threat, it has also been parroting some of Russia’s propaganda narrative.

Meanwhile, in the past few years, EKRE has consciously sought to woo the sizeable Russian-speaking minority to grow its electoral base; as a result, it has become more ambiguous in its positions on some issues (Braghiroli & Makarychev, 2022). Despite being an Estonian nationalist party, EKRE has much in common with the worldview of Russian speakers, who, on average, hold more traditional values, are economically less successful than ethnic Estonians, and hold grievances against the establishment and distrust the elites. An example of how EKRE can gain support from ethnic Russians is the traditional energy sector, where many Russian speakers in the northeast of the country are employed and whose future is most clearly affected by the EU’s climate agenda.

The desire to appeal to Russian minority voters has probably also influenced the party’s foreign policy narrative, which has moderated from outright hostility to calls for Estonia to work towards good neighbourly relations. For example, EKRE was once highly critical of the Estonian-Russian border agreement, which recognizes Russian sovereignty over territory that was part of Estonia before Soviet rule. However, criticism of the agreement is directed primarily at the Estonian political establishment, not at Russia. Rather than calling it an “enemy”, Mart Helme prefers to talk about Russia as a great civilization, emphasizing its global role and the fact that it is a neighbour.



When Russia invaded Ukraine on 24 February 2022, all Estonian parties, including EKRE, condemned the attack. In October 2022, the parliament, including EKRE, unanimously voted to declare Russia a terrorist state (Parliament of Estonia, 2022). Furthermore, when a resolution recognizing Russia as a state sponsor of terrorism came before the European Parliament, EKRE's MEP Jaak Madison voted in favour. Estonia's official position has been to support Ukraine until it is victorious and that peace should be negotiated once Ukraine's territorial integrity has been restored. In this regard, EKRE has sent somewhat mixed messages. For instance, in an interview with a Russophone television programme, Mart Helme echoed some of the Kremlin's talking points:

We find that the best solution would be a peace treaty, no matter how hard it would be for both sides – at least people would no longer have to die. We are not on Russia's side, and we are not on Ukraine's side; we are on the side of peace. (ERR, 2022c)

Later, the party's leadership clarified EKRE's support for Ukraine and excused Helme's "unfortunate wording" while also reiterating the underlying claim, saying, "who wouldn't be for peace?" (ERR, 2022d). The peace narrative is a subtle way of undermining support for Ukraine without appearing to be overtly pro-Russian. EKRE's rhetoric has also been noted and praised by Russia's state-controlled media (Lomp, 2022).

Another populist Radical Right figure, who has been speaking out for good neighbourly relations with Russia, is the leader of the Foundation for the Protection of Family and Tradition (SAPTK), Varro Vooglaid, who has a considerable following on his website Objektiiv (<https://objektiiv.ee>). Vooglaid is now a candidate for EKRE (although he has stopped short of *actually becoming a member*) and is almost certain to be elected to parliament. Vooglaid has also depicted Ukraine as an innocent casualty in a war between Russia and the West, provoked by the latter to bring Moscow into an open military conflict to drain its capabilities and weaken it (Vooglaid, 2022b).

EKRE (and Vooglaid) objected to the government-initiated bill banning the display of symbols under which international crimes, such as the infamous "Z" used by the Russian military, have been committed because the wording is imprecise and interferes with the freedom of speech (Vooglaid, 2022a). Nevertheless, it sided with the government in the heated debate over removing Red Army monuments in the

spring and summer of 2022. As a result, many of EKRE's ethnic Russian activists, who joined the party before the local elections in 2021, left the party (ERR, 2022a). In certain ways, the more liberal right-wing parties have begun to move into EKRE's nationalist and authoritarian niche. For instance, the Reform Party and Isamaa have proposed revoking the right of permanent residents who are citizens of Russia to vote in local elections, initially suggested by EKRE in 2017 (ERR, 2022b).

While taking sides in the Ukrainian-Russian conflict is awkward for EKRE, and it struggles to gain airtime with nationalist statements, the party has been vocal about the war's adverse socioeconomic and cultural effects.

As of early February 2023, 123,000 Ukrainian refugees had crossed into Estonia. Roughly half have moved on to other countries, and 43,000 have applied for temporary protection status (Estonian Social Insurance Board, n.d.), making Estonia the largest recipient of Ukrainian refugees on a per capita basis in the world (Estonia's population is 1.3 million). Trying to appeal to both Estonian and Russian-speaking audiences, EKRE has used a Janus-faced strategy. When communicating with their Russian-speaking audience, they play on their anti-Ukrainian sentiment, claiming that Ukrainian refugees threaten local Russians' job prospects. But when addressing their Estonian audience, they appeal to anti-Russian sentiment and frame the events as a mass influx of Russian-speaking immigrants and a danger to the survival of the Estonian nation, as the share of ethnic Estonians in the population has been falling. EKRE also claims that integrating Ukrainian children into the Estonian school system will result in the russification of Estonian schools and prevents Ukrainians from returning to Ukraine and the Ukrainian school system (Hindre, 2022). Furthermore, EKRE members are fuelling conspiracy theories about the government hiding the actual number and intention of refugees, claiming that Estonia is giving refuge to Ukrainian men who are forbidden to leave Ukraine, thus weakening Ukraine's position in the war (Uued Uudised, 2022). In a speech to the parliament on 13 March 2022, EKRE founder Mart Helme claimed that Ukrainian refugees are bringing communicable diseases like HIV and will engage in prostitution (Delfi, 2022).

While its anti-refugee rhetoric has lessened over time, EKRE remains highly vocal about the economic consequences of the war. For instance, EKRE organized a widely-publicized rally on October 16, 2022, against high energy prices. However, EKRE did not blame the soaring prices on Russia or the war but on the ineptitude of the government and the European Green Deal proposed by Brussels.



Estonia goes to the polls again on March 5, 2023, and the main issues in the election campaign are defence policy and the cost of living. In defence debates, EKRE mainly aims to appear as an expert on which investments must be made to build specific military capacities. It merges these recommendations with its earlier criticism of NATO, claiming that Estonia must build independent defence capabilities (Uued Uudised, 2023). However, the campaign's primary focus is on combating inflation. In a promotional video from December 2022, EKRE promised generous tax cuts and welfare benefits, especially for families, claiming that this would help revive the economy (Birnbaum, 2022). Furthermore, EKRE positions itself as protecting Estonia's national interests while claiming other parties are prioritizing Ukrainian welfare (Karell, 2023).

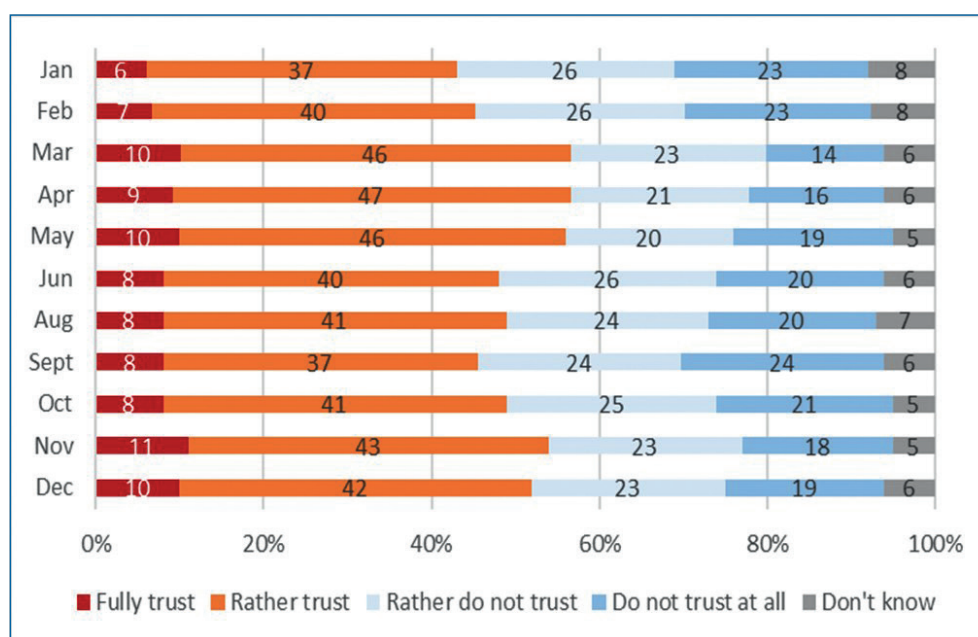
Other parties are keen to accuse EKRE of ambivalence on the war but, aside from the rhetorical inconsistencies mentioned above, do not have much to pin on them. For instance, EKRE's opposition to the bill criminalizing the display of symbols of international crimes against humanity was interpreted as an attempt to safeguard the right of their activists to flaunt Nazi symbols.

The “demand side” of right-wing populism

EKRE surpassed the Centre Party to become the second-most popular party for the first time in 2021. Before the war started, EKRE had steadily been closing the gap with the Reform Party, Estonia's largest by vote share. When Russia attacked Ukraine on 24 February 2022 (Estonia's Independence Day), both the public and political reaction was unanimous in condemning Russia's action and showing solidarity with Ukraine.

Due to the active role of Prime Minister Kaja Kallas and the rally-round-the-flag effect that benefits incumbent parties during crises, both the government as an institution as well as the Reform Party enjoyed a surge in support (see Figures 1 and 2). This suggests that the war has generally reduced the potential success of populist, anti-establishment messaging.

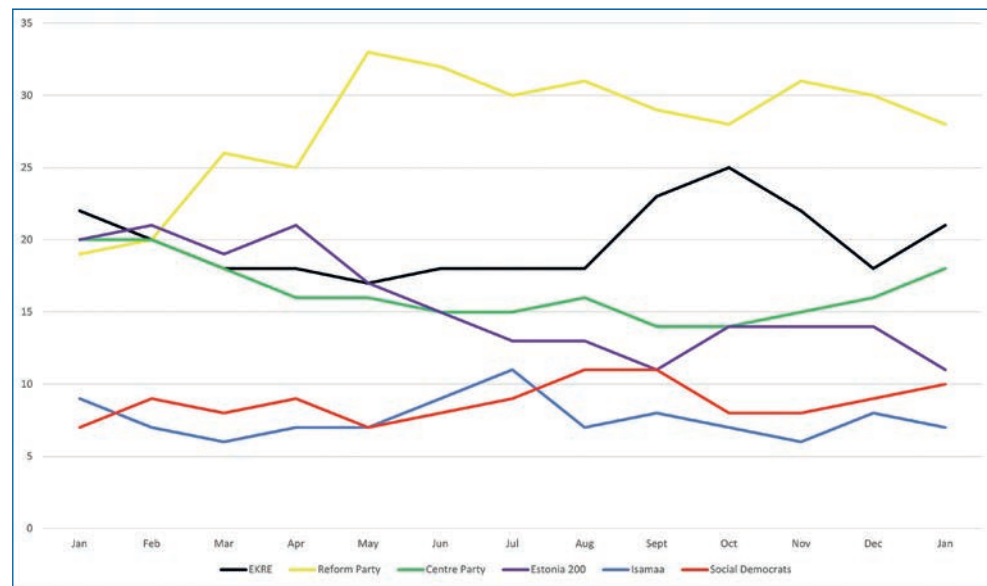
Figure 1. Public trust in state institutions in Estonia (January–December 2022)



Source: Public Opinion monitoring, Turu-Uuringute AS (2023, p. 5).

However, the main loser in the popularity ratings was not EKRE, but the Centre Party, which was in an awkward position as it was also condemning Russia's actions, then being a government party (see Figure 2), which created ambivalent feelings, especially among the party's numerous Russian-speaking supporters. EKRE's ratings initially remained stable but began to grow again and, according to the popularity ratings by Norstat (n.d. a), reached an all-time high of 27% in October 2022 before declining to just under 20% in January 2023. EKRE's ratings seem to have strongly correlated with the Centre Party's popularity, which has recently begun to recover some of its earlier losses. The recent decline in EKRE's relative support can also be explained by the declining share of "undecided" voters, who seem to be breaking for the other parties as the elections approach. While EKRE's supporter base of staunch partisans remains more or less stable, the party seems unable to appeal beyond it, meaning other parties are pulling ahead.

Figure 2. Voting intentions in Estonia, January 2022 - January 2023



Source: Compiled by the authors based on data from TNS Emor (2023)

EKRE's surge of support in the autumn of 2022 can be explained by its campaign efforts. The peak of its popularity coincided with the protest rallies against rising energy prices in October. After that, however, its rating went into evident decline in November after Mart Helme's remarks about being "for peace". Interestingly, the decrease in EKRE's overall rating in November coincided with a surge in their popularity among voters from ethnicity other than Estonian (Norstat n.d. b). This suggests that Helme's ambiguous statements (and their amplification in the media) did have some positive effect on the preferences of the Russian-speaking voters. Still, the ensuing clarifications made it temporary, and its effect on the ethnic Estonian voters was negative.

One reason why EKRE's anti-refugee messaging did not improve its ratings, unlike during the European Migration Crisis in 2015–16, relates to the public's much more accommodating attitude towards Ukrainian refugees. While in 2015, 43–54% of respondents agreed that Estonia should accept refugees (Jakobson et al., 2017); in 2022, 71–81% of respondents agreed that Estonia should accept refugees from Ukraine (Turu-Uuringute AS, 2023, p. 11).

Discussion and perspectives

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has had a manifold effect on the Estonian populist Radical Right and has created both challenges and opportunities for it. Initially, EKRE's support plummeted as people rallied around the flag and behind the prime minister's party. Opponents tried to claim that EKRE had been acting as a "useful idiot" for Putin. Furthermore, mainstream parties are beginning to co-opt some items on the nativist anti-Russian agenda. The war also hampered EKRE's plans to expand its electoral base to include a greater share of the Russian-speaking population. However, the high inflation and economic difficulties occasioned by the war and sanctions provided the populists with new possibilities to gain support.

Nevertheless, the Russian invasion of Ukraine is unlikely to negatively impact EKRE's competitive position in the long run, as the party has solidly institutionalized (Saarts et al., 2021). Significantly, EKRE still retains its near monopoly on many salient issues, such as immigration, Euroscepticism, championing "traditional" values (with a focus on opposing LGBTQ rights), and opposition to the European Green Deal, which will remain on the political agenda for the foreseeable future.

References

- Auers, D., & Kasekamp, A. (2009). Explaining the electoral failure of extreme-right parties in Estonia and Latvia. *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 17(2), 241–254 <https://doi.org/10.1080/14782800903108718>
- Birnbaum, A. (2022, December 6). *EKRE: Päästame Eesti!* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NZKOfIVtUhU>
- Braghiroli, S., & Makarychev, A. (2022). Conservative populism in Italy and Estonia: playing the multicultural card and engaging "domestic others". *East European Politics*, 1–22 <https://doi.org/10.1080/21599165.2022.2077725>



- Delfi (2022, April 13). *Mart Helme seostas Ukraina sõjapõgenikke prostitutsiooni ja HI-viiruse tagasitulekuga. Ratas: õudne ja tülgastav!* <https://www.delfi.ee/artikkel/96407309/mart-helme-seostas-ukraina-sojapogenikke-prostitutsiooni-ja-hi-viiruse-tagasitulekuga-ratas-oudne-ja-tulgastav>
- ERR (2022a, April 20). *EKRE Narva osakonna juhid lahkusid erakonnast*. <https://www.err.ee/1608570919/ekre-narva-osakonna-juhid-lahkusid-erakonnast>
- ERR (2022b, June 8). *Vene kodanikelt valimisõiguse võtmist pooldavad Isamaa ja EKRE*. <https://www.err.ee/1608623083/vene-kodanikelt-valimisoiguse-votmist-pooldavad-isamaa-ja-ekre>
- ERR (2022c, October 27). *Politicians criticize Mart Helme for “pro-peace in Ukraine” comments*. <https://news.err.ee/1608767248/politicians-criticize-mart-helme-for-pro-peace-in-ukraine-comments>
- ERR (2022d, October 27) *Jaak Madison, Martin Helme: EKRE pro-peace, but also pro-Ukraine*. <https://news.err.ee/1608767626/jaak-madison-martin-helme-ekre-pro-peace-but-also-pro-ukraine>
- Estonian Social Insurance Board (n.d.). *Statistika. Ukraina sõjapõgenikud Eestis*. Retrieved on 7 February, 2022 from <https://www.sotsiaalkindlustusamet.ee/asutus-uudised-ja-kontakt/praktiline-teave/statistika#ua-stat>
- Estonian State Chancellery. (2022, December 14–19). *Avaliku arvamuse seireuuring (Series 13, December 2022)*. <https://riigikantslei.ee/media/2214/download>
- Hindre, M. (Host) (2022, April 20). Martin Helme: EKRE mõtted seoses Ukraina sõja ning põgenikega [Radio broadcast]. *Uudis+*. <https://vikerraadio.err.ee/1608556984/uudis-madis-hindre/399146b94c8b71cbf5712e7b18ddb204>
- Jakobson, M-L., Pajumets, M., & Stõun, S. (2017). Eesti elanikud suhtuvad pagulastesse varasemast sallivamalt ja nõudlikumalt. *ERR*. <https://www.err.ee/603090/eesti-elanikud-suhtuvad-pagulastesse-varasemast-sallivamalt-ja-noudlikumalt>
- Karell, M. (Host) (2023, February 14). Laser valimissaade [TV broadcast]. *PlayTV*. <https://play.tv3.ee/shows/laser-valimissaade,serial-5197093/osa-1,episode-5197095>
- Kasekamp, A., Madisson, M. L., & Wierenga, L. (2019). Discursive opportunities for the Estonian populist Radical Right in a digital society. *Problems of Post-Communism*, 66(1), 47–58. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10758216.2018.1445973>
- Lomp, L-E. (2022, October 19). *Martin Helme: Vene propaganda sõimab EKREt*. Postimees. <https://www.postimees.ee/7630013/videod-martin-helme-vene-propaganda-soimab-ekret>
- Mudde, C. (2007). *Populist Radical Right parties in Europe*. Cambridge University Press <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511492037>
- Norstat (n.d. a). *Erakondade reitingud*. Retrieved on 27 February 2023 from <https://reitingud.ee/>

- Norstat (n.d. b). *Erakondade reitingud. Muu rahvus*. Retrieved on 27 February 2023 from <https://reitingud.ee/reitingud/>
- Parliament of Estonia (2022, October 18). *Riigikogu kuulutas Venemaa režiimi terroristlikuks* [Press release]. <https://www.riigikogu.ee/pressiteated/taiskogu/riigikogu-kuulutas-venemaa-reziimi-terroristlikuks/>
- Postimees (2022, October 16). *VIDEO: EKRE avaldas Vabaduse Väljakul meelt*. <https://www.postimees.ee/7627489/video-ekre-avaldas-vabaduse-valjakul-meelt>
- Poverina, E. (2021, February 1). Март Хельме: нельзя считать себя экспертами по России, не зная русского. *Rus.Postimees*. <https://rus.postimees.ee/7168868/mart-helme-nelzya-schitat-sebya-ekspertami-po-rossii-ne-znaya-russkogo>
- Saarts, T., Jakobson, M. L., & Kalev, L. (2021). When a right-wing populist party inherits a mass party organisation: The case of EKRE. *Politics and Governance*, 9(4), 354–364 <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v9i4.4566>
- Turu-Uuringute AS (2023, January 11). *Avaliku arvamuse seireuuring, 13. Seire. Küsitlus 15a. ja vanema elanikkonna seas, 14.-19. detsember*. <https://www.riigikantselei.ee/media/2214/download>
- Uued Uudised. (2022, September 13). *EKRE: Reformierakonna valitsuse rändepoliitika kahjustab nii eesti kui ka ukraina rahva huve*. <https://uueduudised.ee/uudis/estil/ekre-reformierakonna-valitsuse-randepoliitika-kahjustab-nii-eesti-kui-ka-ukraina-rahva-huve/>
- Uued Uudised. (2023, January 28). *EKRE Valimisprogramm: Ehitame üles tugeva ja kaitstud riigi, mida vaenlane rünnata ei julge*. <https://uueduudised.ee/uudis/estil/ekre-valimisprogramm-%E2%9F%A9-ehitame-ules-tugeva-ja-kaitstud-riigi-mida-vaenlane-runnata-ei-julge/>
- Voog, V. (2019, November 20). *Mart Helme: On rumal mitte tunnistada, et NATO on kriisis. Õhtuleht*. <https://www.oh tuleht.ee/983988/mart-helme-on-rumal-mitte-tunnistada-et-nato-on-kriisis>
- Vooglaid, V. (2022a, April 27). *Varro Vooglaid: ka mina poleks hääletanud vaenusümboleid keelava seaduseelnõu poolt. Miks? Objektiiv*. <https://objektiiv.ee/ka-mina-poleks-haaletanud-vaenusumboleid-keelava-seaduseelnou-poolt-miks>
- Vooglaid, V. (2022b, April 29). *Seekordses otsesaates peatun mõningatel põhimõtetel tähelepanekutel seondult sõjaga Ukrainas ning arutlen tõdemuse üle ...* [Facebook Live event]. Facebook. <https://www.facebook.com/varro.vooglaid/videos/503866308053598>



FINLAND



The impact of the Russia–Ukraine war on right-wing populism in Finland

Yannick Lahti* and Emilia Palonen** *University of Helsinki*

Abstract

As Finland's neighbour, Russia, attacked its neighbour, Ukraine, the response across the political spectrum in Finland was universal. All the parties underscored the importance of patriotism and sovereignty and messages of solidarity and support for Ukraine (alongside condemnation of Russia). Support for Putin or the war is basically non-existent in Finland. Still, the Finns Party (FP), which is part of the populist Radical Right milieu in Finland, polls extremely well. Moreover, groups combining anti-COVID-19 measures with pro-Putin leanings have registered as political parties in preparation for elections in spring 2023. Still, their combined support is in single digits. The concrete consequences of the war include a U-turn in foreign policy from long-standing neutrality to NATO membership, with all parties—including the FP—supporting the government's pending application to join alongside neighbouring Sweden. Interestingly, as the conflict heated up in early 2022, “Niikkogate”—a scandal in which a parliamentary committee chair from the FP was replaced after tweeting pro-Kremlin sentiments—has indicated the degree of pro-Ukraine support across the political spectrum.

Keywords: *Finns Party (FP); Finland; Russia–Ukraine war; populist Radical Right; digital counterpublics; disinformation*

* yannick.lahti@helsinki.fi

** emilia.palonen@helsinki.fi

Lahti, Yannick & Palonen, Emilia. (2023). “The impact of the Russia–Ukraine war on right-wing populism in Finland.” In: *The Impacts of the Russian Invasion of Ukraine on Right-wing Populism in Europe*. (eds). Gilles Ivaldi and Emilia Zankina. European Center for Populism Studies (ECPS). March 8, 2023. Brussels. <https://doi.org/10.55271/rp0018>



Introduction

It is inconceivable to study the effects in Finland of Russian aggression toward its neighbours as something that started in February 2022 with the current conflict. First, we must consider the historical impact of the Soviet Union's hegemonic position, particularly on the origins of the Finns Party (Perussuomalaiset, FP). This legacy of sovereignty implies that most FP supporters stand for Ukraine against Russia. What pro-Kremlin voices existed in the FP before February 2022 have been marginalized.

Second, Russian influence has worked in the margins of the Finnish media field, particularly since the Russian annexation of Crimea. As Bjola and Papadakis (2020) have found, sound macro-level “resilience” to digital disinformation in Finland is threatened by the potential for Russian influence campaigns in the largely unregulated micro-level, where “digital counterpublics” often flourish. Leaders of these “counterpublics” are linked with the marginal populist Radical Right movements and parties and appear on both the Finnish and Russian sides, generating a new hostile anti-government perspective of Finland in Russia that is transmitted digitally into Finland (*ibid.*). Third, Russian influence (particularly since 2014), the pandemic and the proximity to the national elections in April 2023 have contributed to the emergence of new Radical Right parties in Finland that, while small, often have distinct pro-Kremlin leanings (Hatakka, 2019; Fagerholm, 2022).

Mudde's (2019) definition of the Far Right divides it into two subgroups: the Extreme Right, which is hostile to democracy and seeks to subvert it, and the Radical Right, which chooses to operate within the democratic system. The FP fits mainly the latter and is more or less populist in its outlook. Most of the existing populist Radical Right parties in Europe foster nationalism and nativism, and most of the leaders and key figures of these parties are—if not outright admirers of Putin—at least tend to look favourably at some of his conservative, nationalist policies and leadership characteristics. Thus, shared nativism, authoritarianism, and, increasingly, illiberal politics creates a natural bond between these parties and the Kremlin (Eatwell & Goodwin, 2018).

The FP has been a distinct outlier in this party family. Russia is Finland's “unpredictable neighbour” (Nyberg, 2016) in the region and the FP, being committed to Finnish national interests, has never adopted pro-Putin or pro-Russia

stances. Some members and MPs have pro-Kremlin leanings, but the majority in the party have openly opposed Putin and his regime and condemned the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. We see the party's robust defence of Ukraine as a logical continuum of their advocacy of nationalist values and national sovereignty. The Finnish people see an analogy between Ukraine's current fight for independence and Finland's struggle in the Winter War (1939–40), when the country's small but highly motivated defence forces beat back the much larger Soviet Union against all odds. Additionally, while Ukrainian refugees have not (yet) provoked nativist sentiments, Moscow's invasion has activated Finnish Russophobia.

Although we focus on Radical Right populist parties in Finland, another populist party, *Liike Nyt* ("Movement Now"), deserves mention. It is an emerging force that fashions itself after Italy's *Movimento Cinque Stelle* (M5S), which successfully won seats outside the capital in the Finnish regional elections in 2021 (Yle, 2021). While a disproportionate number of the current leading figures of the FP hail from the universities and the teaching professions (Saresma & Palonen, 2022), *Liike Nyt*'s leadership are business elites that have been tied to Russian oligarchs (Luukka, 2022), which they now publicly disavow (Nalbantoglu, 2023).

The full-scale war in Ukraine contributed to a new national consensus regarding the country's potential membership in NATO. This was a significant shift in foreign policy, as Finland prided itself on its neutral status and non-alignment during the Cold War (and after). Popular views changed fast. In August 2014, after Russia annexed Crimea, only 26% of Finns supported Finnish NATO membership, with 57% against (Elonen & Kinnunen, 2014). By early March 2022, the numbers had flipped, with 48% in favour and 26% against (Huhtanen, 2022), and by June 2022, 79% of Finns were in support of NATO membership, with just 10% opposed (Vanttinen, 2022). Finland applied for NATO membership with strong cross-party parliamentary support. Even grassroots supporters of the Left Alliance have backed NATO membership, compelling the stridently neutralist party elite to change tack somewhat. Crucially, the Finns Party was also strongly in favour, with the party council voting 61–3 in favour of NATO following an electronic membership ballot (Arter, 2022, p. 15).



The Finns Party: From stridently anti-Soviet to avowedly pro-Ukraine

The Radical Right in Finland has anti-elitist and rural roots. The Finnish Rural Party (Suomen Maaseudun Puolue, SMP) emerged from the agrarian populist movement founded by Veikko Vennamo in the late 1950s and was against the “urban elites”, specifically President Urho Kekkonen, who held that office continually from 1956–1982. In contrast to its Scandinavian counterparts, the SMP was not an anti-taxation party calling for the retrenchment of the welfare state (Palonen & Sunnercrantz, 2021). Rather it was for welfare “without socialism” and was stridently anti-communist. The party lost support in the 1990s and, by 1995, was a spent force in Finnish politics.

A former party secretary and supporter of Vennamo, Timo Soini founded the FP (at first known as the “True Finns”) on the ruins of SMP in 1995 and would go on to chair the party for the next 20 years. In 1995, the FP had only one seat in the Parliament, but it grew steadily and scored three seats in the 2003 elections. An election financing crisis in the 2007 elections boosted the FP’s stocks. The party broke through in national elections in 2011, gaining 39 seats in Finland’s 200-seat Parliament (Arter, 2022; Palonen & Saresma, 2017). Under Soini’s leadership, the FP retained the SMP’s anti-elitism and combined it with opposition to supranationalism, which was convenient as Finland joined the European Union (EU) in 1995.

The FP has always had a more radical, right-wing, anti-immigration faction centred on Jussi Halla-aho, who led the party from 2017–2021. When Halla-aho was elected leader in 2017, a splinter group of 19 MPs (including five serving ministers) formed the Blue Reform movement (Sininen Tulevaisuus). It broke away in opposition to the “openly Far Right” values which the party had embraced by electing Halla-aho as leader. As a result, the FP line changed overnight as the party shed its softer anti-elitist, populist positioning and embraced mainstream Radical Right populist positions. The FP continued this tack to the right under Riikka Purra, the party leader since 2021 (Palonen, 2021). The party’s finances were unaffected by the split as legislation ensured they continued to receive party subsidies based on the original number of MPs. Such a sound financial footing is likely why the party has never been accused of financial links to the Kremlin, unlike other European Far Right parties, like Marine Le Pen’s Front National (Laruelle et al., 2015, p. 33).

The pro-Putin faction inside the FP became evident in early February 2022. On February 8, the chairman of the parliamentary Foreign Affairs Committee, Mika Niikko, a Finns Party MP, posted a (now-deleted) tweet calling on President Macron of France to “step up” and put the official kibosh on Ukraine joining NATO. Niikko believed that without intervention from a Western leader with a deep understanding of Russian intentions like Macron, negotiations to cool the simmering tensions between Russia and Ukraine would fail. Niikko’s comments were widely seen as inappropriate across the political spectrum, especially because of the parliamentary committee he was chairing (Blencowe & Suikkanen, 2022). Even the FP’s notoriously radical youth wing condemned his rhetoric, and the ensuing firestorm saw Niikko resign the same day (Etelämäki, 2022). “Niikkogate”, as the scandal came to be known, saw Jussi Halla-aho return to the political centre ground and take over Niikko’s role as chair of the committee.

“Niikkogate” ultimately reflected political institutionalists’ desire to deal with the pro-Putin elements in the Finnish populist Radical Right at a moment when it was increasingly becoming clear that a Russian invasion was imminent. Intelligence reports of Russian troop movements were closely monitored in Finland, and tensions were apparent to the public already in 2021. For months, several seasoned MPs on the committee had been expressing concerns about Niikko’s (in)competence and personal ethics in such a sensitive position (Yle, 2022a). Unlike Niikko, most committee members considered it prudent to defer to long-serving civil servants and special advisers in making public statements about foreign policy. In any event, the committee was in safe hands due to the vice chairmanship of Erkki Tuomioja of the Social Democrats (SDP), a former minister of foreign affairs and a veteran institutionalist (Auvinen, 2022).

Important for understanding the FP position on Russia’s aggression against Ukraine is Jussi Halla-aho’s background as a scholar of early Slavonic linguistics, in which he has a PhD. He was even on track to enter academia before becoming engaged in blogging and politics (Nurmi, 2018). His studies from the 1990s to 2006 introduced him to the history of Ukraine and its establishment as a modern nation-state after the Cold War. Unsurprisingly, Halla-aho was staunchly pro-Ukraine from the start of the war. Slightly more striking for a man now chairing a major parliamentary committee, Halla-aho was publicly effusive in his support for Kyiv, even getting ahead of Finnish policy. In early March, he went on record claiming that the “intervention of the West [in the war] will be inevitable” and that action against Russia sooner rather than later was critical: “Please, stop the Russian



horde before we have a new Grozny and Aleppo in the middle of Europe! You have the means. You have the legal and moral right” (Yle, 2022b). Fellow committee members criticized Halla-aho for “pushing World War Three” (Yle, 2022c; Muhonen, 2022). In January 2023, Halla-aho posted on Facebook a picture of the signed artillery shell he purchased for Ukraine (Yle, 2023) with the text, “If killing Russian soldiers in this situation is right and necessary, then anything that promotes their killing is also right and necessary” (Pantzar, 2023).

In short, the FP has roots in strong anti-Soviet thinking and lacks the Russophilia of other Far Right parties in Europe (e.g., France’s Front National and Italy’s Lega). This is echoed in the current pro-Ukraine stance, which is also strengthened by the former party leader’s personal history. In this sense, their anti-Sovietism also turned them against Russia and for Ukraine. Finally, Halla-aho’s policy direct testifies to his emergence in the anti-immigration faction of his party (Vaarakallio, 2015). In the FP, anti-immigrant stances have hardened even further. The party’s current policy on immigration argues, for example, to end non-citizens’ welfare benefits.

New pro-Putin parties emerge at the margins

The Finnish party system is well over a century old, established when Finland was still an autonomous part (a Grand Duchy) of the Russian Empire, which had conquered it from Sweden in the early nineteenth century. For example, the parties in the current ruling coalition are long-standing, including the Social Democrat Party (founded in 1899) and the Centre Party and Swedish People’s Party of Finland (both founded in 1906).

After the country won its independence from Russia in 1917, the party system stabilized right through to the end of the Cold War. Since then, it has been in flux. Especially since the year 2000, a significant number (almost 20) of new parties have been founded to compete for seats in the Finnish Parliament. According to Mickelsson (2021), a remarkable proportion of these newcomers have “political party characteristics” that allow them to be classified as radical right-wing parties or Far Right extremists. Researching the ideological profiles of the new Far Right parties in Finland in the last two decades, Fagerholm (2022) identifies an existing dominant dividing line within the Finnish Far Right between traditionally populist elements of the Radical Right and ethnonationalist tendencies, with the Finns Party sharing both.

Five new populist Radical Right parties have emerged on the Finnish political scene since 2017 (Fagerholm, 2022). These include the aforementioned Blue Reform movement (now known as the Finnish Reform Movement) and Suomen Kansa Ensin (Finnish People First), which has its origins in the anti-immigration Rajat Kiinni! (“Close The Borders!”) movement. Two personal splinters are on a more general populist line: Valta Kuuluu Kansalle (Power Belongs to the People, VKK), formed around Ano Turtiainen, a former FP member of Parliament, in 2021. The VKK has networks among the leaders and influencers of Finland’s digital pro-Russian counterpublic. Vapauden Liitto (Freedom Alliance), a splinter of the VKK, was founded in 2022 by a former FP activist, Ossi Tiihonen, who also ran for party chair and has been vocal against Finland’s COVID-19 measures. Ideologically distinct is the proto-fascist, ethnonationalist Sinimusta Liike (Blue–Black Movement), also founded in 2022. Party formation has intensified, and three other populist Radical Right parties are waiting to be officially registered.

The Russian attack on Ukraine is not the only reason for the emergence of these new party actors. They are also a product of the pandemic and the moderation of the FP under Purra, which is hungry to return to government. Moreover, their rapid emergence is related to thriving online communities, which are driven by pro-Kremlin forces. What are these splinters likely to produce? Certainly, they can partly erode the power of the FP and split some of its votes. It is not a coincidence that they appeared at the end of the pandemic (Wondreys & Mudde, 2022) and before the April 2023 general elections.

What is the actual friction between these populist Radical Right parties, and what has the war in Ukraine to do with it? First, it sustains the VKK as a parliamentary opposition to FP, which has moved away from the position of “populist challenger party” into what they like to see as the populist nationalist mainstream. Despite historic EU criticism and suspicion of supranational institutions, they have not actively campaigned for a Finnish exit from the EU or the Eurozone and continue supporting NATO membership. However, in the election campaign in January 2023, Riikka Purra identified such a “Fixit” as the long-term goal of the party.



Conclusion

The Russian invasion in Ukraine has seen the idea of “defending the nation-state” return to the centre of political discourse in Europe (Fiott, 2022). National sovereignty or sovereignism, which is sometimes connected with populist language in which claims to recover authority are made on behalf of the “the people” against the political elite and international institutions, is at its core the idea of “taking back control” (Mazzoleni & Ivaldi, 2022). The element of “taking back control” is essential within the narrative set by populists as they aim to create a division by positioning “us” against some “frontier” in any given political context, whether the “us” or the “frontier” are real or imaginary (Vulović & Palonen, 2022). The “us” (who are virtuous) aims to “take back” something (in this case, control) from “them” (who are a threat). In Finland, the “mental frontier” against which the “us” is cast is quite concretely the Russian border and the threat of the Kremlin’s imperialism.

The Finns Party is polling at around 19% in the run-up to general elections in 2023 (and up to 30% among first-time voters), which puts it in second place to the ruling SDP of Prime Minister Sanna Marin (Keski-Heikkilä, 2023). Overall support for the FP has not shifted significantly in any direction following the war in Ukraine as it has adopted a pro-Ukraine stance and reaffirmed its support for national sovereignty. Moreover, Niikko, a pro-Russian MP, was removed from a key parliamentary foreign policy role just before the war broke out.

Still, since shortly before the Russian attack in Ukraine, Finland has witnessed a surge of Far Right party registration and mobilizing online, with many advocating for a Finnish exit from the EU and against Finland joining NATO. These stances may cause tension between the mainstream FP, the only Radical Right party currently represented in the Finnish Parliament, and the more marginal Far Right parties outside and inside the Parliament. Nevertheless, if and when the more Radical Right parties seek to differentiate themselves markedly in the public consciousness, these themes of pandemic restrictions and military neutrality may be useful points of leverage to recruit new voters.

The fact that the FP is not actively running a Fixit campaign (however committed to it they are in the long term). It has endorsed Finnish NATO membership as a notable and remarkable difference between it and other populist Radical Right parties, which are emerging from the margins. The more radical

margins may indirectly influence the FP and other parties' discourse or legitimize FP as a more "respectable" actor in the field.

Historical experiences differ across the member states of the EU, which sets all countries apart as individual nation-states in supranational policymaking and cooperation. The Finnish case shows how factions within the populist Radical Right parties manage to leverage concerns about this in crises. Russia's brutal aggression in Ukraine casts Far Right themes of national pride and sovereignty into sharp relief, translating into migration policy, even when unrelated to the war itself. Thus, a range of political actors with their own agendas can "leverage" the issue space for their own ends. The strength of the established Far Right in such debates can also foster more marginal voices from the Extreme Right.

Ultimately, this calls for political action—discursive and electoral—from the forces of the centre and the liberal Left. For when liberal values and principles are called into question in one form or another by the Far Right, deeper understanding and discussion of these values should be promoted by the opposing side. Responses could include adjustments to policy to enhance democracy rather than expecting existing structures and open forums to do this work as a natural consequence of a plural public sphere. After all, "resilience" to disinformation in the macro-level public sphere is undermined by influence campaigns at the micro-level of the internet, where "digital counterpublics" opposed to democracy can flourish unless checked.



References

- Auvinen, P. (2022, February 9). Analyysi: Niikon kautta ulkoasiainvaliokunnassa leimasi vuotojen pelko – Halla-ahon linja Venäjää kohtaan näyttää jyrkältä. *Yle News*. <https://yle.fi/a/3-12309968>
- Arter, D. (2022). From Finlandization and post-Finlandization to the end of Finlandization? Finland's road to a NATO application, *European Security*, Advance online publication, 1–19. 10.1080/09662839.2022.2113062
- Blencowe, A., & Suikkanen, P. (2022, February 8). Tutkija selittää, miksi Mika Niikon twiitti oli niin tyrmistyttävä: “Ajatteliko hän, että nyt suljetaan vain ovi Ukrainalta, kun käytännössä se myös sulkisi oven Suomelta”. *Yle News*. <https://yle.fi/a/3-12308220>
- Bjola, C., & Papadakis, K. (2020). Digital propaganda, counterpublics and the disruption of the public sphere: the Finnish approach to building digital resilience. *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 33:5, 638–666, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09557571.2019.1704221>
- Eatwell, R., & Goodwin, M. (2018). *National populism: The revolt against liberal democracy*. Penguin Random House.
- Elonen, P., & Kinnunen, T. (2014, August 27). Naton kannatus noussut Suomessa samalle tasolle kuin Georgian sodan jälkeen. *Helsingin Sanomat*. <https://www.hs.fi/kotimaa/art-2000002756551.html>
- Etelämäki, T. (2022, February 8). Mika Niikko luopuu ulkoasiainvaliokunnan puheenjohtajan tehtävästä. *Helsingin Sanomat*. <https://www.hs.fi/politiikka/art-2000008599239.html?share=55d60ed7a50571391a7cfd2c759f3b3b>
- Fagerholm, A. (2022). *Nya ytterhögerpartier i Finland (2000–2022): En översikt. Politikk*, 64(3). <https://doi.org/10.37452/politiikka.117042>
- Fiott, D. (2022). The Fog of War: Russia's War on Ukraine, European Defence Spending and Military Capabilities. *Intereconomics* 57, 152–156.
- Futak-Campbell, B. (2020). Political synergy: How the European Far-Right and Russia have joined forces against Brussels. *Atlantisch Perspectief*, 44(1), 30–35. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48600543>
- Hatakka, N. (2019). *Populism in the hybrid media system: Populist Radical Right online counterpublics interacting with journalism, party politics, and citizen activism*. University of Turku.
- Huhtanen, J. (2022, March 4). Nato-jäsenyyttä kannattaa 48 prosenttia suomalaisista, vastustajien määrä painui noin neljäsosaan. *Helsingin Sanomat*. <https://www.hs.fi/politiikka/art-2000008659067.html>
- Judis, J. (2016). *The populist explosion: How the Great Recession transformed American and European politics*. Columbia Global Reports

- Keski-Heikkilä, A. (2023, February 15). Perussuomalaiset on ensi kertaa äänestävien selkeä suosikkipuolue. *Helsingin Sanomat*. <https://www.hs.fi/politiikka/art-2000009382345.html>
- Kimball, R. (2017). *Vox populi: The perils & promises of populism*. Encounter Books.
- Laruelle, M., Györi, L., Krekó, P., Haller, D., & Reichstadt, R. (2015). “From Paris to Vladivostok”: The Kremlin connections of the French Far-Right. PoliticalCapital Institute. http://www.politicalcapital.hu/wp-content/uploads/PC_Study_Russian_Influence_France_ENG.pdf.
- Luukka, T. (2022, April 24). “Ei tästä ihan puhtain jauhoin selvitä”: Tutkijoiden mukaan Suomen eliitin ei olisi pitänyt mennä niin pitkälle yhteistoiminnassa oligarkkien kanssa. *Helsingin Sanomat*. <https://www.hs.fi/politiikka/art-2000008769226.html>
- Mazzoleni, O., & Ivaldi, G. (2022). Economic populist sovereignism and electoral support for radical right-wing populism. *Political Studies*, 70(2), 304–326.
- Mickelsson, R. (2021). *Suomen puolueet: Vapauden ajasta maailmantuskaan*. Vastapaino.
- Moffit, B. (2016). *The global rise of populism*. Stanford University Press.
- Mudde, C. (2019). *The Far Right today*. Polity Press.
- Muhonen, T. (2022, March 1). Ulkoasiainvaliokunnan jäsenet ryöpyttävät puheenjohtaja Halla-ahon vaatimusta lännen väliintulosta: “Hän haluaa kolmatta maailmansotaa”, “Suomen kannalta jopa vaarallista”. *Helsingin Sanomat*. <https://www.hs.fi/politiikka/art-2000008651687.html>
- Nalbantoglu, M. (2023, February 2). Harkimo: Yhteistyö venäläisten kanssa ja Jokerien vieminen KHL:ään oli virhe. *Helsingin Sanomat*. <https://www.hs.fi/politiikka/art-2000009336531.html>
- Nurmi, L. (2018). *Perussuomalaisten hajoamisen historia*. Into Kustannus.
- Nyberg, R. (2016, September 8). Finland and the unpredictable neighbor. *Atlantic Council*. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/natosource/finland-and-the-unpredictable-neighbor/>
- Palonen, E., & Sunnercrantz, L. (2021). Nordic populists as hegemony challengers. In A. Koivunen, J. Ojala, & J. Holmén (Eds.), *The Nordic economic, social and political model* (pp. 153–176). Routledge.
- Palonen, E. (2021, August 22). The new leader of the FP reinforces an illiberal turn. *The Loop*. <https://theloop.ecpr.eu/the-new-leader-of-the-finns-party-reinforces-an-illiberal-turn/>
- Palonen, E., & Saresma, T. (2017). *Jätkät & jytkyt: Perussuomalaiset ja populismin retoriikka*. Vastapaino.
- Pantzar, M. (2023, January 9). Jussi Halla-aho osti terveiset ukrainalaisammuksen kyllkeen ja kirjoitti, että mikä edistää venäläisten sotilaiden tappamista on oikein. *Yle News*. <https://yle.fi/a/74-20011842>



- Saaremaa, T., Palonen, E. (2022). On the emergence of alt-science counterhegemony: The Case of the FP. In H. Eslen-Ziya, & A. Giorgi (Eds.), *Populism and science in Europe* (pp. 117–40). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-97535-7_6
- Vaarakallio, T. (2015). The ideological framework of the French Nouvelle Droite and The contemporary Finnish Far Right. *Redescriptions: Political Thought, Conceptual History and Feminist Theory*, 18(2), 202–24. <https://doi.org/10.7227/R.18.2.5>
- Vanttinen, P. (2022, June 28). Most Finns oppose Turkey's NATO demands. *Euractiv*. https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/most-finns-oppose-turkeys-nato-demands/
- Vulović, M., & Palonen, E. (2022). Nationalism, populism or peopleism? Clarifying the distinction through a two-dimensional lens. *Nations and Nationalism*, Advance online publication, 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1111/nana.12920>
- Wondreys, J., & Mudde, C. (2022). Victims of the pandemic? European Far-Right parties and COVID-19. *Nationalities Papers*, 50(1), 86–103. doi:10.1017/nps.2020.93
- Yle News (2021, June 16). *Municipal elections: Result service*. <https://vaalit.yle.fi/kv2021/en>
- Yle News (2022a, February 8). *Parliament's foreign affairs committee chair Mika Niikko forced to explain Ukraine Nato comments*. <https://yle.fi/a/3-12307181>
- Yle News (2022b, March 2). *Wednesday's papers: Halla-aho's "strong words", cyber attack on Nordea, Finlandia for Ukraine*. <https://yle.fi/a/3-12339446>
- Yle News (2022c, March 2). *Speaker of Parliament criticises Halla-aho's "military intervention" comments*. <https://yle.fi/a/3-12339896>
- Yle News (2023, January 9). *Finnish MP's decision to send message to Russia via Ukrainian rocket sparks heated debate*. <https://yle.fi/a/74-20011893>



FRANCE



The impact of the Russia-Ukraine War on radical right-wing populism in France

Gilles Ivaldi* CNRS-CEVIPOF-Sciences Po Paris

Abstract

This article examines the impact of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on the main actors of the populist radical right in France (i.e., Marine Le Pen's *Rassemblement National* and Éric Zemmour's *Reconquête*) as well as Jean-Luc Mélenchon's *La France insoumise* on the populist radical left. It looks, in particular, at the effects of the Ukraine crisis on the French presidential election in April 2022. After the outbreak of the war, French populists (of the left and the right) came under fire for their pro-Russia positions and previous sympathy for Vladimir Putin. However, these parties revealed quite different responses in interpreting the Ukraine crisis. The analysis suggests that Marine Le Pen successfully evaded accusations of sympathy for Putin by toning down her nativism and emphasizing instead her social-populist agenda, which foregrounds egalitarian social protection and economic nationalism. This move allowed her to exploit war-related issues of energy and rising prices. Public opinion data suggest that such issues were paramount to voters in the 2022 election. Zemmour, on the other hand, largely ignored growing socioeconomic concerns while perpetuating a more ambiguous stance vis-à-vis Putin, which may have contributed to his failure to challenge Le Pen on the radical right. Overall, the article concludes that the impact of the Ukraine war in France has been heavily mediated by socioeconomic anxieties, fuelling support for populism at both ends of the political spectrum.

Keywords: *Ukraine War, populism, France, Le Pen, Zemmour, presidential elections*

* gilles.ivaldi@sciencespo.fr

Ivaldi, Gilles. (2023). "The impact of the Russia-Ukraine War on radical right-wing populism in France." In: *The Impacts of the Russian Invasion of Ukraine on Right-wing Populism in Europe*. (eds). Gilles Ivaldi and Emilia Zankina. European Center for Populism Studies (ECPS). March 8, 2023. Brussels. <https://doi.org/10.55271/rp0019>



Background

The war in Ukraine has presented new challenges for Kremlin-backed radical right-wing populist parties in Europe, putting many under strain for their association with Russia and admiration of Putin's regime and forcing them to adapt to the new context produced by the war.

This article examines the impact of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on the state of the populist radical right in France, looking in particular at the effects of the crisis on the 2022 presidential election, which took place in April. The first section charts the topography of radical right-wing populism in France. The following section presents the international agenda of the populist radical right. The impact of the war—at both the party and voter levels—is subsequently analysed in the third section.

The topography of radical right-wing populism in France

Traditionally, the French *Front National* (FN) exhibited all the hallmarks of a populist radical right party (Mudde, 2007, p. 41), which forms part of the broader contemporary “far right” party family. The party has always combined three core features: nativism, authoritarianism and populism (Pirro, 2022). However, since her accession to the party leadership in 2011, Marine Le Pen's strategy has essentially been to “detoxify” the party's far right reputation, widely referred to as “de-demonization.” A significant step in this direction was taken in 2018 when the party rebadged itself as the *Rassemblement National* (National Rally, RN). Meanwhile, Le Pen has taken her party further to the economic left to address growing socioeconomic concerns in the French electorate (Ivaldi, 2022a). As a result, electorally, the FN/RN has grown its share of the vote in national elections to over 20%, even winning the plurality vote in both the 2014 European Parliament elections (24.9%) and 2015 French regional elections (27.1% in the second round).

The 2022 elections saw the rise of a new populist radical right party in France, led by Éric Zemmour. A well-known political commentator, columnist and author, Zemmour entered the 2022 campaign trail as the typical anti-immigration politician making nativism and anti-Muslim rhetoric a centrepiece of his presidential bid. Recent research suggests that the Zemmour phenomenon sits squarely within the

broader framework of the West European far right, adopting its central ideological tenets of nativism and authoritarianism alongside populism (Ivaldi, 2021).

The international agenda of the populist radical right in France

This section surveys the international agenda of the populist radical right in France, especially changes that have occurred in the FN/RN's vision of international politics since the mid-1980s. This vision rests on a constructed binary that opposes “patriotism” (virtuous) and “globalism” (threatening), reflecting the party's nationalism and populism.

European integration

Euroscepticism has been a central feature of the FN/RN in France since the mid-1990s (Hainsworth et al., 2004). The party has traditionally advocated turning the EU into a looser association of free and independent nations. During the 2010s, the FN/RN adopted hard Eurosceptic policies, pledging to pull France out of the Eurozone and the Schengen Area while calling for a French referendum on leaving the EU.

However, the blame for Le Pen's failure to win the presidential runoff in the 2017 elections was largely pinned on these policies, prompting the FN to moderate its positions and abandon its previous policy of “Frexit.” As a result, the 2022 election campaign saw the RN adopt an ambiguous stance vis-à-vis the EU and attempt to de-emphasize European issues to increase its appeal to moderate pro-EU voters without relinquishing its core Eurosceptic agenda (Padis, 2022).

Similarly, Éric Zemmour's vision of international relations is dominated by national sovereignty claims and his vehement opposition to supranational institutions. Like Le Pen, Zemmour espoused the concept of establishing the precedence of national law over European treaties and international conventions, signalling his intention to curb the powers of the EU and to engage in the construction of a “Europe of independent nations,” thus adopting the FN's traditional vision of European regional order.

Russia and NATO

Today, Russia occupies a prominent place in the French far right's vision of a multipolar world order, which opposes NATO and what it sees as American



imperialism. As will be discussed, such positions are also traditionally found in the populist radical left in France.

On the far right, such positions represent a notable departure from the past, however. Anti-communism was a core feature of the ideology of the far right in France during the Cold War. During the 1980s, the FN was generally pro-NATO, siding with the United States in the camp of the so-called “free world” against the USSR. This positioning changed after the fall of the Berlin Wall. As Lebourg (2016) suggests, “the transition to a unipolar world allows members of the far right to impose their interpretation of a world in the process of unification under the leadership of ‘American-Zionist’ and/or globalist capitalism [...] which is synonymous with ‘cosmopolitanism’” (p. 106).

In being opposed to explicit alignment with the United States, the current RN follows in the Gaullist tradition in France and opposes both NATO and the EU (Mielcarek, 2018). The party defends an alternative vision of the world, which postulates a complete break with the existing economic, political, institutional and geopolitical order, advocating, in particular, a new trilateral Paris–Berlin–Moscow alliance along with a pan-European association of sovereign states that would include Russia. During the 2022 election, Le Pen reaffirmed her intention to leave NATO’s integrated military command while reiterating the commitment to Article 5 on collective defence. She also confirmed that she would refuse to place French troops under the command of any future independent EU Rapid Deployment Capacity (EU RDC) while foreswearing French “subjection to an American protectorate” and calling for “closer ties between NATO and Russia” to forestall a Sino–Russian alliance (“Marine Le Pen déroule sa vision”, 2022).

The FN/RN’s pro-Russia ‘tropism’ is both ideological and societal (Camus, 2016). Russia is essentially seen as a bulwark against American economic, political and cultural influence and as the leader of a global patriotic insurrection against neoliberal globalization, supranational institutions and post-modernism (Lebourg, 2018). In her 2012 book, Le Pen wrote:

Relying on Russia today means creating a true European space from the Atlantic to the Urals, a Europe of nations pursuing their national interests and associated in a community of civilization, far removed from the ultraliberal American cosmopolitan model towards which the European Union is leading us. (p. 225)

The FN/RN has taken pro-Russian stances in the Ukraine crisis in 2014. During the war in Syria, the party called for restoring diplomatic links with the regime of Bashar al-Assad, thus following the lead of Vladimir Putin (“Marine Le Pen et les relations internationales”, 2017). Just before the Russian invasion, Le Pen was still blaming NATO and the United States for the conflict, asserting in an interview on the BBC programme “Hard Talk” in early February 2022 that:

Today the United States is pushing Ukraine to join NATO with the aim of deploying armed forces on Russia’s border, so the Russians are retaliating, putting forces at their borders with Ukraine [...]. But I do not believe at all that Russia wishes to invade Ukraine. (Sackur, 2022)

We find similar strategic and civilizational views in Zemmour’s writings and statements. He has long professed admiration for Russian President Vladimir Putin. In 2018, Zemmour portrayed the Kremlin’s leader as “a true patriot” and “defender of European values”, publicly declaring that “he would dream of a French Putin” to stop France’s decline (“Eric Zemmour: ‘Je rêve d’un Poutine français’”, 2018). Such arguments were reiterated in the 2022 election campaign:

Vladimir Putin is a Russian patriot. It is legitimate that he defends the interests of Russia [...]. The Americans want to enslave Western Europe, which only asks for that; it is voluntary servitude [...]. I think that the Americans have done a lot to provoke Putin. (France Inter, 2022)

The FN/RN has also had direct financial links with Russia (Turchi, 2016), something Emmanuel Macron sought to use during the 2022 campaign to pin Le Pen to Putin (see below). In 2014, the FN obtained a loan of €9 million from the Moscow-based First Czech Russian Bank. The negotiations over the loan coincided with Russia’s annexation of Crimea, reflecting the connection between FN officials and senior politicians close to Russia’s president, Vladimir Putin (Turchi, 2014), and the pro-Russian stance adopted by the party.

The populist radical left

Finally, it is worth noting that the French far right is not alone in its strong orientation toward Russia. Such positions are also found in the populist radical left, which, in France, is primarily embodied by Jean-Luc Mélenchon’s La France Insoumise (LFI), and they are associated with Eurosceptic and anti-NATO views predicated on the concept of a “non-aligned” France.



LFI's opposition to NATO and the party's pro-Russian stance reflect the radical left's traditional hostility toward the United States, neoliberalism and what is deemed American "imperialism." Mélenchon's call for national sovereignty and independence in France's foreign policy is based on the concept of "non-alignment," which means, in particular, that the country should leave NATO's integrated military command.

As Mélenchon asserted in December 2021:

The Russians are not adversaries [...]. We lied to them. We told them that we would not advance the borders of our military alliance and we did. Why is all this happening in Ukraine right now? Because the United States intends to advance the borders of NATO to Ukraine ("De 'la menace n'existe pas' à 'la Russie agresse l'Ukraine'", 2022).

During the 2022 election campaign, Mélenchon made several ambiguous statements regarding Russia. During a radio interview, he explained that

we have brought ten Eastern European countries into NATO, which Russia felt as a threat. We have a duty to ensure that Ukraine does not join NATO so that the Russians do not feel threatened, particularly if we station anti-missile batteries in Poland. (Demorand & Salamé, 2022)

The Ukraine war in the 2022 French presidential election

In this section, we turn to the repercussions of the Ukraine war to the April 2022 French presidential election both at the party and voter levels. Like other European countries, the war in Ukraine has had a significant impact on France's economy and society, as socioeconomic anxiety has grown from the energy crisis associated with the war and its effect on prices and the cost of living.

Far right strategies and counter-strategies of "performing" the war

After the outbreak of the war, French populists came under fire for their pro-Russia positions and previous sympathy for Vladimir Putin, however showing different responses to their interpretation of the Ukraine crisis.

In a press release published on her campaign website on 24 February, Le Pen

sought to put distance between herself and the Russian president, condemning the Russian invasion and accusing Putin of “breaking the equilibrium of peace in Europe.” Calling on France to spearhead a diplomatic intervention under UN auspices, she declared: “No reason can justify the launching by Russia of a military operation against Ukraine [...]. It must be unambiguously condemned.” (Le Pen, 2022)

In line with other radical right-wing populists in Europe (Albertazzi et al., 2022), Le Pen strategically adopted a more open stance on welcoming Ukrainian refugees in France, demonstrating her ability to quickly adapt to shifts in public opinion. This also signalled a temporary change from the FN/RN’s traditional demonization of asylum seekers. Le Pen also criticized some of the sanctions imposed on Russia because such measures would disproportionately harm French businesses and workers, thus addressing the concerns of her core working class and petty-bourgeoisie constituency. Meanwhile, the RN binned campaign leaflets that included a photo of Le Pen shaking hands with Russia’s leader Vladimir Putin in 2017.

More importantly, Le Pen managed to somewhat steer attention away from her Russian links by focusing her campaign on domestic socioeconomic issues (Ivaldi, 2022c). Her campaign accentuated social-populist arguments, which foreground egalitarian social protection, economic nationalism, and the defence of “little people”, and she successfully exploited war-related issues of energy and rising prices. At the policy level, her presidential platform offered a generous redistributive package of lower value-added tax (VAT), higher wages and pensions, tax exemptions and free transport for young workers. Le Pen’s social-populist agenda clearly resonated with the many economic fears of the French, particularly amongst the lower social strata most severely hit by the economic repercussions of the war and faced with the rising cost of living, especially in rural areas (Perrineau, 2022).

Like Le Pen, Zemmour came under fire for his long-held admiration for Russia and Vladimir Putin, but he failed, however, to evade accusations of sympathy for Putin. In the weeks before the invasion, Zemmour reaffirmed his support for Russia while blaming NATO and the West. Such arguments were reiterated in a press release on 21 February 2022, where Zemmour made clear that the situation in Ukraine was also the result of “policies led by the West and NATO,” refraining from condemning Putin while pre-emptively advocating against sanctions and suggesting a new treaty to end what he deemed was NATO’s expansion in Eastern Europe (Zemmour, 2022).



Zemmour's ambiguous stance vis-à-vis Russia continued into the period after the invasion. On February 24, he conceded that he had “believed that Vladimir Putin would not cross this red line” and said: “I unreservedly condemn this use of force, and my first thoughts go to the people who are victims of this absurd and fratricidal conflict.” Still, Zemmour renewed his call for a new “treaty to put an end to the expansion of NATO” in response to “Russian demands” (Johannès, 2022). Meanwhile, the far right politician sparked further controversy when he cautioned against what he dubbed an “emotional response” to the war. He initially refused to welcome refugees from Ukraine before changing his position by clearly distinguishing between Ukrainians and those fleeing conflicts in Arab Muslim nations (“Eric Zemmour assume une différence”, 2022).

Finally, on the left of French politics, Mélenchon continued to show an ambiguous stance during the few weeks before the invasion, calling for ‘de-escalation’ while simultaneously pointing to the threat of NATO moving closer to Russia’s borders (“Zemmour, Le Pen, Mélenchon”, 2022). However, on February 6, he was still asserting that Vladimir Putin’s position was “understandable,” adding: “France must be non-aligned, which means that neither the Russians should enter Ukraine, nor the Americans annex Ukraine into NATO” (Mélenchon, 2022a).

Mélenchon dramatically shifted position immediately after the beginning of the war. The LFI leader denounced Russia’s invasion of Ukraine as a demonstration of “pure violence,” saying in a press release on 24 February: “Russia is attacking Ukraine. This is an initiative of pure violence manifesting a will of power without measure. An unbearable escalation is provoked” (Mélenchon, 2022b). Mélenchon called upon the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) to lead international cooperation in the crisis, reiterating, in passing, his vision of a “non-aligned” France (Laïreche, 2022).

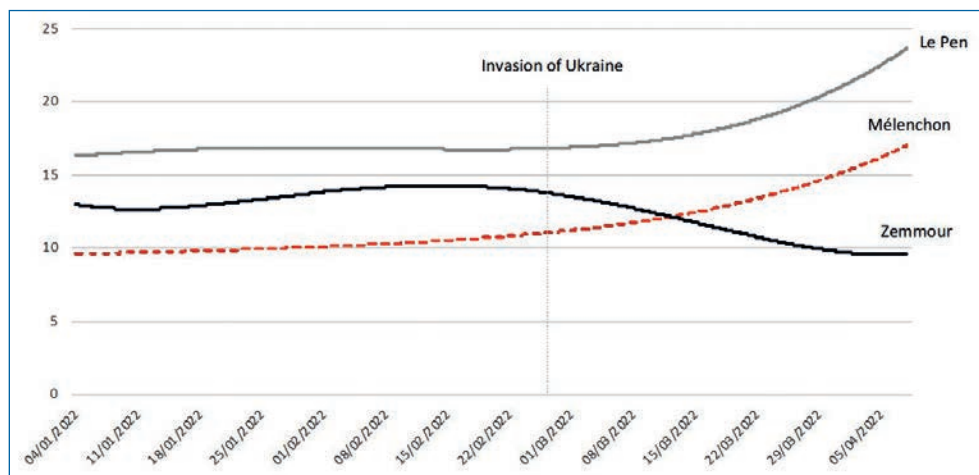
Voters and the Ukraine war

How did the Ukraine crisis play out in the 2022 French presidential election? Opinion polls taken in the run-up to the elections—specifically those of the CEVIPOF National Election Panel (ENEF)—suggest that the effect of the war was heterogeneous across different sectors of the electorate in France. In a poll conducted in early April 2022, 41% of French voters said that the positions taken on Ukraine by the different candidates would matter to their vote (ENEF wave #9). Such views were predominant among Macron’s voters (50%) but much less among

populists, with 36% of Mélenchon, 31% of Le Pen, and only 22% of Zemmour's voters saying that the war would be important to their decision.

If anything, support for populism rose during the period after the invasion of Ukraine by Russia, with both Le Pen and Mélenchon making substantial gains in voting intention polls, essentially reflecting growing war-related socioeconomic anxiety among the French (see Figure 1). In contrast, Zemmour appeared to be most affected by the consequences of the war, and he began to lose support in early March, which fell from an average of 13% to about 8% in the final days of the campaign. Meanwhile, polls reported high levels of support for Macron and his management of the Ukraine crisis.

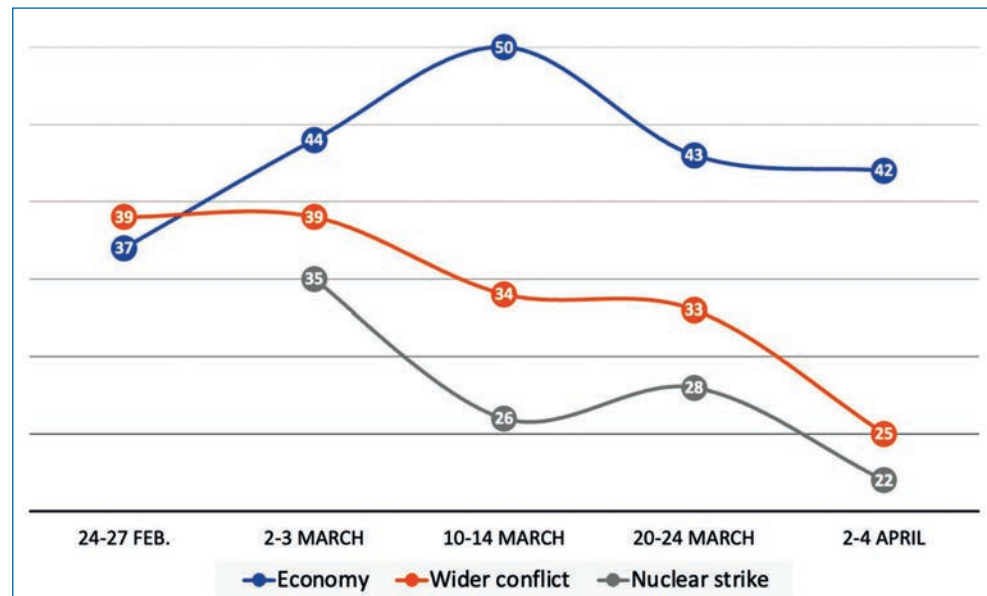
Figure 1. Voting intentions for populist candidates in the first round of the 2022 French presidential election (% support)



Source: data collected from 167 public opinion polls published between January 4 and April 8, 2022, polynomial fit, calculations by the author

Meanwhile, the war in Ukraine was becoming less salient politically as a majority of French essentially expressed their concerns about the economic consequences of the war rather than fears of a wider conflict or even of a nuclear strike by Russia (see Figure 2). While there had been a substantial spike in approval ratings and voter support for Macron at the beginning of the Ukraine war (Ivaldi, 2022c), the increase in his popularity quickly waned as economic fears loomed.

Figure 2. Concerns among French voters related to the Ukraine war (Feb-Apr 2022)



Source: ENEF Surveys (CEVIPOF)

The 2022 presidential election saw a surge in electoral support for populist parties across the political spectrum. Le Pen won 23.2% of the presidential vote, coming in second place behind incumbent centrist President Emmanuel Macron (at 27.9%). While failing to challenge Le Pen's position on the far right, Zemmour made a significant breakthrough at 7% of the total votes cast in the first round. Finally, Mélenchon came in third place with 22% of the vote, taking the lead on the left from the once-dominant Socialist Party (PS).

In 2022, the electoral vitality of populism was fuelled primarily by economic instability, rising prices, and profound voter disaffection with Macron during most of his presidency (Perrineau, 2022). Economic fears clearly dominated the later stage of the campaign. According to the final wave of the CEVIPOF National Election Panel (ENEF) just a few days ahead of the first round, no fewer than 57% of French voters said that the cost of living and purchasing power would be important to their vote.

While first-round support for Le Pen appeared unaffected by the war, Macron nevertheless sought to leverage Russia's invasion against her in the second-round runoff. During their TV debate, Macron accused Le Pen of being "dependent on Russian power," telling her: "You cannot properly defend the interests of France on this subject because your interests are linked to people close to Russian power [...]. When you speak to Russia, you are speaking to your banker." ("Débat présidentiel: Macron attaque Le Pen", 2022). A survey conducted immediately after the debate

suggested that 59% of French voters had found Macron more convincing and that he “had won the debate” (Bulant, 2022). Meanwhile, voting intention polls showed a moderate rise in electoral support for the French president ahead of the second round (“Sondage présidentielle 2022”, 2022). As it turned out, while Macron handily beat her in the runoff, Le Pen captured 41.5% of the vote, a record for the RN in a presidential race. The result suggests that war-related concerns likely played only a limited role in voters’ decision-making.

Discussion and perspectives

Ukraine war-related socioeconomic anxiety has fuelled support for populism in the April 2022 French presidential election at both ends of the political spectrum. Legislative elections in June 2022 further attested to the electoral strength of populism after the RN won an unprecedented 89 seats in the National Assembly. On the left, Mélenchon led the newly formed NUPES coalition—which brought together LFI, the Socialists and the Greens—to a combined 149 seats, leaving the left-wing coalition just short of the majority needed to impose cohabitation on Macron.

As the energy crisis and rising prices have continued to top the political agenda, Le Pen has established herself as the main opposition leader against President Macron. Her popularity has been rising since last September, reflecting her efforts to detoxify her party and the increasing normalization of the RN. As for the left, Mélenchon’s LFI has been weakened by internal factionalism and accusations of physical abuse against Adrien Quatennens, a leading LFI parliamentarian (Carriat & Cassini, 2022). Meanwhile, Zemmour’s party, Reconquête, which failed to win a single seat in the 2022 elections, has faded into political irrelevance.

Overall, the 2022 elections have reflected the mainstreaming of the populist radical right, marking a new phase in the RN’s institutionalization and de-demonization. Together with the waning of the ‘Republican Front’ –consisting of ad hoc alliances of parties and/or voters across the spectrum whenever the RN is likely to win a decisive round– in the presidential runoff and the historical breakthrough of Le Pen’s party in the 2022 legislative elections, this suggests a new phase in the already long history of far right politics in France, possibly heralding a more significant reshaping of the party sub-system of the right in the future, with the RN as its predominant force.



References

- Albertazzi, D., Favero, A., Hatakka, N., & Sijstermans, J. (2022, March 15). Siding with the underdog: Explaining the populist radical right's response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. *LSE EUROPP Blog*. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2022/03/15/siding-with-the-underdog-explaining-the-populist-radical-rights-response-to-russia-as-invasion-of-ukraine>
- Bulant, J. (2022, April 21). Sondage BFMTV-débat: Macron jugé plus convaincant que Le Pen par 59% des téléspectateurs. *BFMTV*. https://www.bfmtv.com/politique/elections/presidentielle/sondage-bfmtv-debat-macron-juge-plus-convaincant-que-le-pen-par-59-des-telespectateurs_AV-202204200725.html
- Camus, J-Y. (2016, August 31). Le Front national et les relations internationales. *Fondation Jean Jaurès*. <https://www.jean-jaures.org/publication/le-front-national-et-les-relations-internationales/>
- Carriat, J., & Cassini, S. (2022, November 24). LFI party plunged deeper into crisis as wife of French MP Quatennens accuses him of “years of abuse.” *Le Monde*. https://www.lemonde.fr/en/france/article/2022/11/24/melenchon-s-party-plunges-deeper-into-crisis-after-quatennens-accused-of-repeated-abuse_6005548_7.html
- Débat présidentiel : Macron attaque Le Pen sur son “banquier” Poutine (2022, April 20). *Le Point*. https://www.lepoint.fr/politique/macron-attaque-le-pen-sur-ses-rapports-avec-la-russie-et-son-banquier-poutine-20-04-2022-2472821_20.php#11
- De “la menace n'existe pas” à “la Russie agresse l'Ukraine” (2022, February 25). *France Inter*. <https://www.radiofrance.fr/franceinter/de-la-menace-n-existe-pas-a-la-russie-agresse-l-ukraine-sur-la-russie-melenchon-varie-3565552>
- Demorand, N., & Salamé, L. (Hosts) (2022, January 3), Sixième République, libertés fondamentales, Union européenne: Jean-Luc Mélenchon répond aux questions du 7/9. [Podcast episode]. In *Le 7/9.30*. France inter. <https://www.radiofrance.fr/franceinter/podcasts/un-candidat-face-au-7-9/un-candidat-face-au-7-9-du-lundi-03-janvier-2022-4073956>
- Eric Zemmour: “Je rêve d'un Poutine français !” (2018, September 18). *L'Opinion*, <https://www.lopinion.fr/politique/eric-zemmour-je-reve-dun-poutine-francais>
- Eric Zemmour assume une différence entre “immigration blanche chrétienne” et “immigration musulmane” (2022, March 8). *Valeurs Actuelles*. <https://www.valeur-sactuelles.com/politique/eric-zemmour-assume-une-difference-entre-immigration-blanche-chretienne-et-immigration-musulmane>
- France inter [@franceinter]. (2022, February 7). @ZemmourEric: “Vladimir Poutine est un patriote russe. Il est légitime qu'il défende les intérêts de la Russie” [Video attached] [Tweet]. <https://twitter.com/franceinter/status/1490590887063269378?s=20&tz=ziD4jyZuRZtPrfOMdu9dw>

- Ivaldi, G. (2021, December). Éric Zemmour ou le nouvel avatar de la droite radicale populiste pan-européenne. *Sciences Po CEVIPOF*. https://www.sciencespo.fr/cevipof/sites/sciencespo.fr.cevipof/files/NoteBaroV13_GI_zemmourounouvelavatar_decembre2021_VF.pdf
- Ivaldi, G. (2022a, March). Marine Le Pen, Éric Zemmour: social-populisme contre capitalisme Populaire. *Sciences Po CEVIPOF*. https://www.sciencespo.fr/cevipof/sites/sciencespo.fr.cevipof/files/NoteBaroV13_GI_socialpopulisme_mars2022_V4.pdf
- Ivaldi, G. (2022b, March 14). War anxiety makes French voters rally round Macron. For how long? *The Conversation*. <https://theconversation.com/war-anxiety-makes-french-voters-rally-round-macron-for-how-long-179120>
- Ivaldi, G. (2022c, March 28). Economic fallout from Ukraine war could give Le Pen's social-populist strategy an edge. *The Conversation*. <https://theconversation.com/economic-fallout-from-ukraine-war-could-give-le-pens-social-populist-strategy-an-edge-179863>
- Johannès, F. (2022, February 26). Guerre en Ukraine: à Chambéry, Eric Zemmour tente de défendre sa volte-face sur la Russie. *Le Monde*. https://www.lemonde.fr/election-presidentielle-2022/article/2022/02/26/guerre-en-ukraine-a-chambery-zemmour-tente-de-defendre-sa-volte-face-sur-la-russie_6115348_6059010.html
- Laïreche, R. (2022, February 24). Guerre en Ukraine: Jean-Luc Mélenchon dénonce la "pure violence" de la Russie. *Libération*. https://www.liberation.fr/international/europe/guerre-en-ukraine-melenchon-denonce-la-pure-violence-de-la-russie-20220224_LCCVFFXRZBB3PPE5LK5KRD2QUU/
- Le Pen, M. (2012). *Pour que vive la France*. Editions Jacques Grancher.
- Le Pen, M. (2022, February 24). *Guerre en Ukraine, Marine Le Pen en appelle à l'arrêt des opérations militaires* [Press release]. <https://mlafrance.fr/communiqués/guerre-en-ukraine-marine-le-pen-en-appelle-a-larret-des-operations-militaires>
- Lebourg, N. (2016). Les dimensions internationales du Front national. *Pouvoirs*, 157(2), 105–113. <https://doi.org/10.3917/pouv.157.0105>
- Lebourg, N. (2018, May 15). The French far right in Russia's orbit. *Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs*. <https://www.carnegiecouncil.org/media/series/russian-soft-power-in-france/the-french-far-right-in-russias-orbit>
- Marine Le Pen déroule sa vision de la diplomatie (2022, April 13). *Le Monde*, https://www.lemonde.fr/election-presidentielle-2022/article/2022/04/13/rapprochement-strategique-entre-l-otan-et-la-russie-accord-de-paris-rapport-a-l-algerie-marine-le-pen-deroule-sa-vision-de-la-diplomatie_6122032_6059010.html
- Marine Le Pen et les relations internationales: ruptures et ambivalences (2017, April 27). *Terra Nova*. <https://tnova.fr/democratie/international-defense/marine-le-pen-et-les-relations-internationales-ruptures-et-ambivalences/>



- Mélenchon, J-L. [@JLMelenchon] (2022a, February 6). *La France doit être non alignée, ce qui signifie que ni les Russes ne doivent entrer en Ukraine ni les Américains* [Video attached][Tweet]. <https://twitter.com/JLMelenchon/status/1490409132490375179>
- Mélenchon, J-L. (2022b, February 24). *Attaque de la Russie en Ukraine – Communiqué de Jean-Luc Mélenchon* [Press release]. <https://melenchon.fr/2022/02/24/attaque-de-la-russie-en-ukraine-communique-de-jean-luc-melenchon/>
- Mielcarek, R (2018). Rhétoriques politiques à propos de l'OTAN. *DSI (Défense et Sécurité Internationale)*, 133, 34–39.
- Mudde, C. (2007) *Populist Radical Right parties in Europe*. Cambridge University Press.
- Padis, M-O. (2022, April 1) Le “Frexit” caché de Marine Le Pen. *Terra Nova*. https://tnova.fr/site/assets/files/27878/terra-nova_la-grande-conversation-2022_le-frexit-cache-de-marine-le-pen_010422.pdf?a4qj4
- Perrineau, P. (2022) *Le Vote clivé: Les élections présidentielle et législatives d'avril et mai 2022*. Presses Universitaires de Grenoble.
- Pirro, A.L.P. (2022). Far right: The significance of an umbrella concept. *Nations and Nationalism*, 29(1), 101–12. <https://doi.org/10.1111/nana.12860>
- Sackur, S. (Presenter) (2022, February 8). *Marine Le Pen: French presidential candidate, National Rally* [Television broadcast]. BBC, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m0014cmj>.
- Sondage présidentielle 2022: après le débat, Emmanuel Macron creuse encore l'écart avec Marine Le Pen (2022, April 21). *Le Parisien*. <https://www.leparisien.fr/elections/presidentielle/sondage-presidentielle-2022-au-lendemain-du-debat-dentre-deux-tours-macron-accroit-son-avance-sur-le-pen-21-04-2022-S63DH5CXR-FES3OASXUSANIDEEY.php>
- Turchi, M. (2014, November 24). How a Russian bank gave France's far right Front National party 9mln euros. *Mediapart*. <https://www.mediapart.fr/en/journal/international/241114/how-russian-bank-gave-frances-far-right-front-national-party-9mln-euros>
- Turchi, M. (2016). L'argent du Front national et des le Pen: Une famille aux affaires. *Pouvoirs*, 157(2), 31-47. <https://doi.org/10.3917/pouv.157.0031>
- Zemmour, É. [@ZemmourEric]. (2022, February 22). *Ma position sur la situation en Ukraine*. [Image attached][Tweet]. <https://twitter.com/ZemmourEric/status/1495896711184752653?s=20&t=FRkX1beRpHocft6xORY8Rg>
- Zemmour, Le Pen, Mélenchon: les ambiguïtés des candidats à la présidentielle face à la Russie de Vladimir Poutine (2022, February 22). *Franceinfo*. https://www.francetvinfo.fr/monde/europe/manifestations-en-ukraine/zemmour-le-pen-melenchon-les-ambiguites-des-candidats-face-a-la-russie-de-vladimir-poutine_4981164.html



GERMANY



To Russia with love? German populist actors' positions vis-a-vis the Kremlin

Kai Arzheimer Johannes Gutenberg-University Mainz*

Abstract

Russia's attack on Ukraine and its many international and national repercussions have helped to revive the fortunes of Germany's main radical right-wing populist party, the "Alternative for Germany" (AfD). Worries about the threats posed to Germany's traditional export-led industries by spiking energy prices, the country's historical anxieties over becoming involved in armed conflict in Europe, and hundreds of thousands of refugees arriving in Germany seem to have contributed to a modest rise in the AfD's poll numbers after a long period of stagnation. However, the situation is more complicated for the AfD than it would appear at first glance. While many party leaders and the rank-and-file have long held sympathies for Putin (and for Russia more generally), support for Ukraine among the German public remains strong, even if there is some disagreement about the appropriate means and the acceptable costs. At least some AfD voters are appalled by the levels of Russian violence against civilians. Like on many other issues, there is also a gap in opinion between Germany's formerly communist federal states in the east and the western part of the country. The AfD's leadership has responded by blaming the government and unspecified external actors for the economic crisis, calling for a "diplomatic solution," and demanding a "return to normal." While this policy has helped to keep the AfD's base mobilized, the stated approach is scarcely feasible and has not led to a surge in support for the party among the general population.

Keywords: *Germany, Alternative for Germany (AfD), Pegida, energy security*

* arzheimer@politik.uni-mainz.de

Arzheimer, Kai. (2023). "To Russia with love? German populist actors' positions vis-a-vis the Kremlin." In: *The Impacts of the Russian Invasion of Ukraine on Right-wing Populism in Europe*. (eds). Gilles Ivaldi and Emilia Zankina. European Center for Populism Studies (ECPS). March 8, 2023. Brussels. <https://doi.org/10.55271/rp0020>



Background: Populism in Germany

The “Alternative for Germany” (AfD) is currently Germany’s most prominent and influential Far Right party. It is represented in the Bundestag, the European Parliament, and in fifteen of Germany’s sixteen state parliaments. Over the last ten years, it has effectively absorbed the fragmented support that existed for older Far Right parties, most prominently the right-wing extremist National Democrats (NPD). Only recently has the AfD faced some fresh competition from the Grassroots Democratic Party of Germany (“dieBasis”) and “Team Todenhöfer” (a personal party founded by former conservative politician and journalist Jürgen Todenhöfer), which were launched during the pandemic and target Germany’s so-called “Querdenken” (“lateral thinkers”), COVID-19-sceptics and conspiracy theorists. However, at the federal election in September 2021, these outfits groups won just 1.4 and 0.5 % of the votes, respectively.

Founded in 2013, the AfD started as a soft Eurosceptic outfit that positions itself on the centre-right (Arzheimer, 2015). However, immigration and the Muslim minority in Germany quickly became the AfD’s main issues, and by 2016, the party had transformed into a prototypical populist radical Right party. However, what sets the AfD apart from other European parties of this type is that it cultivates ties to openly right-wing extremist actors outside the party and tolerates extremist tendencies among its own members, which have become more pronounced and visible over time (Arzheimer, 2019).

Since 2014, the AfD has drawn up a series of increasingly comprehensive manifestos that aim to address all fields of public policy. As ardent supporters of Germany’s car industry and the internal combustion engine, they are sceptical of climate change and vehemently anti-“woke.” Their economic, fiscal, and welfare policies also place them on the Right, economically speaking. While welfare chauvinists on the one hand and market liberals on the other have long wrestled about the AfD’s pension policies, this conflict contributed little to the public perception of the party, which is framed almost entirely by the interlinked issues of immigration, asylum, and Islam.

The AfD won 10.3% of the list vote in the 2021 federal election, a modest decline compared to their 2017 result of 12.6%. More recently, the party has regained some support in national polls, but considerable regional variation remains. Almost from its foundation, the AfD has been disproportionately

successful in Germany's formerly communist eastern states, particularly in Thuringia and Saxony. In some districts within these states, the AfD has become the strongest political force, necessitating the formation of awkward coalitions across the political spectrum (e.g. the CDU/SPD/Greens coalition in Saxony or the Left/SPD/Greens minority government in Thuringia that has a confidence-and-supply agreement with the CDU).

While the AfD is the most important populist actor in Germany, it is worth pointing out that the Far Left Linkspartei, generally stylized as "die Linke" ("the Left"), is also considered populist, as noted by The Populist (<https://popu-list.org/>). As a self-professed pacifist party that is also the (indirect) successor of the socialist state party in the GDR, die Linke has long campaigned for the dissolution of NATO, frequently taken a pro-Russian stance and is highly suspicious of the United States, the EU, and Germany's security apparatus. However, Russia's atrocities against Ukrainian civilians have proven too much for most members of die Linke. Its parliamentary party condemns Russia's attack as a violation of international law, portrays Ukraine as the victim of a power struggle between the West and Russia, and calls for Western countries to spearhead de-escalation (Die Linke, n.d.).

Die Linke's most prominent and controversial member, Sahra Wagenknecht (who has a huge presence in both traditional and social media), takes a more clear-cut pro-Russian position. For years, Wagenknecht has toyed with the idea of forming her own breakaway party, but so far, she has failed to follow through. Nonetheless, Wagenknecht is the frequent object of speculation of her intention to spearhead a "Querfront," namely, an issue-specific alliance of Far Left and Far Right actors.

German elite discourses on Russia

Before turning to populist demands for and supply of foreign policy, it is worthwhile briefly considering German elite discourse and positions on Russia. During the 1950s, when West Germany found itself at the front line of the Cold War, integration into NATO became a central plank of its political consensus and was deemed essential for West Germany's political survival. However, even then-Chancellor Konrad Adenauer, a staunch anti-communist, wanted a good working relationship with the Soviet Union and agreed to compromise over the resumption of diplomatic relations in order to free thousands of German POWs who were still detained in the USSR in the mid-1950s.



Not much later, the first scheme to supply Germany and Western Europe with natural gas from Siberia was drawn up. Due to the Cuban Missile Crisis, these plans were temporarily shelved but eventually led to a trade deal that supplied Germany with Siberian gas in exchange for West German steel pipes. Natural gas imports increased from the end of the 1970s. Although the United States put considerable pressure on its West European allies to limit commercial exchanges with the USSR, by the late 1980s, the Soviet Union supplied about 50% of the natural gas consumed in Germany. After the end of the Cold War, Russia's share of German natural gas imports fluctuated between 30 and 50% but began to rise steadily again after 2013 (Pleines, 2021, p. 2), exceeding 50% once more by 2017.

This increasing energy dependency, epitomized by the Nord Stream 2 pipeline project, was seen positively (or at least not as a security problem) by both the centre-left Social Democrats (SPD) and the centre-right Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU), as it fit into the wider framework of Germany's policy toward the former USSR after the Cold War. In their analysis of this policy (which was loosely linked to the détente of the 1970s), Meister and Jilge (2022, p. 18) identify several core principles:

- A strong focus on Russia (to the detriment of other states in the region).
- A belief that economic interdependencies would secure peace and even modernization and democratization in Russia.
- The conviction that Russia *had to be a part* of Europe's collective security.
- A disregard for the security implications of economic and trade policy.
- The notion that Russia, as the principal successor state to the Soviet Union, was entitled to Great Power status with an accompanying sphere of influence.
- And, finally, a pervading sense of guilt over German atrocities committed in Russia during the Second World War, which crowded out the memory of Belarusian and Ukrainian victims and even clouded awareness of these countries' independent statehood and cultural identities.

In line with this general approach towards Russia, both the CDU/CSU and the SPD brushed aside the concerns voiced by the United States, Ukraine, and the eastern EU members over Nord Stream 2 as late as the 2021 federal election campaign. On the other hand, the liberal Free Democrats (FDP) and the Greens have taken a much more critical stance towards Russia in recent years. Still, the salience of foreign policy in general (and eastern policy in particular) has remained limited in German politics even after Russia annexed Crimea in 2014.

Ties between German right-wing populists and Russia

Although the Nazis justified their abhorrent crimes in the east with the supposedly inferior nature of the Slavic peoples, German right-wing extremists began to form networks with their counterparts in Central and Eastern Europe soon after 1990 (Maegerle, 2009). Among the states of Eastern Europe, Russia has held a particular attraction for the German Far Right because it was seen as offering both a check on US hegemony and an alternative to Western liberal democracy, which is increasingly seen as corrosive to Western traditions. The German Far Right also had contacts with extreme right-wing actors in Ukraine, but with the annexation of Crimea in 2014, Russia became the main focus. For example, after the annexation, the anti-Islam movement Pegida added a demand for “an end to anti-Russian warmongering” to its manifesto (Jennerjahn, 2016, p. 539).

Unusually among West European nations, Germany has also accepted about 2.5 million immigrants from the former Soviet Union over the last three decades. While almost all of them hail from German-speaking communities within the former USSR (Russlanddeutsche), many are not well integrated into the wider German society and rely on Russian (state) media for political information (Sablina, 2021, p. 362). This group reacted particularly negatively to the influx of refugees in 2015 (Sablina, 2021) and was specifically canvassed by the AfD, which draws disproportionate support from Russlanddeutsche voters (Spies et al., 2023).

In 2014, the AfD’s website showed “an unusual degree of sympathy for Russia and distrust” in the United States (Arzheimer, 2015, p. 548). In the same year, one of the party’s most influential leaders, Alexander Gauland, compared a possible division of Ukraine to the peaceful dissolution of Czechoslovakia in 1992 (“AfD für Spaltung des Landes”, 2014). In its 2017 federal manifesto, the AfD demanded (albeit without mentioning Ukraine) “détente with Russia,” an end to the prevailing sanctions, a “deepening of the economic cooperation with Russia,” and even Russia’s integration into (an unspecified) regional “security structure.” The juxtaposition with Turkey is also telling. According to the AfD manifesto, Turkey, unlike Russia, is “not culturally a part of Europe” and should be expelled from NATO. Similar calls for ending sanctions against Russia were presented in various state-level manifestos, including in Baden-Württemberg (in 2016), Western Pomerania (in 2016), and Saxony (in 2019). The 2019 AfD manifesto in Thuringia even demands more electrical power generation from natural gas and specifically



mentions “Russia, Norway, and the Netherlands” as “extremely reliable suppliers.”

In 2018, a group of German parliamentarians travelled to Crimea as “international observers” of the Russian presidential election. It later emerged that the Russian state paid at least partially for this trip (“AfD-Politiker”, 2020). One of the lawmakers, Markus Frohnmaier, is married to a Russian journalist and has repeatedly travelled to Crimea and eastern Ukraine. In 2019, the BBC published documents purportedly showing Frohnmaier to be a Russian asset. Nonetheless, he was re-elected in 2021. Another AfD politician, Gunnar Lindemann, also regularly visited the parts of Ukraine illegally annexed by Russia and even attended an “anti-Fascist” congress in Crimea, where he received an award. As late as September 2021, Lindemann and three other state-level deputies travelled to Russia to act as “observers” during the elections for Russia’s parliament, the Duma. As on previous occasions, they had no mandate from any international organization (Stöber, 2021).

In short, while pro-Russian and anti-Ukrainian positions were not central to the AfD’s agenda, which remains focused on immigration, they were widely accepted within the party and were enshrined in the AfD’s manifestos. Moreover, the Kremlin made an effort to cultivate individual AfD politicians.

After February 2022, the party initially took a somewhat more nuanced position. Speaking on behalf of the parliamentary party during the first debate of the invasion in March, MP Matthias Moosdorf called the war a “tragedy” and demanded Russia return to the negotiation table. However, he also alleged that Russischstämmige (“ethnic Russians”) in Ukraine had been persecuted since 2014, painted a Russian victory as inevitable, and called for a negotiated compromise that would imply referenda in Crimea and eastern Ukraine (Deutscher Bundestag, 2022, p. 1435). He also repudiated sanctions against Russia and military aid for Ukraine. Similarly, the parliamentary party published a position paper in June that condemned Russia’s aggression as a violation of international law and called for a ceasefire and the deployment of a peacekeeping force under the auspices of the United Nations (UN) and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) (“Der unmögliche Krieg”, 2022, p. 16). In the same statement, the party renewed its support for the Nord Stream 2 pipeline as it was essential for a “reliable, secure and cheap energy supply” (AfD Bundestagsfraktion 2022). By that time, Russia had already reduced the throughput of Nord Stream 1 by 60%. Deliveries would cease entirely in September.

By the end of summer, the AfD reverted to a more hard-line stance and openly admitted that they hoped to capitalize on widespread worries about energy insecurity and economic instability. They did not, however, shift to the left on fiscal and economic policies but rather demanded the return to the “status quo ante,” which serves as the AfD master frame. Shortly before Russia held hastily organized sham referenda on the annexations in September 2022, another delegation of would-be “observers” travelled via Russia to the occupied parts of Ukraine. They only abandoned their trip after a massive public backlash and some criticism from within their own party (Joswig, 2022). In October, the AfD’s co-chair, Alice Weidel, claimed that the “main loser” of the conflict was “neither Russia nor Ukraine but Germany,” which she called the victim of an “economic war.” In the same interview, she denounced the West for “reflexively supporting Ukraine’s maximalist demands,” rejected any form of German involvement, and urged the government to focus on reinstating the supply of Russian natural gas to safeguard Germany’s economy: “what that means for Ukraine [...] for a partition, that is not our concern” (Finthammer, 2022). Six weeks later, Weidel’s co-chair, Tino Chrupalla, doubled down on that position in a rambling statement in which he stated that “American presidents were war criminals, too” while simultaneously refusing to call Putin a war criminal “because I am not in a position to judge his actions” (“Chrupalla bei Lanz über Putin”, 2022).

The demand side of right-wing populism

Insofar as Germans cared about foreign policy at all, the centre parties’ approach to Russia was widely seen as entirely reasonable. Against this backdrop, the positions and behaviour of the AfD outlined in the previous section were certainly radical but not completely outlandish.

The February 2022 invasion was, therefore, a shock to German public opinion. Overwhelming majorities expressed support for the opening of Germany’s borders to Ukrainian refugees (84%), new sanctions against Russia (85%), and even arms deliveries to Ukraine (67%), something that had been almost universally rejected just a couple of weeks before.¹ At the same time, the invasion triggered anxiety about the economy and energy supplies as well as fears about a broader Russian attack on Europe and even a global nuclear conflict.

1. Support for arming Ukraine depends on the weapons in question but in February 2022, 74% were against delivering any weapons. See Forschungsgruppe Wahlen (2022a, 2022b).



Over the course of the year and particularly since the summer, support for Germany's involvement in the war has slowly eroded, and worries about inflation and heating during the coming winter have come to the fore. The rally-around-the-flag effect quickly subsided, and although the new government managed to find new suppliers for natural gas in record time — imports from Russia effectively ended in August — its approval rates are very low. Once more, there is also a marked difference between Germany's western and eastern states, with easterners being particularly reluctant, worried, and unhappy.

However, there have been no mass protests, and the AfD has not benefited from the dramatic developments as much as one could have assumed. In January 2022, the party hovered between 10 and 11% in national polls, which was very close to their result in the 2021 election. A year later, their support had increased by about four percentage points. Although the arrival of more than a million refugees from Ukraine, the steepest increase in the cost of living since the 1970s, and a major land war in Europe have created an almost perfect storm, the AfD so far remains below its peak of 17–18% public support recorded in 2018.²

This is not to say that (right-wing) populism has been sidelined or disarmed during the crisis. On the contrary, the AfD has performed surprisingly well in the western state of Lower Saxony and has become entrenched in many eastern regions. However, there seems to be a ceiling to the AfD's support, and the party is already operating close to that limit. In November 2019, a polling outfit found that 80% of Germans said that extremist ideas had spread “far” or “very far” through the AfD (Forshungsgruppe Wahlen, 2019), and roughly the same number consistently states in opinion surveys that they would under no circumstances vote for the party. Since then, the AfD's involvement with the anti-vaccination movement and various right-wing extremist groups, as well as its support for Russia, have further consolidated the party's negative image. The invasion may have somewhat revived the AfD's support, but not on account of any specific political innovation of the party. The party simply offers more of the same, packaged in an ever more radical fashion.

2. Somewhat surprisingly, support not just for the CDU/CSU (now the main opposition party) but also for the Greens, which are part of the governing coalition, has risen by four to five points over the same period.

Discussion and perspective

So far, the invasion has had a minimal effect on right-wing populist politics in Germany. While the issue was quickly picked up by actors that had been active during the pandemic, there were very few pro-Russian or anti-war protests.

In terms of party politics, the country is currently forced to reconsider its largely failed eastern policy. Like in other areas of political life, the AfD is essentially campaigning for a radical version of what was once considered normal. However, the idea that Germany could somehow disentangle itself completely from the conflict, ignore the system of Western sanctions and simply go back to importing cheap natural gas from Russia must appear preposterous even to many of the party's supporters. Therefore, the AfD's leaders' sometimes almost cartoonish statements are primarily designed to grab the public's attention and further fire up their (limited) base. They are certainly not aimed at influencing public policy or redefining the AfD's image.

Therefore, the most likely scenario is that the AfD will continue to focus on the economic crisis while stressing the importance of diplomacy and a peaceful, negotiated settlement, ideas that are generally popular and may even attract some disgruntled supporters of die Linke, which remains in disarray. However, there is no sign of a shift in economic or fiscal policy. The AfD, which is currently led by a former business consultant and the owner of a small building company, remains committed to low-tax, pro-(small)-business, and welfare chauvinist policies.

Were Sarah Wagenknecht ever to set up a (pro-welfare, anti-immigration, and anti-war) personal party, that might be a game changer, as she is currently more popular than any politicians of either die Linke or the AfD and could attract disaffected voters from these and other parties, at least in the short term. However, this would likely break die Linke and seriously weaken the AfD, so it is unclear what the net effect on populism in Germany would be.

Of course, this does not mean that mainstream actors should be complacent: during the pandemic, right-wing populist mobilization, while confined to pockets of society, was associated with lower rates of vaccination and mitigation and hence with worse policy outcomes (Leistner, 2021). On the contrary, politicians, journalists, and civil society actors should dispel misinformation and propaganda, using proven techniques to avoid accidentally reinforcing these messages.



References

- AfD Bundestagsfraktion (2022). *Für Frieden in der Ukraine!* <https://afdbundestag.de/positionspapier-ukraine-krieg>
- AfD für Spaltung des Landes (2014, April 4). *Frankfurter Allgemeine*. <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/inland/afd-fuer-spaltung-der-ukraine-12888098.html>
- AfD-Politiker gibt Sponsoring aus Moskau zu (2020, June 25). *Spiegel online*. <https://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/krim-reise-afd-politiker-gibt-sponsoring-aus-moskau-zu-a-4a6c1b1a-e82d-4268-a658-fb78a3fc4ed8>
- Arzheimer, K. (2015). The AfD: Finally a successful right-wing populist *Eurosceptic party for Germany?* *West European Politics*, 38(3), 535–56. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2015.1004230>
- Arzheimer, K. (2019). “Don’t mention the war!” How Populist right-wing radicalism became (almost) normal in Germany. *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 57, 90–102. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.12920>
- Chrupalla bei Lanz über Putin: “Für mich ist er kein Kriegsverbrecher” (2022, November 30). *ZDF*. <https://www.zdf.de/nachrichten/video/politik-lanz-chrupalla-putin-kriegsverbrechen-100.html>
- Der unmögliche Krieg (2022, June). *Fraktion Kompakt: Das Magazin der AfD-Bundestagsfraktion*. https://afdbundestag.de/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/fraktionszeitung_ausgabe-5-2022_v7.0.pdf
- Deutscher Bundestag. (2022, March 16). *Stenografischer Bericht 20. Sitzung, Berlin*. <https://dserver.bundestag.de/btp/20/20020.pdf>
- Die Linke. (n.d.). Ukraine. Retrieved February 6, 2023, from <https://www.linksfraktion.de/themen/a-z/detailansicht/ukraine/>
- Finthammer, V. (Host) (2022, October 16). *Weidel sieht einen “Wirtschaftskrieg gegen Deutschland” [Radio broadcast]*. *Deutschlandfunk*. <https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/alice-weidel-afd-ukraine-krieg-100.html>
- Forshungsgruppe Wahlen. (2019). *Politbarometer November II 2019*. https://www.forschungsgruppe.de/Umfragen/Politbarometer/Archiv/Politbarometer_2019/November_II_2019/
- Forschungsgruppe Wahlen. (2022a). *Politbarometer März 2022*. https://www.forschungsgruppe.de/Umfragen/Politbarometer/Archiv/Politbarometer_2022/März_2022/
- Forshungsgruppe Wahlen. (2022b). *Politbarometer April II 2022*. https://www.forschungsgruppe.de/Umfragen/Politbarometer/Archiv/Politbarometer_2022/April_II_2022/

- Jennerjahn, M. (2016). *Sachsen als Entstehungsort der völkisch-rassistischen Bewegung PE-GIDA*. In S. Braun, A. Geisler, & M. Gerster (Eds.), *Strategien der extremen Rechten: Hintergründe–analysen–antworten* (2nd ed., pp. 533–558). VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-01984-6_23
- Joswig, G. (2022, September 21). *Reiserücktritt bei der AfD*. *Taz*. <https://taz.de/AfD-A-bgeordnete-in-Russland/!5883129/>
- Leistner, A. (2021, November 19). *Je mehr AfD-Wähler, desto höher die Corona-Infektionszahlen – Studie*. *Euronews*. <https://de.euronews.com/2021/11/19/afd-wahler-corona-infektionszahlen-studie>
- Maegerle, A. (2009). *Die Internationale der Nationalisten: Verbindungen bundesdeutscher Rechtsextremisten–am Beispiel von NPD/JN–zu Gleichgesinnten in ausgewählten osteuropäischen Staaten*. In S. Braun, A. Geisler, & M. Gerster (Eds.), *Strategien der extremen Rechten: Hintergründe–analysen–antworten* (pp. 461–473). VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-531-91708-5_24
- Meister, S., & Jilge, W. (2022). *Nach der Ostpolitik. Lehren aus der Vergangenheit als Grundlage für eine neue Russland–und Osteuropapolitik* (DGAP Analyse, 2022/6). Deutsche Gesellschaft für Auswärtige Politik. https://dgap.org/system/files/article_pdfs/DGAP-Analyse-2022-06-DE-Final_0.pdf
- Pleines, H. (2021). *Der deutsch-russische Erdgashandel. Die Ursachen der aktuellen Spannungen*. *Russland-Analysen*, 410, 2–8. <https://doi.org/10.31205/RA.410.01>
- Sablina, L. (2021). “We Should Stop the Islamisation of Europe!”: Islamophobia and Right-Wing Radicalism of the Russian-Speaking Internet Users in Germany. *Nationalities Papers*, 49(2), 361–374. <https://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2019.76>
- Spies, D.C., Mayer, S.J., Elis, J., & Goerres, A. (2023). *Why do immigrants support an anti-immigrant party? Russian-Germans and the Alternative for Germany*. *West European Politics*, 46(2), 275–299. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2022.2047544>
- Stöber, S. (2021, September 19). *Wahlbeobachtung auf Bestellung*. *Tagesschau*. <https://www.tagesschau.de/investigativ/kontraste/russland-demokratie-wahlbeobachtung-101.html>



HUNGARY



Politicizing war: Viktor Orbán's right-wing authoritarian populist regime and the Russian invasion of Ukraine

*Zoltán Ádám** Corvinus University of Budapest

Abstract

Soon after Viktor Orbán returned to power in 2010, Vladimir Putin's Russia became a strategic ally for Hungary. This was a somewhat surprising development for a country with a history of mass movements for political freedom crushed with the assistance of Russian troops. Yet, unlike virtually all his European allies on the radical and populist Right, Orbán has supported Putin even during his campaign against Ukraine. As this has not been without political and economic costs for Hungary, the question emerges as to why Orbán has been so loyal to Putin. The report presents three complementary explanations: (1) the traditional animosity Hungarian governments have shown toward Kyiv in the past three decades; (2) blaming the European Union and the pro-Ukraine Western alliance for economic hardship in Hungary; (3) endorsing Putin's totalitarian turn in Russia to suggest that a similar course of political developments in Hungary is not excluded either. Worryingly, considerable institutional measures in the latter direction in the form of states of danger, continuously implemented since March 2020, have already been taken.

Keywords: *Hungary, Ukraine, Viktor Orbán, authoritarian populism, autocratization, macroeconomic conditions*

* zoltan.adam@uni-corvinus.hu

Ádám, Zoltán. (2023). "Politicizing war: Viktor Orbán's right-wing authoritarian populist regime and the Russian invasion of Ukraine." In: *The Impacts of the Russian Invasion of Ukraine on Right-wing Populism in Europe*. (eds). Gilles Ivaldi and Emilia Zankina. European Center for Populism Studies (ECPS). March 8, 2023. Brussels. <https://doi.org/10.55271/rp0021>



Context

At the time of writing (Spring 2023), Hungary has been under populist rule for 13 years, the longest of any European Union (EU) country. Soon after Viktor Orbán's right-wing populist Fidesz party returned to power in 2010, Vladimir Putin's Russia became a strategic ally for Hungary. Having played the sovereigntists card against Brussels and "the West" since the early 2010s, Orbán and his domestic allies have increasingly relied on China, Russia, and other autocratic regimes, such as Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Turkey, as sources of alternative economic and political support. For Orbán and Fidesz, this has been a rational political strategy, at least to some extent. They have sought to increase their room for political and economic manoeuvre concerning the EU, the IMF and the global financial markets, on which Hungary has long been dependent.

This political project has been contentious from the start. After all, Hungary — particularly the Hungarian Right — have long viewed Russia as an oppressive regional power and positioned themselves in opposition to Moscow. In 1848–49, Russian troops helped the Austrians put down a Hungarian uprising against Habsburg rule, ending hopes of an independent Magyar state. And while the Red Army liberated Hungary from the Far Right Arrow Cross regime under Nazi occupation during the Second World War, the Soviets troops did not withdraw, backing a local communist dictatorship against the wishes of the majority. Then, in 1956, Soviet troops intervened again when Hungarians took to the streets to champion freedom and independence. This historical litany has reinforced the notion that Russia (or the Soviet Union) was an irredeemably imperialist power intent on suppressing freedom in Central and Eastern Europe. With this historical context in mind, Orbán's sympathy for Putin's increasingly autocratic and oppressive regime since 2010 has been a somewhat surprising development.

Having said that, Orbán and Fidesz are certainly not the only pro-Russian populist voices on the European continent. From Alexis Tsipras in Greece and Marine Le Pen in France to Matteo Salvini in Italy and Donald Trump in the United States, a growing number of left- and right-wing populist leaders adopted pro-Russian views in the 2010s. Although the precise reasons for this are unclear (and may well include direct financial incentives), they most probably include admiration for power and the ability to rule without institutional constraints. In the Hungarian case, Fidesz has been joined by Jobbik, another Radical Right party established in 2003, in communicating positive sentiments towards Putin's Russia.

Jobbik was also probably financially supported by Moscow.¹

When Orbán's Fidesz was in opposition from 2002 to 2010, the party criticized Hungary's succession of Socialist–Liberal governing coalitions for cultivating overly cordial relations with Moscow at the cost of Hungary's Western orientation. In opposition, Fidesz was an active member of the conservative European People's Party (EPP) in the European Parliament and cherished partnerships with right-wing parties abroad. Yet at the same time, Fidesz relentlessly played the sovereigntist card in domestic politics, something Orbán honed to a fine art, blaming Hungary's government for “selling out” to Western interests before 2010. Fidesz also toyed with Eurosceptic rhetoric, and for some time, it was unclear whether or not Orbán genuinely backed Hungary's EU accession in 2004.

Hence, by the time Fidesz and Orbán won a landslide victory in 2010 that handed them the two-thirds parliamentary majority needed to amend the constitution, the ideological profile of Fidesz had become a mix of pro-EU Christian democratic, conservative, and Eurosceptic–sovereigntist views. After 2010, Orbán and his party moved progressively toward the European Radical Right, forging ties with Le Pen's Front National, Salvini's Lega and the Austrian Freedom Party. Today, Fidesz's most important regional ally is PiS, the Polish governing party.

After a long, contentious, and drawn-out battle, Fidesz was finally expelled from EPP in 2021, and since then, Orbán has cemented his position as a senior Radical Right leader in the EU. And although none of his allies on the Radical Right—including Le Pen and Salvini—has been willing to openly support the Putin regime after February 2022, Orbán has doggedly maintained a pro-Russian stance. So the question arises as to what explains Orbán's bold exceptionalism, which has inevitably alienated him (and his government) from his closest European allies, including, for example, PiS.

1. See, for instance, Seres (2017).



Authoritarian populism as political strategy

Orbán's deviant geopolitical stance within the EU is undergirded by his rock-solid political base at home. This is not simply a result of his being exceptionally successful at preserving his power (Orbán is the longest-serving elected prime minister in Hungarian history, although two twentieth-century autocrats, Miklós Horthy and János Kádár, governed Hungary longer from other positions). Orbán can also rely on an exceptionally centralized, stable, and exclusionary system of political institutions partly inherited from the system established after Hungary's transition to democracy in 1990 and partly developed by himself after 2010. This institutional architecture is organized around a government that the prime minister personally controls. The two-thirds majority Fidesz maintains in Hungary's unicameral parliament has allowed it to pass constitutional amendments unconstrained and to stack the state institutions with party loyalists. The entire system of political institutions is vertically organized such that Orbán can orchestrate it in a top-down fashion. And Orbán has no viable competition either in Fidesz or in the opposition.

The opposition consists of a cluster of smaller, independent (and often ideologically opposed) parties, which unsuccessfully attempted to replace Fidesz in the 2022 elections by creating a joint electoral list and joint prime ministerial candidate. The extensive intra-party coordination that this required simply disintegrated after the failure to unseat Fidesz at the polls. It is unclear whether a similar joint opposition list and prime ministerial candidate will be created at the next elections. Currently, seven relatively small opposition parties are represented in parliament.² Most are politically ineffective and seen as increasingly redundant by the public.³

The difficulties of the opposition are exacerbated by the electoral system. Its underlying nature is majoritarian, as most parliamentary seats are gained in single-mandate constituencies (SMCs) through single-round, first-past-the-post elections. Winning a majority of these seats requires considerable financial and organizational resources at the national level that only large parties can hope to muster. However, smaller parties can enter parliament through party lists that provide proportional

2. The largest opposition party, centre left Demokratikus Koalíció (DK), currently has 15 seats (7.5%) in the 199-member Parliament.

3. For opinion polls on party preferences, see: <https://kozvelemenykutatok.hu/>.

representation in a minority of parliamentary seats. Such an electoral system creates multiple equilibria for political parties: winning elections requires pooling large amounts of resources (high-level equilibrium), but having relatively few resources can also provide a viable entry into parliament without an effective chance of taking over the government (low-level equilibrium). As voters know this, they prefer to vote for parties seeking the high-level equilibrium, although few such parties are on offer on the opposition side.

This political-institutional architecture fits very well with authoritarian populism as a political strategy.⁴ Reproducing the two-thirds parliamentary majority every four years through a customized electoral system, Orbán and his allies have gained popular legitimacy by using complete institutional control over Hungary's political and economic resources to channel rewards in a clientelist manner. The wealthiest person in Hungary is a childhood friend of the prime minister, and all nationally important officeholders are his confidants. Actions of the governing coalition⁵ are endorsed by a pliant mass media that is partly public and partly private. The bulk of this private media is controlled by government-friendly businesses, including the Central European Press and Media Foundation (KESMA), a syndicate into which Fidesz-friendly private media entrepreneurs “voluntarily” transferred their media outlets in 2018.

Authoritarian populism as a political strategy is characterized by contesting competitive but unfair elections under highly skewed conditions (Ádám, 2018; Weyland, 2021). Waging these electoral battles, authoritarian populists typically employ exclusionary ideologies often associated with nationalism and anti-immigrant xenophobia, as well as anti-elitism in one form or another. Where authoritarian populists have been in power for some time (as in Hungary and Poland), anti-elitism is often oriented against powerful external political or economic actors, such as the EU, the IMF, the United States, or the global financial

-
4. Populism as a political strategy as opposed to political discourse or ideology is classically conceptualized by Weyland (2001, p. 14): “populism is best defined as a political strategy through which a personalistic leader seeks or exercises government power based on direct, unmediated, uninstitutionalized support from large numbers of mostly unorganized followers.”
 5. Formally, the two-third majority of parliament is held by a coalition of two parties: Fidesz and the Christian Democratic People's Party (KDNP). The latter, however, is a satellite party of the former: it does not have separate party lists at elections and nor does it represent any separate political alternative to Fidesz on its own right. However, in contrast to Fidesz, KDNP has remained a member party of EPP after Fidesz' expulsion in 2021 and is still represented in the European Parliament's EPP group by one MEP.



industry and especially one of its most active representatives, the Hungarian-born George Soros. Anti-elite rhetoric against all these actors is a Fidesz mainstay as it exploits fierce ingroup-outgroup dynamics in Hungary, which the party itself has largely cultivated for this very purpose. In this context, any salient political cleavage the government can establish to distinguish Hungary's friends from its enemies is a powerful political tool. Such cleavages perpetually restructure the political space, and as the sole actor controlling the restructuring process in the media, Fidesz is able to reinforce its institutionally unlimited power symbolically.⁶

However, waging an actual war is a qualitatively different political strategy than employing a strategy of perpetual cleavage creation in ideological space. War can be, of course, also conceptualized as a cleavage, but its human and political consequences reach much further. In war (or in a war-type situation such as “special operations”), governments request unconditional cooperation from citizens justified by the need to defend the interests of the entire national community. Hence, war serves as an effective handmaiden for introducing totalitarian rule. However, once government power has become totalitarian, authoritarian populism ceases to exist and is replaced by outright dictatorship. Such a process started in Russia with the invasion of Crimea in 2014 and culminated in the invasion of Ukraine in 2022. By maintaining its alliance with Russia, the Orbán regime has endorsed Russia's totalitarian turn as a legitimate course of action. In addition, by introducing and maintaining a legal state of danger, the administration has created extraordinary government powers in response to the war in Ukraine and presented a strategy of introducing openly autocratic rule to replace authoritarian populism.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine: A new turning point for the Orbán regime?

The year 2022: Elections and other challenges for the regime

In early 2022, Orbán and his lieutenants were preparing for yet another electoral battle, this time with a unified (and thus potentially more effective) opposition challenge than before. Economic difficulties, partly related to the COVID-19 crisis and Hungary's exclusion from post-pandemic European development financing,

6. For further discussions on the interplay between exercising symbolic and 'actual' power – i.e., the way the effective power monopoly of Fidesz is symbolically reinforced –, see Bohle (2018), Kim (2018), and Sebők & Simons (2022).

saw the government's electoral position deteriorate. Half a year before the April 2022 parliamentary elections, the united opposition was on par with Fidesz in opinion polls. The regime responded to the challenge using its usual arsenal, but this time went even further than before in providing economic incentives for the pro-government vote: aggressive anti-opposition discourse in mass propaganda, broad-based tax reductions, and pension hikes (Ádám & Csaba, 2022). And then came the Russian invasion of Ukraine five weeks before Hungary's April 3 elections.

The invasion fundamentally changed the political trajectory of the Orbán regime. Right from the beginning, the regime clearly sided with Russia and aligned its messaging with pro-Russian propaganda. Why did they do so? The *reasons* are not immediately clear, as a pro-Russian position carries substantial political costs for the regime. But the *results* are all too apparent. Orbán and his allies have found themselves increasingly isolated in the EU and, perhaps even more importantly, also within the group of Central and Eastern European member states. Hungary became a near pariah in the West after siding with the oppressor of the East, betraying all values – and interests – of humanity, freedom, and democracy.

Isolation and international humiliation have seen Hungary's economic position deteriorate as well. A large part of Hungary's EU development financing as part of the so-called Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) has been suspended and is now dependent on Hungary implementing anti-corruption measures (an unprecedented decision in EU history). At the same time, the Hungarian forint weakened on currency markets, inflation soared (and became the highest in the EU by the turn of 2022/23), the refinancing costs of Hungarian public debt increased, and Hungarian credit ratings were downgraded. Without firm EU backing, Hungary has become the member state most vulnerable to the global economic crisis, triggered by ultra-expansionary fiscal and monetary policies globally, the aftermath of the COVID-19 crisis, and the effects of the current war.

As a communication strategy, the government has been trying to shift the blame for all economic difficulties to the EU, claiming that the sanctions against Russia are responsible for high inflation, volatile markets and weak output. Orbán has resorted to his go-to strategy of orchestrating a so-called “National Consultation” (essentially, a direct marketing campaign posted out to Hungarian households seeking their opinions on highly manipulative questions) backed by government-sponsored mass advertising campaigns claiming Brussels is “bombarding” peaceful countries. The government proudly reported that 97% of respondents (which, in



the particular case, meant 1.4 million people in a country of about 8 million eligible voters) returned their postal surveys agreeing with the government's position of criticising EU economic sanctions on Russia.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine also played a role in reinforcing Fidesz's dominant political position in the electoral campaign. The Fidesz strategy portrayed the united democratic opposition as a pro-Ukraine camp that would drag Hungary into war with Russia. Of course, no opposition candidate suggested that Hungary should enter the war, but some of them, including the joint prime ministerial candidate, Péter Márki-Zay, voiced the view that Hungary should be part of the Western alliance supporting Ukraine. Yet, this was more than enough for the Fidesz propaganda machine to portray them as war hawks endangering the peace and integrity of Hungary. Public opinion data suggest that the government communication strategy was successful: the majority of the electorate, even most of those with pro-opposition and anti-Orbán views, internalized the government-stirred anxiety about the war and wanted to see Hungary remaining neutral and distancing itself from the conflict.

Although opinion polling on wars is notoriously unreliable because polling data itself becomes part of disinformation campaigns, it seems that Hungary has indeed become an outlier in terms of pro-Russian views and reservations about the rectitude and rationality of Western political and military support for Ukraine. In June-July 2022, the Prague-based Free Press for Eastern Europe surveyed internet users' views on the Russian invasion of Ukraine in six Central and East European (CEE) member states of the EU: Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania and Slovakia.⁷ This was cited in the Hungarian press, including the leading Hungarian opposition website Telex, whose English-language edition observed, "46% of Hungarian internet users were moderately pro-Russian, 31% strongly pro-Russian, 8% completely pro-Russian and only 15% pro-Ukrainian" (Aradi & Horváth Kávai, 2022). In another online publication that covered the survey in November 2022, *Átlátszó*, it was revealed that according to 36% of Hungarian respondents, Ukraine should have surrendered to Russia, the highest

7. According to their website, "Free Press for Eastern Europe (FPEE) is a non-for-profit organisation registered in Prague, Czech Republic, in April 2016. It is supported by the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs Transition Promotion Program. Our mission is to support independent media and journalism in Central and Eastern Europe and beyond" (<https://www.fpee.info/about>).

ratio in the six countries surveyed. The corresponding ratios in the other five CEE countries were between 8% (Poland) and 32% (Bulgaria).

Meanwhile, 34% of Hungarian respondents said the EU should not intervene in the war. The corresponding ratios in the other five CEE countries were between 2% (Poland) and 28% (Bulgaria) (Pete, 2022). Although these figures look broadly reasonable, the survey was conducted online, and information on it is not available on the FPPE website. (Átlátszó presumably covered the survey in November because its coverage was linked to the November 15 conference of FPPE. According to the FPPE website, the conference took place, but little further information on its content is provided.)

Another relevant public opinion survey was conducted by the pro-government think-tank Századvég which published opinion data in October 2022. In this, Századvég proudly proclaims that

nearly two-thirds (63 percent) of Hungarians believe that the United States of America and Joe Biden are more in favour of continuing the Russian-Ukraine war, which is likely related to the fact that the actions and statements of the US president do not contribute to the promotion of peace deal but to the further escalation of the conflict. (Századvég, 2022)

Századvég, like most pro-government think tanks, pseudo-autonomous civil society organizations and media outlets, engages in notoriously one-sided political discussions to endorse government views. In this context, public opinion data serves explicit political interests. Yet, what they stress and how they formulate arguments provide accurate information on the structure of government propaganda in terms of which arguments are supposed to resonate most with the sentiments of the pro-government electorate.

An (un)easy alliance: Explanations for siding with the aggressor

Why do Orbán and his domestic followers side so resolutely with Putin? There appear to be three roughly equally important explanatory factors. First, Orbán and his friends believe that Hungary is not interested in taking sides in the war. They consider Russian dominance over an institutionally weak Ukraine to be better from a Hungarian point of view than a strategically reinforced, militarily strong Ukraine. In the past three decades, most Hungarian governments have had a degree of animosity towards Ukraine as most Kyiv governments were not particularly



respectful of Hungarian minority rights in Transcarpatia. At an early stage of the invasion, some might have even assumed that Hungary had territorial claims against Ukraine when the Russian government was seen to be signalling potential support for such Hungarian ambitions. This was, however, unlikely to become actual Hungarian government policy unless Ukraine completely disintegrated as a consequence of the war.

Secondly, by siding with Putin and against the EU and the entire Western alliance, Orbán can tactically remain on the offensive, blaming EU sanctions and Western policies for sustaining Ukrainian self-defence in an armed conflict, ostensibly imposing economic costs on the entire region. This is particularly advantageous for Orbán at a time of increasing economic hardship on the home front. Blaming the EU and the Western alliance backing Ukraine can reorient some of the Hungarian population's disenchantment toward "Brussels". A recurring argument in this context, often endorsed by opinion leaders in the anti-capitalist Radical Left is that supporting Ukraine and extending the borders of NATO to the east serves Western economic and strategic interests and the 'real stake' of the war is not Ukrainian (or European) freedom but rather who dominates global capitalism: the United States and its Western allies, or China, Russia, and other emerging economies?

Such an "anti-war" or "pacifist" left-wing disposition is, of course, a usual stance internationally, often appearing at the fringes of the mainstream centre-left, primarily in Western Europe. One example in the Hungarian context is Antal (2023), who presents this disposition in the Hungarian case and criticizes both the "pro-war", "militaristic" opposition that adopts the West's pro-Ukraine views uncritically and the government position endorsing Russian imperialism. A meaningful left-wing political response to the war in Ukraine, Antal claims, should create political space between these "two extremes", but he fails to explain how "anti-war pacificism" should take on an actual war machine in operation in Ukraine. Hence, in effect, his argumentation reinforces the government's allegedly "pro-peace" position to the war.

Thirdly and perhaps most worryingly, Orbán's pro-Russian stance can be interpreted in a way that Orbán uses Putin's regime as an implicit reference for totalitarian power, as a kind of proxy for his own potentially implemented outright autocracy. Putin decided to escalate the low-profile armed conflict between Russia and Ukraine that had started in 2014 with the Russian annexation of Crimea into

an open invasion against Kyiv in February 2022. Military experts agree that the Russians made several strategic mistakes at the beginning of the war, mainly by underestimating the strength of Ukrainian resistance. However, Putin's most important aim might not have been overthrowing Volodymyr Zelenskyy's pro-EU government and making Ukraine a Russian vassal state but reinforcing his grip on power back home.

Before the war, Putin had a semi-institutionalized domestic opposition. He attempted to kill (and subsequently jailed) his strongest political opponent, Alexei Navalny, whose organization was able to mobilize tens of thousands of people across Russia in anti-regime demonstrations amidst a generally declining economic situation and growing isolation from the West that has increasingly alienated the middle classes from the regime.⁸ However, the assault on Ukraine started a new chapter in Russian history. War means totalitarian rule. No institutionalized opposition operates during war. Everybody is subordinated to the government that rules in martial law-like conditions.

Putin, of course, has provided powerful economic incentives for like-minded political groups and regimes worldwide in the past two decades for being his allies, and the Orbán regime was no exception. Relatively cheap Russian oil and gas and the multi-billion-euro extension of the Paks nuclear power station were the most critical goods Orbán traded with Putin, which he used economically and politically. Putin became a regular guest in Budapest in the 2010s, and Orbán grew to be his most reliable ally in the EU, extending their friendship to the post-February 2022 period. However, the most important reason that Putin and his regime became popular among the worshippers of Orbán (just as he did among the worshippers of Trump in the United States) is not the economic benefits Russia had been able to provide for its allies until anti-Russian sanctions were switched into full gear by the EU. Instead, it is the cult of total power that Putin and his regime exercise.

There are important parallels in domestic political conditions for Orbán to those of Putin, albeit in a different international context and at a considerably higher level of democratization. Economic conditions have been deteriorating in past years

8. Putin's approval rate in December 2021 according to the Moscow-based Levada Center (<https://www.levada.ru/en/ratings/>) was 65%, as high as in January 2014, a month before Russia's annexation of Crimea (His disapproval rates were 34% in both periods). Starting an armed conflict saw his approval rates jump above 80% (and lowered his disapproval rate to under 20%).



(Ádám & Csaba, 2022), and Hungary faces a grim outlook with negligible (or outright negative) economic growth in 2023. Annual average inflation is forecast to stay above 15%, real wages to fall, and the rising refinancing costs of public debt are likely to force budgetary cuts.⁹ Meanwhile, due to political radicalization and growing international isolation, important middle-class groups have started to distance themselves electorally from the government in past years. The Fidesz electorate has become increasingly rural and lower educated.

At the October 2019 municipal elections, most urban areas (cities of several tens of thousands of inhabitants and more, Budapest districts, and Budapest as a whole) were electorally dominated by candidates of the united opposition. At the April 2022 parliamentary elections, the united opposition won all but one of the 18 SMCs in Budapest. This was the first time since the foundation of parliamentary democracy in 1990 that the SMCs in the richest Buda parts of the city — the country's most affluent and educated — were not carried by the dominant right-wing party. According to an April 2022 poll by Median, a leading independent public opinion polling agency, the level of education was the most important determinant of electoral choice: the lower educated were more inclined to vote for Fidesz across types of settlements. As better-educated voters typically inhabited more urbanized areas, they tended to vote less for Fidesz (Median, 2022).

Importantly, the mechanism the lower educated are typically affiliated to Fidesz is rather economic than ideological: having survived the 2008–10 economic crisis under center-left governance, a large part of the lower-middle and working classes learnt that they were better off under a right-wing administration (Róna et al., 2020). Hence, deteriorating economic conditions – the most serious economic challenge for the Orbán regime since its inception in 2010 – threatened the gradual alienation of relatively poorer, lesser-educated, rural parts of the electorate, on which Fidesz has become increasingly dependent in past years. This is the conundrum Orbán needs to solve, and one apparent political solution is growing autocratization.

Putin's aggression, in fact, was not only ideologically approved by Orbán, but his regime has used it as an opportunity for further institutionalizing autocracy.

9. In its November 2022 economic outlook for Hungary, the European Commission forecast 0.1% economic growth and 15.7% average annual inflation for 2023 (https://economy-finance.ec.europa.eu/economic-surveillance-eu-economies/hungary/economic-forecast-hungary_en).

Importantly, Hungary has been governed by special legal regimes called “states of danger” since March 2020, when the first was introduced due to COVID-19, enabling the government to overrule acts of parliament and replace them with government decrees. The state of danger has also constrained the economic powers of local municipalities and some of the citizens’ basic freedoms, including the freedom to assemble and free expression – back then as measures were taken against the pandemic (Ádám, 2020). In May 2022, the state of danger due to COVID-19 was terminated, but at the very same time, another state of danger due to an armed conflict in a neighbouring state was introduced.¹⁰ Effectively, this implies that outright autocracy can be introduced whenever Orbán decides so.

Conclusion

This chapter tried to shed light on the dynamics of political exposure to the Russian invasion of Ukraine for the Orbán regime. First, I explained why it was a surprising political move by Orbán to side with Putin already well before the invasion, since the early 2010s. Secondly, I discussed authoritarian populism as a political strategy defining the Orbán regime and argued that it was incompatible with the totalitarian rule that autocratic governments exercise during open military conflict. In the first part of the third section, I presented the general conditions among which the regime operated in 2022, including the challenge of a united opposition at the April 2022 parliamentary elections and the deteriorating economic situation, exacerbated by the EU stance of withholding Hungarian development funding that the government could otherwise rely on as part of the RRF. These developments provide context for the situation in which the regime found itself during the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The question is why Orbán has sided with Putin since the first moment of the war and has continued supporting the aggressor despite the considerable economic and political costs of international isolation.

My answer was threefold. First, I argued that Orbán and his allies believe that a Ukrainian victory in the war is no better for Hungary than reinforced Russian domination over Ukraine would be. Traditional animosity between Budapest and

10. In fact, the very same issue of the official bulletin *Magyar Közlöny* (85/2022) on May 24 contained government decrees repealing the state of danger due to COVID19 and introducing a new one in response to the armed conflict and humanitarian catastrophe in Ukraine. On the dubious constitutionality of the second state of danger as a special legal regime, see Mészáros (2022).



Kyiv and the particular logic of regional power games may have been instrumental in formulating this policy stance in Budapest. Secondly, and probably more importantly, by siding with Russia, Orbán could stay on the offensive, appreciating the relative, short-term value of his consent to European and NATO policies and blaming the EU and the pro-Ukraine Western alliance for domestic economic difficulties. Thirdly and most worryingly, supporting Putin in the conflict meant the approval of his totalitarian turn at home. By endorsing the Russian invasion of Ukraine and blaming the EU and NATO for not letting Ukraine fall, Orbán politically suggests that he could take a similar totalitarian turn were authoritarian populism as a pseudo-democratic strategy for maintaining his rule to become untenable. He knows that what he claims about the distribution of responsibilities among Russia, Ukraine, and the West would not convince the majority of voters at fair elections and that pushing back against the EU at the cost of losing EU development funds and, potentially, access for other EU cooperation schemes¹¹ would not sell well politically. What Orbán does against these conditions is a bet on a disintegrating Western alliance behind Ukraine and a weakening EU that itself shifts to the Radical Right, giving room for further autocratization in Hungary, and the potential emergence of the EU's first outright autocracy. The fact that Hungarians have been living under special legal regimes called "states of danger", enabling practically unlimited government power since March 2020, underscores the feasibility of this alternative.

11. In December 2022, the Council of the EU requested the exclusion of most Hungarian universities from the EU's Erasmus student and lecturer exchange program as well as from HorizonEurope research cooperation schemes. The reason for the Council's decision was the lack of academic autonomy at formerly state-owned Hungarian universities that had been taken over by newly created foundations, in which government officials and other regime confidants became government-appointed members of board of trustees with unlimited tenures.

References

- Ádám, Z. (2018). Authoritarian populism at work: A political transaction cost approach with reference to Viktor Orbán's Hungary. UCL Centre for Comparative Studies of Emerging Economies Working Papers. https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/10050931/1/Douarin_Working%20Paper%202018.2-2.pdf
- Ádám, Z. (2020). Ultra-orthodoxy and selective voluntarism: How did the Orbán regime react to the first wave of the pandemic? *European Policy Analysis*, 6(2), 277–292. <https://doi.org/10.1002/epa2.1103>
- Ádám, Z., & Csaba, I. (2022). Populism unrestrained: Policy responses of the Orbán regime to the pandemic in 2020–2021. *European Policy Analysis*, 8(3), 277–296. <https://doi.org/10.1002/epa2.1157>
- Antal, A. (2023, February 2). A béke lehetetlensége. *Mérce*. <https://merce.hu/2023/02/02/a-beke-lehetetlensege/>
- Aradi, H.Zs., & Horváth Kárai, A. (2022, September 23). According to a recent survey, almost half of Hungarian internet users may be moderately pro-Russian. *Télex*. <https://telex.hu/english/2022/09/23/propaganda-at-work-almost-half-of-hungarian-internet-users-moderately-pro-russian>
- Bohle, D. (2018, June 8). *Hegemonic right and defeated left: lessons from Hungary's drift to authoritarianism*. The Progressive Post. <https://progressivepost.eu/hegemonic-right-defeated-left-lessons-hungarys-drift-authoritarianism/>
- Kim, S. (2018, April 8). *Hungary before the Elections: Understanding the Hegemony Project of Fidesz*. WZB Democracy Blog. <https://democracy.blog.wzb.eu/2018/04/06/hungary-before-the-elections-understanding-the-hegemony-project-of-fidesz/>
- Median. (2022, April 27). *Köz hely, hogy a választási eredmények látványosan összefüggenek az ország településszerkezetével: a fővárostól a kisebb települések felé haladva egyre nagyobb a Fidesz-KDNP főlénye* [Image attached] [Status update]. Facebook. <https://www.facebook.com/median.hu/posts/3275767629335146>
- Mészáros, G. (2022). Exceptional governmental measures without constitutional restraints. Hungarian Helsinki Committee. <https://helsinki.hu/en/akta/covid-19-and-the-state-of-danger/>
- Müller, J.-W. (2016). *What is Populism?* University of Pennsylvania Press. <https://doi.org/10.9783/9780812293784>
- Pete, L. (2022, November 25). Kelet-Közép-Európában a magyarok a leginkább orosz pártiak és EU-szekptikusok egy közvélemény-kutatás szerint. *Átlátszó*. <https://atlatso.hu/adat/2022/11/25/kozep-kelet-europaban-a-magyarok-a-leginkabb-orosz-partiak-es-eu-szekptikusok-egy-kozvelemenykutatas-szerint/>



- Róna, D., Galgóczy, E., Pétervári, J., Szeitl, B., & Túry, M. (2020). The Fidesz Party's Secret to Success: Investigating Economic Voting in Hungary. Budapest: 21 Research Center. https://21kutatokozpont.hu/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Main_Secret_Fidesz_Success_final-2.pdf
- Sebők, M. & Simons, J. (2022). How Orbán won? Neoliberal disenchantment and the grand strategy of financial nationalism to reconstruct capitalism and regain autonomy. *Socio-Economic Review*, Vol. 20, No. 4, pp. 1625-1651. doi: 10.1093/ser/mwab052
- Századvég. (2022, October 27). *The majority of Hungarians are calling for a ceasefire and peace talks*. <https://szazadveg.hu/en/2022/10/27/the-majority-of-hungarians-are-calling-for-a-ceasefire-and-peace-talks~n3301>
- Seres, L. (2017, May 24). Német leleplezés: Orbán-párti orosz oligarcha pénzelte a Jobbikot?. *hvg.hu*. https://hvg.hu/itthon/20170524_Uzovszkij_orosz_oligarcha_finanszirozas_nacionalistak_Jobbik_Magyar_Garda
- Weyland, K. (2001). Clarifying a Contested Concept: Populism in the Study of Latin American Politics. *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 34, No. 1 (October), pp. 1-22
- Weyland, K. (2021). Populism as a political strategy: An approach's enduring — and increasing — advantages. *Political Studies*, 69(2), 185–189. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00323217211002669>



ITALY



Italy's multiple populisms facing the Russo-Ukrainian war

*Cecilia Biancalana** University of Turin

Abstract

Italy has been defined as a laboratory for populism and a “populist paradise.” Indeed, multiple forms of populism coexist in Italy, covering the entire political spectrum. From the “left-wing” Movimento 5 Stelle to the right-wing coalition composed of Fratelli d’Italia, Forza Italia and the Lega, we can be sure that populism is very popular in Italy. We can be equally sure that, over the last few years, all these parties have had links to the Putin regime. Suffice it to mention the decades-long friendship between Silvio Berlusconi and Vladimir Putin or the admiration Matteo Salvini, the head of the Lega, has demonstrated for the president of the Russian Federation. However, the Russian invasion and the extensive popular and institutional support evinced for Ukraine in its wake changed everything, leaving populist parties scrambling to review their positions and modify their discourse. In the report, I will examine the ties between the main Italian populist parties (Fratelli d’Italia, Forza Italia, Lega, Movimento 5 Stelle) and Russia and the shifts in their positions towards President Putin in the aftermath of the invasion. Against this backdrop, the September 2022 elections in Italy can be considered as a “test case” to measure the success of the populist parties’ strategies to negotiate the crisis and to shed light on the changing balance of power within the broad populist field.

Keywords: *Italy; Fratelli d’Italia; Lega; Berlusconi; Movimento 5 Stelle.*

* cecilia.biancalana@unito.it

Biancalana, Cecilia. (2023). “Italy’s multiple populisms facing the Russo-Ukrainian war.” In: *The Impacts of the Russian Invasion of Ukraine on Right-wing Populism in Europe*. (eds). Gilles Ivaldi and Emilia Zankina. European Center for Populism Studies (ECPS). March 8, 2023. Brussels. <https://doi.org/10.55271/rp0022>



Italy as a “populist paradise”

Italy has always been considered a Petrie dish for the study of populism, earning it the rubric of the “laboratory of populism” (Tarchi, 2015). A range of types and forms of populism coexist in Italy. The leading manifestations today are the Fratelli d'Italia (“Brothers of Italy,” FdI), Lega (“the League”), Forza Italia (“Forward Italy,” FI), and the Movimento 5 Stelle (“Five Star Movement,” M5S). Together, these four populist parties garnered 59.2% of the vote in the September 2022 election, attesting to the electoral strength of populism in Italy today. During the election campaign—which took place after the collapse of a two-year grand coalition government that all the populist parties (except for FdI) participated in—the FdI, Lega, and FI campaigned jointly and stormed home to a decisive victory.

The FdI was founded in 2012 but follows the tradition of the Movimento Sociale Italiano (MSI), a neo-fascist party founded in 1946 by supporters of the former dictator Benito Mussolini. The FdI made its electoral breakthrough in the 2022 elections, where it obtained 26% and got to the government for the first time, under the leadership of Giorgia Meloni. The party promotes an extreme right-wing ideology based on the Fascist motto “Dio, Patria, Famiglia” (“God, Homeland, Family”). It defends a homogeneous people against everything considered different: e.g., LGBT people and immigrants (especially from Islamic countries). In the same way, it defends national sovereignty against supranational integration, even though its opposition to the European Union can be considered “soft.” It is worth noting that the FdI belongs to the more moderate ECR group in the European Parliament.

Lega, which before December 2017 was known as Lega Nord (the Northern League), was founded in 1991. During the first phase of its existence, it was a regionalist party (Bulli & Tronconi, 2011) that displayed intense ethno-chauvinism vis-à-vis the southern parts of Italy and sought to champion the interests of the north against central political institutions. Since the election of Matteo Salvini as party secretary in 2013, Lega's hostility to immigration has moved to the foreground. Furthermore, Salvini has forged links with parties of the populist Right, such as France's Rassemblement National (“National Rally,” RN), with which he shares a form of euro-scepticism and hostility towards the common European currency.

Silvio Berlusconi's party Forza Italia was founded in December 1993 after the *Tangentopoli* corruption scandals, in which judicial investigations revealed an extensive network of kickbacks for government contracts involving billions of

dollars and thousands of officials, which rocked Italy's political establishment. FI took part in the general elections of March 1994, garnering 21% of the vote and joining the first right-wing coalition in office in Italy since the Second World War. From that moment on, Berlusconi became a permanent fixture of Italian politics. Berlusconi is generally positioned as an example of "right-wing populism" (Fella & Ruzza, 2013). A billionaire media mogul, he entered politics as the consummate "outsider," leveraging his television stations to address his appeals to "the people" in a mode that foreshadowed Thailand's Thaksin Shinawatra and Donald J Trump in the United States. In this telling, Berlusconi cast himself as the only true channel of the voice of ordinary Italians (the "common people").

While there is broad agreement that M5S is a populist outfit, its classification as left-wing is contested (Ivaldi, Lanzone & Woods, 2017; Mosca & Tronconi, 2019). The M5S was founded in October 2009 by the former comedian and blogger Beppe Grillo. The party made its electoral breakthrough in the 2013 general elections, winning 25% of the vote. Support for the M5S was fuelled by the economic crisis and the de-legitimization of the parties, which allowed Grillo's party to dislodge the bipolar dynamic that had characterized the Italian Second Republic, winning voters across the whole political spectrum (Colloca & Marangoni, 2017). In the 2018 general election, the M5S won the plurality, taking 32.8 % of the vote. It joined the national government as part of a populist governing coalition with Salvini's Lega. In power, the M5S experienced for the first time the constraints of holding office and the need to challenge some of the internal traits it had championed as a long-standing oppositional movement (Bordignon & Ceccarini, 2019). When the governing coalition collapsed, the M5S partnered with the leftist Partito Democratico (PD) to form a new government. From 2021 to 2022, the party also participated in the technocratic grand coalition government led by Mario Draghi.

Over the last few years, all these parties have had relationships, including formal links, with Putin's regime. What are the populist parties' relationships with Putin's Russia? How did their positions change after the outbreak of the war? The remainder of the report is organized as follows. After sketching the historical background of the relationship between Italy and Russia, I will examine how the positions of the four main Italian populist parties towards Russia and President Putin shifted in the aftermath of the invasion of Ukraine. In the last section, I will comment on the results of the national election in September 2022. The election can be considered a "test case" to measure the success of the populist parties'



strategies to negotiate the crisis and to shed light on the changing balance of power within the broad populist field.

Italy and Russia: Dangerous liaisons

Italian populists have long been attracted by Vladimir Putin's sovereigntism (an ideology that foregrounds efforts to maintain a nation or political community's sovereign independence). This, in part, reflects a historical ambivalence towards Italy's post-Second World War security arrangements. Indeed, although for different reasons, parties across the political spectrum have been sceptical of Italy's close ties with the United States and its membership in NATO. Pro-Russian feelings and hostility towards the United States persist on the Far Left. And even if vehement anti-communism saw the Italian Right oppose the USSR during the Cold War, this did not translate into enthusiastic support for the United States.

Nowadays, there are two main reasons that Italian populists admire Putin's Russia. First, it is a matter of *economic self-interest*. Italy imports large quantities of Russian oil. Furthermore, companies in the country's north, the historical stronghold of right-wing parties, have firm ties with Russia. Second, there is a *cultural reason*, a sort of elective affinity between the Russian leader and the populist parties. Populists see in Putin the figure of a powerful and authoritarian leader, able to decide and act quickly without the constraints of the checks and balances of liberal democracy. Moreover, while left-wing populist parties have cast their support for contemporary Russia as part of an anti-establishment stance, right-wing populist parties appreciate his defence of Christian values and his opposition to Islamism. Finally, they share criticism towards the European Union and other supranational bodies, which are said to weaken national sovereignty.

However, the Russian invasion and the extensive popular and institutional support evinced for Ukraine in its wake have compelled Italy's populist parties to review their positions and modify their discourse.

The reactions of the four populist parties to the war

Giorgia Meloni and Fratelli d'Italia: Instrumentalizing the war as electoral strategy

Historically, the Italian Far Right adopted a broadly Atlanticist posture, even

though this coexisted with an impulse to promote a “third way” between the United States and the Soviet Union. In recent years, the second instinct has proved more prevalent, with Giorgia Meloni — the FdI leader and current prime minister of Italy— repeatedly praising Putin. For example, on the occasion of Putin’s re-election as president in 2018, Meloni wrote on Facebook that “the will of the people in Russian elections appears unequivocal” (Meloni 2018). FdI also condemned the economic sanctions imposed on Russia after its annexation of Crimea in 2014 as against the Italian national interest.

Nevertheless, of all the parties in the Italian party system, FdI is the least compromised in terms of links to Russia. Indeed, after the outbreak of the war, Meloni firmly condemned the invasion and backed moves to welcome Ukrainian refugees. Moreover, in the run-up to the 2022 elections, which her party was expected to win, Meloni tried to distance the FdI from the positions of its electoral partners (i.e., Lega and FI, see below). Meloni’s aim in this regard was to cast herself before a domestic and international audience as a credible future leader and institutional player. For instance, the party supported government initiatives in favour of Ukraine, including the supply of weapons, even when it was in opposition.

The controversial position of the Lega

Salvini has long admired Putin. In March 2015, he declared, “I believe that Russia is much more democratic than the European Union” (“Salvini, Russia molto più democratica dell’Ue”, 2015). That November, he appeared before the European Parliament wearing a t-shirt¹ bearing the face of Putin and declared: “I would exchange two of Mattarella [Italy’s then-president] for half a Putin!” (Salvini 2015). Then, in March 2018, he tweeted encouragement to Russian voters ahead of presidential elections to cast a ballot for Putin, whom he described as “one of the best politicians of our era” (Salvini 2018).

This admiration has three grounds, one *cultural* (the elective affinity between populists and Putin), one *economic* (defending Italian commercial interests, especially those of industrial firms in the Italian north with significant Russian business)² and one related to *international partnerships*. Moreover, Salvini’s

-
1. After the outbreak of the war, Salvini was mocked by a Polish mayor because of that t-shirt (“‘See what your friend Putin has done’: Salvini mocked in Poland”, 2022).
 2. For this reason, Salvini regularly called for the lifting of sanctions imposed by the EU on Russia after the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014.



connections to Marine Le Pen (they belong to the same populist, Eurosceptic group in the European Parliament) reflect a distinct network of Far Right ties to the Putin regime inside the EU.

Indeed, the relationship between Lega and Russia reflects not merely affinity and mutual appreciation but clear and formal institutional linkages. For instance, in March 2017, the Lega signed a confidential cooperation agreement with Putin's United Russia Party. This was part of the Russian attempt to strengthen institutional links with European populist parties. There is also an ongoing investigation into alleged illegal party financing from Russia.

As the Russian invasion of Ukraine unfolded, Lega was in government as part of the technocratic administration led by Mario Draghi since 2021. Despite his former public statements in support of Putin, in the aftermath of the invasion, Salvini wrote that "The League firmly condemns any military aggression, the hope is an immediate stop to the violence. Support to Draghi for a common response of the allies" ("Ucraina: Salvini, Lega condanna ogni aggressione militare", 2022). During an interview with Bloomberg in September 2022, Salvini declared: "My opinion about Putin has indeed changed amid the war, because when someone starts invading, bombing, sending tanks into another country, well, everything changes" (Lepido, Albanese, & Eberhart 2022). Moreover, the party voted for fresh sanctions against Russia and to send weapons to Ukraine, although party leaders expressed scepticism at sanctions arguing they would harm the Italian economy. As for his notorious hostility to people seeking asylum in Italy, Salvini squared the circle by defining Ukrainians as "genuine" refugees (Salvini, Ucraini sono veri profughi, non quelli col telefonino, 2022).

Berlusconi and Putin: The once and future friendship?

Silvio Berlusconi has a long friendship with Putin, which began during the media mogul's second stint as prime minister from 2001–06. In 2003, Berlusconi excused Russia's brutal crackdown in Chechnya as "an anti-terrorist operation" ("Berlusconi difende Putin e attacca la stampa", 2003). The two first met at the G8 summit in Genoa in 2001. They met again in the following years, not only in their capacities as heads of government but on a personal basis, often appearing together in public and exchanging expensive gifts. In 2010, Berlusconi declared Putin "a gift from the Lord," (Lombardozzi 2010) and in 2019, Putin returned the favour, describing Berlusconi as "a politician of world stature" (De Feo 2019) In 2015, after the annexation of Crimea, Berlusconi visited Sebastopol with Putin.

Apart from their friendship and a shared self-identity as “strongmen in command,” the relationship between the two is also a matter of economics and diplomacy. Concerning the former, in 2005, Berlusconi’s government prepared an agreement that would have allowed the Russian company Gazprom to resell Russian gas directly to Italian consumers. On the diplomatic front, Berlusconi helped to broker a set of agreements between Russia and NATO after a 2002 summit held in Rome, which created the now-defunct NATO-Russia Council and is considered the high point of relations between Russia and the West.

Immediately after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Berlusconi tried to say as little as possible about Putin and did not explicitly condemn the invasion. Only in April 2022 did he say that he was “deeply disappointed and saddened” (Berlusconi alla convention di Forza Italia: “Deluso da Putin. A Bucha crimini di guerra. Spetta a Mosca far tacere le armi”, 2022) by Putin’s behaviour. However, despite the words of criticism, his position remained at first ambiguous. In September 2022, in a TV interview, he said that Putin “was pushed to do this special operation in Ukraine” to “replace the Zelensky government with decent people” (Ucraina, Berlusconi: ‘Putin spinto a inventarsi l’operazione speciale’, 2022) In October, in a leaked audio, he said that he had “reconnected” with President Putin (Berlusconi: ‘Ho riallacciato i rapporti con Putin’. Poi smentisce. LaPresse pubblica audio, 2022). Finally, in February 2023, after a meeting between Meloni and Zelensky, Berlusconi attacked Zelensky, saying that he would have never met him, causing political embarrassment within the coalition (“Berlusconi: ‘Da premier non sarei mai andato da Zelensky’”, 2023).

The Movimento 5 Stelle: Peace, but not at any price

The M5S has its roots in Italy’s leftist social movements (Biancalana, 2020), which were drawn to Grillo’s unvarnished defence of democracy and human rights. Indeed, when Russian journalist Anna Politkovskaya was murdered in 2006, Grillo wrote that “Russia is a democracy based on exporting gas and oil. If they didn’t export that, they would go back to being the good old dictatorship of earlier times” (Kirchgaessner 2017). However, the positions of the M5S changed over time, and the party started expressing sympathies for Russia.

For the M5S, Russia appeared to exemplify a robust opposition to the United States and the EU, both of which have been perceived in the movement as harmful to Italy’s national interests. Mirroring the long-standing M5S slogan that it is “beyond Left and Right,” the M5S tried after the Russian annexation of Crimea in



2014 to position itself “beyond Russia and the United States.” In September 2014, Grillo wrote in a blog post that “the M5S is not pro-Russian or pro-American; it is pro-Italian” (Movimento 5 stelle 2014). In reality, with the institutionalization of the party in government and following Russia’s attempt to create links with successful European populist parties, the positions of Grillo—and some of the party’s MPs—became increasingly pro-Putin. For example, M5S condemned the European sanctions imposed on Moscow after the annexation of Crimea. In an interview in 2017, Grillo stated that “Putin is the one who says the most reasonable things about foreign policy. The embargo against Russia costs us €7 billion a year. We are in favour of lifting the sanctions against Moscow” (Picardi 2017). The domestic economic effects of sanctions were likely driving Grillo’s rhetoric, which is clearly focused on the “national interest.” After the 2018 elections, the M5S formed a government with the Lega, which took a similar approach to the Italian national interest, especially concerning trade and economics.

Grillo made no public statement after the February 2022 invasion, although the new head of the party, Giuseppe Conte, condemned it. As part of the Draghi government, the M5S voted for sanctions and to send weapons (albeit expressing doubts about the efficacy and effect on Italy). Finally, in the summer of 2022, a split emerged in the party after an internal campaign to push for an end to Italian weapons supplies to Ukraine, which Conte backed. Luigi Di Maio, the more Atlanticist minister of foreign affairs at the time, left the party saying that “we are compelled to choose which side to take at this moment in history — with the victim Ukraine or the aggressor Russia,” (“Di Maio lascia i 5Stelle: ‘Bisogna scegliere da che parte stare della storia. Alcuni dirigenti hanno rischiato di indebolire l’Italia’”, 2022) and later blamed Conte for “falling for Putin’s propaganda” (Messa 2022). The M5S, currently in opposition to the Draghi government, now opposes sending weapons to Ukraine, a return to its traditional pacifist orientation, which it shares with the Far Left in Italy.

The September 2022 elections: A test case for Italian populist parties

In July 2022 Draghi’s technocratic coalition administration fell apart, triggering early elections in September 2022. Lega, the FdI and FI campaigned on a joint ticket and formed a coalition in government. The FdI topped the polls with 26% of the vote, while Lega and FI won 8.7% and 8.1%, respectively. As a result, an

entirely new balance of power within the right-wing coalition has emerged. In the previous elections in 2018, Lega garnered 17.3% against 14% for FI and 4.3% for FdI. For its part, M5S's share of the vote declined from 32.7% to 15.4%. We cannot say that the results depended exclusively on the parties' positions on the war. However, the issue of Ukraine certainly played some role in voters' minds.

Concerning public opinion, Italians generally blame Russia for the invasion and express support for Ukraine (80% of citizens say they favour welcoming Ukrainian refugees. See Freyrie, 2022). However, there are key differences within the electorate. In late 2022, researchers from the Political and Social Analysis Laboratory (LAPS) at the University of Siena asked voters to nominate who they considered primarily responsible for the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Some 59 and 54% of those saying they voted for centre-right parties and the M5S, respectively, answered "Russia" (in comparison, 75% of centre-left voters blame Russia for the invasion). Concerning the M5S, 20% of their voters said it was the United States, while 10% said NATO was to blame. From this view, it is the M5S electorate that is the most pro-Russian. Among centre-right voters, 16% said the United States is to blame, while 8% blame NATO. The report also shows that most Italians are sceptical of (or downright opposed to) military support for Ukraine. The most sceptical are M5S voters (60% against) and centre-right (57% against) (Freyrie, 2022).

In conclusion, we can say that populists adapted to the situation, leveraging the issue of the war for their respective ends. As regards the right-wing coalition, Meloni (the leader least compromised by Russian ties) used the war to gain credibility at the international level and to moderate her image to get to the government. Despite their well-established links with Putin and fearing they would cede consensus and international credibility, Salvini and Berlusconi voted in favour of sanctions and the sending of weapons as part of both the Draghi and Meloni administrations, although somewhat less enthusiastically than FdI. They expressed scepticism about these measures, but more in word than in deed, all the while careful not to explicitly support Putin and instead focusing on reasons linked to the economy and peacekeeping. Moreover, all the right-wing populist parties, which typically take a hard line against immigration, welcomed Ukrainian refugees. The M5S leader, Giuseppe Conte, maintained his position against sending weapons and favouring "peacekeeping." The fluid and opportunistic nature of the M5S allowed it to simultaneously adopt positions in line with the Italian Left (anti-Americanism, pacifism) and the Right (defence of the national economic interest).



In sum, the circumstances surrounding the Ukraine war serve to once again demonstrate the ability of populism to adapt quickly to different contexts and to make use of “calculated ambivalence” (Wodak, 2015). This can explain how parties that previously supported Putin adapted quickly to the situation by condemning the invasion and welcoming refugees while simultaneously using peace and national economic interests as discursive reasons for opposing measures against Russia.

References

- Albertazzi, D., Giovannini, A. and Seddone, A. (2018), ‘No regionalism please, we are *Leghisti!*’ The transformation of the Italian Lega Nord under the leadership of Matteo Salvini, *Regional & Federal Studies*, 28(5), 645–671. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13597566.2018.1512977>
- Berlusconi alla convention di Forza Italia: “Deluso da Putin. A Bucha crimini di guerra. Spetta a Mosca far tacere le armi” (2022, April 9). *la Repubblica*. https://www.repubblica.it/politica/2022/04/09/news/berlusconi_convention_forza_italia-344815053/
- Berlusconi difende Putin e attacca la stampa (2003, November 6). *la Repubblica*. <https://www.repubblica.it/2003/k/sezioni/esteri/putinroma/berluprodi/berluprodi.html>
- Berlusconi: “Da premier non sarei mai andato da Zelensky” (2023, February 12). *ANSA*. https://www.ansa.it/sito/notizie/politica/2023/02/12/berlusconi-da-premier-non-sarei-mai-andato-da-zelensky_c3f4cd65-ccb9-4f0d-b813-9c-c8a4b26379.html
- Berlusconi: “Ho riallacciato i rapporti con Putin”. Poi smentisce. *LaPresse* pubblica audio (2022, October 18). *Il Sole 24 Ore*. <https://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/berlusconi-ho-riallacciato-rapporti-putin-poi-smentisce-AErlNd9B>
- Biancalana, C. (2020). From social movements to institutionalization: The Five-star Movement and the high-speed train line in Val di Susa. *Contemporary Italian Politics*, 12(2), 155–168. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23248823.2020.1743469>
- Bordignon, F., & Ceccarini, L. (2019). Five stars, five years, five (broken) taboos. In L. Ceccarini & J.L. Newell (Eds.), *The Italian general election of 2018* (pp. 139–163). Palgrave Macmillan.

- Bulli, G., & Tronconi, F. (2011). The Lega Nord. In A. Elias and F. Tronconi (Eds.), *From protest to power: Autonomist parties and the challenges of representation* (pp. 51–74). Braumüller.
- Colloca, P., & Marangoni, F. (2017). L'andamento elettorale: analisi della “natura” mutevole del Movimento 5 stelle. In P. Corbetta (Ed.), *M5S. Come cambia il partito di Grillo*. Il Mulino.
- De Feo, F. (2019, July 5). Putin: “Silvio politico di statura mondiale”. *Il Giornale*. <https://www.ilgiornale.it/news/politica/silvio-politico-statura-mondiale-1721455.html>
- Di Maio lascia i 5Stelle: “Bisogna scegliere da che parte stare della storia. Alcuni dirigenti hanno rischiato di indebolire l’Italia” (2022, June 21). *la Repubblica*. https://www.repubblica.it/politica/2022/06/21/news/luigi_di_maio_scissione_m5s_giuseppe_conte_grillo-354923869/
- Fella, S., & Ruzza, C. (2013). Populism and the fall of the centre-right in Italy: The end of the Berlusconi model or a new beginning? *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 21(1), 38–52. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14782804.2013.766475>
- Freyrie, M. (2022, October 21). Italiani incerti e divisi sulla guerra in Ucraina. *AffarInternazionali*. <https://www.affarinternazionali.it/?p=100829>
- Ivaldi, G., Lanzone, M. E., & Woods, D. (2017). Varieties of populism across a left-right spectrum: The case of the Front National, the Northern League, Podemos and Five Star Movement. *Swiss Political Science Review*, 23(4), 354–376. <https://doi.org/10.1111/spsr.12278>
- Kirchgaessner, S. (2017, January 5). Italy’s Five Star Movement part of growing club of Putin sympathisers in west. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jan/05/five-star-movement-beppe-grillo-putin-supporters-west>
- Lepido, D., Albanese, C. & Ebhardt, T. (2022, September 19). Italy’s Salvini wants \$30 billion to aid companies hit by energy prices. *Bloomberg*. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-09-19/salvini-wants-30-billion-for-italy-inc-to-survive-energy-woes>
- Lombardozzi, N. (2010, September 11) “Putin un dono del Signore”. Gelo in platea per lo show di Silvio. *la Repubblica*. https://www.repubblica.it/politica/2010/09/11/news/dono_signore-6958184/
- Meloni, G. (2018, March 18) *Complimenti a Vladimir Putin per la sua quarta elezione a presidente della Federazione russa*. [Facebook post]. Facebook. https://www.facebook.com/giorgiameloni.paginaufficiale/posts/complimenti-a-vladimir-putin-per-la-sua-quarta-elezione-a-presidente-della-feder/10156154246102645/?locale=it_IT
- Messa, D. (2022, July 8). Di Maio all'attacco su Conte e la Russia: “Aprire la crisi significa prestare il fianco alla propaganda di Putin”. *La Stampa*. https://www.lastampa.it/politica/2022/07/08/news/di_maio_allattacco_su_conte_e_la_russia_aprire_la_crisi_significaprestare_il_fianco_alla_propaganda_di_putin-5433793/



- Mosca, L., & Tronconi, F. (2019). Beyond left and right: the eclectic populism of the Five Star Movement. *West European Politics*, 42(6), 1258–1283. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2019.1596691>
- Movimento 5 stelle (2014, September 4). Il M5S non è filo-russo né filo-americano, è filo-italiano. *Il Blog delle Stelle*. https://www.ilblogdellestelle.it/2014/09/il_m5s_non_e_filo-russo_ne_filo-americano_e_filo-italiano.html
- Passarelli, G., & Tuorto, D. (2018). *La Lega di Salvini*. Il Mulino.
- Picardi, A. (2017, March 9). Tutte le fregole filo-Putin del Movimento 5 Stelle. Formiche. <https://formiche.net/2017/03/m5s-putin-russia-grillo/>
- Salvini, M. (2015, November 25) *Qui Strasburgo. È appena intervenuto il Presidente Mattarella, che ha detto che chiudere e controllare le frontiere europee non serve*. [Facebook post]. Facebook. <https://www.facebook.com/salviniofficial/photos/a.278194028154/10153394730283155/?type=3>
- Salvini, M. [@matteosalvinimi] (2018, March 17) *Mi auguro che domani i russi rieleggano il presidente Putin, uno dei migliori uomini politici della nostra epoca* [Tweet]. Twitter. <https://twitter.com/matteosalvinimi/status/975111080216326144>
- Salvini, Russia molto più democratica dell'Ue (2015, March 11). *ANSA*. https://www.ansa.it/europa/notizie/rubriche/voceeurodeputati/2015/03/11/salvini-russia-molto-piu-democratica-dellue_4dc84ca4-580e-40f2-bfbf-20c6ca2b49dd.html
- Salvini, Ucraini sono veri profughi, non quelli col telefonino (2022, June 23). *ANSA*. https://www.ansa.it/sito/notizie/topnews/2022/06/23/salviniucraini-sono-veri-profughinon-quelli-col-telefonino_14933376-1e97-4dfb-9987-340a6a74f84c.html
- See what your friend Putin has done': Salvini mocked in Poland, (2022, March 9). *Euronews*. <https://www.euronews.com/2022/03/09/see-what-your-friend-putin-has-done-salvini-mocked-in-poland>
- Tarchi, M. (2015). *Italia populista*. Il Mulino.
- Ucraina, Berlusconi: "Putin spinto a inventarsi l'operazione speciale" (2022, September 22). *Adnkronos*. https://www.adnkronos.com/ucraina-berlusconi-putin-spin-to-a-inventarsi-loperazione-speciale_6folBm5Ei1yMv0fnJjyRDV
- Ucraina: Salvini, Lega condanna ogni aggressione militare (2022, February 22). *ANSA*. https://www.ansa.it/sito/notizie/topnews/2022/02/24/ucraina-salvini-lega-condanna-ogni-aggressione-militare_a8831131-8cc6-4861-892b-799615657a5b.html
- Wodak, R. (2015). *The politics of fear: What right-wing populist discourses mean*. Sage.



LATVIA



The Russia-Ukraine War and Right-Wing Populism in Latvia

*Daunis Auers** University of Latvia

Abstract

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has profoundly impacted Latvia's politics, economy and society. It also moved Latvia's political centre to the right and mainstreamed many of the core policy positions of the dominant Radical Right National Alliance (NA), such as squeezing the Russian language from the public sphere, dismantling the publicly-funded Russian-language school system, and demolishing Soviet-era monuments. This policy shift has been made possible by the NA's gradual political mainstreaming over the last decade (it has been in a governing coalition since 2011) and long-standing opposition to Putin's regime, as well as existing contacts and support for Ukrainian nationalist groups. As a result, there is a public perception that the NA was "right" about Russia. As the NA has mainstreamed and abandoned its populist rhetoric, new populist parties have emerged in Latvia. Parliamentary elections in October 2022 saw new "Latvian" (the Latvia First Party, LPV) and "Russian" (Stability! or S!) populist parties elected to parliament. The LPV largely refused to engage with the war, focusing on domestic economic issues, while S! has capitalized on the "we are for peace" niche left open by other parties' denunciation of Russia's invasion.

Keywords: *Latvia, populism, Radical Right, National Alliance, Russia-Ukraine war, parties*

* auers@lu.lv.

Auers, Daunis. (2023). "The Russia-Ukraine War and Right-Wing Populism in Latvia." In: *The Impacts of the Russian Invasion of Ukraine on Right-wing Populism in Europe*. (eds). Gilles Ivaldi and Emilia Zankina. European Center for Populism Studies (ECPS). March 8, 2023. Brussels. <https://doi.org/10.55271/rp0023>



Introduction

Right-wing populism, and populism more broadly, has long been a feature of Latvia's political landscape. Indeed, in December 2021, a few months before Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Latvia's president, Egils Levits, a former judge at the European Union Court of Justice, warned that populism was a threat to Latvia's democracy:

We see what happens when populists are elected to parliament in Latvia and elsewhere. They collapse. They are not capable of meaningful politics, simply wasting your vote and creating difficulties for the parliament and the state. ("President urges voters to be on guard", 2021)

This article begins by reflecting on the scope and nature of populism in Latvia since the regaining of sovereign independence following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. It then moves to consider the impact of Russia's war on Ukraine on the current crop of Latvia's populist parties and politicians (the supply side) and the impact on public perceptions and voters (the demand side). The final section considers the short- and long-term impacts of the war on Latvia's populist landscape.

Background

The concept of populism is famously contested. More than fifty years ago, Peter Wiles (1969, p. 166) wrote, "to each his own definition of populism, according to the academic axe he grinds." Although there has been more academic consensus in recent decades, there remain three major contemporary approaches to populism that conceptualize it as either a style of politics, a political strategy, or a thin ideology.

Latvian media, the public and politicians alike tend to use the term as a "catch-all" used to criticize anything they dislike or cannot explain, the "mystery ingredient that explains why a rival political leader has inexplicably large support" (Deegan-Krause, 2007, p. 141). A search of headlines on the influential "Delfi" news portal reveals that issues ranging from speeding fines and religious education in schools

1. From a search of the term "populism" in the *Delfi* archive:
<https://www.delfi.lv/meklet?q=populisms>, retrieved January 27, 2023.

through to a new bottle deposit scheme have been described as “populist.”² Vague and sweeping accusations of populism have long been a feature of Latvian politics, particularly among the parties that appeal to the ethnic Latvian, rather than Russian-speaking, electorate.

The late Joachim Siegerist, a shadowy far-right German–Latvian politician who never spoke Latvian, is generally regarded as Latvia’s first major post-communist populist. Having been kicked out of the radical right-wing Latvian National Independence Movement (Latvijas Nacionālās Neatkarības Kustība, LNNK) in 1994, Siegerist founded the People’s Movement for Latvia (Tautas Kustība Latvija, TKL). During the 1995 parliamentary election, he campaigned on both a nationalist and anti-corruption platform of “Russians to Russia and Latvia for Latvians,” handing out free medicine to emphasize the perceived failure of government economic policies and promising to weed out corrupt bureaucrats and politicians who were supposedly holding Latvia back.³ This combination of Russophobe nationalism and criticism of a corrupt and out-of-touch elite set the template for right-wing populism in Latvia for the next three decades. Twenty-first-century additions to this winning formula have included criticism of liberal ideas spreading to Latvia via European elites and, of course, anti-Soros conspiracy theories.

The most recent incarnation of the right-wing populist mantle has been the National Alliance (Nacionālā Apvienība, NA), a merger of first-wave Latvian nationalist parties that traced their roots to the late 1980s independence movement and a second wave of younger nationalist activists that came out of the various nationalist organizations set up in the 1990s and early 2000s. The NA first entered parliament as a party union rather than a single party in 2010 and has been a part of every governing coalition since 2011. Participating in government has led to a mainstreaming of the party and an attendant decline in its populist appeals, with anti-elite and anti-corruption rhetoric clearly having less traction now the party has become an established part of the governing elite.

The mainstreaming of NA has opened a space for new populist political forces to emerge. However, these populists are “pure” rather than right-wing populists. First, in 2014, Artuss Kaimiņš, a moderately successful Latvian actor, leveraged a “shock jock” radio show called “the Dog Kennel” (*Suņu Būda*), where he regularly humiliated politicians by accusing them of graft or incompetence into a political

2. For more details, see Auers (2017).



career.⁴ He was elected to parliament in 2014 when recruited as a vote-catching “locomotive” on the party’s list of the mainstream Latvian Regional Alliance (Latvijas Reģionālā Apvienība, LRA). Kaimiņš was swift to position himself as a political outsider, refusing to join LRA and then leaving the party’s parliamentary fraction altogether. He roamed parliament equipped with a pocket-sized camera, filming parliament’s plenary hall as he addressed MPs, discussions in parliamentary committees and indiscrete encounters on the streets. In advance of the 2018 election, he founded a new party—Who Owns the State? (Kam Pieder Valsts? or KPV)—which adopted a ferocious anti-elite rhetoric and fuzzy policy programme. However, KPV was not Russophobic. KPV won the second-largest share of the vote, took 16 out of the 100 seats in Latvia’s parliament and joined the governing coalition formed after a record-breaking three and a half months of negotiations. KPV collapsed just a few years after the election, torn apart by the fact that its MPs had almost nothing in common except an anti-elite attitude that had little significance after the decision to join the government and become part of the political elite.

Aldis Gobzems, KPV’s candidate for prime minister in 2018, followed in Kaimiņš’s footsteps and swiftly left KPV to form his own populist party, initially called Law and Order (Likums un Kārtība, LuK) and then renamed For Each and Every One (Katram un Katrai, KuK). Similarly to KPV, KuK was ideologically ambiguous while fielding relentless anti-elite rhetoric that tapped into the anti-vaccination and anti-lockdown movements that had spread across Latvia during the Covid-19 pandemic. In December 2021, Gobzems organized a “Rhododendron tour” of Latvia, culminating in an unlicensed, bawdy evening demonstration outside the Latvian president’s office in Riga Castle.

Another new party was also formed in advance of the 2018 election and similarly tapped into the anti-vaccination and anti-lockdown movements. Like KuK, Latvia First (Latvija Pirmā Vietā, LPV) was deeply critical of the government and the political elite. However, it was led and bankrolled by one of Latvia’s three “oligarchs,” Ainārs Šlesers, who entered politics in 1998 and served as a deputy prime minister as well as stints as economics and transport minister. Šlesers had been forced out of mainstream politics in 2011 after then-president Valdis Zatlers had called an early election with the explicit aim of forcing Latvia’s “oligarchs” out of politics. Public

3. See the “Suņu Būda” channel on YouTube for archived shows:
<https://www.youtube.com/@sunubudatv805>.

dissatisfaction with the pandemic offered him a route back to parliament. The major difference between LPV and KuK was the former's focus on the economy and advocacy for tighter commercial ties with Russia. At its founding in August 2021, Šlesers stated that “the current government has no economic development plan [...] people are no longer prepared to accept this elite which has been in power for the last 20 years” (Klūga, 2021).

The line-up of populists was joined by Aivars Lembergs, one of the dominant figures of the political scene in the post-Soviet era, who was released from prison in 2022, having served part of a sentence for convictions of money laundering and abuse of office. Despite being an influential political figure through the Green-Farmers Union (Zaļo Zemnieku Savienība, ZZS) and mayor of the wealthy transit port city of Ventspils, Lembergs has long denounced European and national elites and lamented the influence of George Soros. He had even called the increased NATO troop presence in Latvia following the 2014 Russian annexation of Crimea an “occupation” (“Lembergs iespējamo NATO spēku”, 2014).

The year 2022 also bought a new addition to the populist landscape in Latvia. About one-quarter of Latvia's voters are Russian speakers, and Latvian political parties have long drawn a “red line” around parties representing this minority, arguing that they pose a threat to Latvia's Western-oriented political trajectory. For the last decade, the Harmony Social Democracy party (Sakaņa Sociāl Demokrātija, SSD) has monopolized the representation of the interests of Russian speakers. However, in 2022, this dominance was challenged by an upstart political party led by Aleksejs Rošļikovs, a member of SSD, before he was kicked out of the party in 2019. This new outfit—For Stability! (Stabilitātei! or S!)—was founded in February 2021 at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic in Latvia and used the same anti-vaccination tropes as LPV and KuK but targeted the Russian-speaking audience.

The supply side of populism in Latvia

Latvia was well stocked with populist parties and politicians in early 2022, ahead of that year's scheduled parliamentary election in October. Latvian laws on parties and elections help to explain this steady supply of populists. First, the threshold for creating a new party is low, with just 200 members needed to register a party and 500 to compete in a parliamentary election. Parties must be registered at least twelve months before an election. This allows both charismatic figures (such as Gobzems and KuK as well as Rošļikovs and S!) and well-resourced figures (Šlesers



and LPV) to swiftly set up political vehicles.

The initial core issue for all three new populist parties had been the incumbent government's Covid pandemic policies, particularly vaccination and lockdown, both of which had mobilized small but vociferous groups in 2020 and 2021. However, Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 quickly made these issues largely irrelevant. Latvia shares a 214-kilometre border with Russia and a living memory of Soviet (often equated with Russian) occupation. The war was considered an existential threat to Latvia.

Attitudes towards Russia swiftly hardened. Policies that had long been promoted by the NA—phasing out Russian-language schooling, marginalizing the use of Russian in both public and private sectors and removing Soviet-era monuments—became mainstream. The NA became still more radical, discussing the forced emigration of pro-Kremlin Russian speakers from Latvia (Spalvēns, 2023). As an NA parliamentary deputy reflected during parliamentary debates on Latvia's foreign policy in January 2023, “we will come to this matter sooner or later, colleagues, like all of us have come together on other issues that until recently were considered taboo” (Ventasballs, 2014).

This shift in attitudes to Russia impacted LPV, KuK and Lembergs, who had been nominated as the ZZS candidate for prime minister. LPV, which had advocated closer economic ties with Russia, was forced to backtrack (instead advocating closer ties with other post-Soviet states). As a result, criticism of the EU and the United States, now critical to Latvia's future security, was muted. However, by the time of the election in October, the war's impact on the economy through high inflation and rapidly rising energy prices allowed LPV to return to the theme of the economic incompetence of what they termed the “Kariņš and Levits regime” and, referring to the émigré backgrounds of both the prime minister, Krišjānis Kariņš and President Levits and urged them to “return home” (Kariņš was born in the United States and Levits is of Baltic German heritage and fled with his family to West Germany in 1972 where he lived until 1990). With only the pandemic and an anti-elite message to draw on, KuK's founder, Aldis Gobzems, simply left the country and resettled his family in Spain. Although he returned to campaign in the summer, he was diminished, and his party polled just 3.7% in the election.

S! seized on the opportunity offered by SSD's swift condemnation of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. In contrast to SSD, S! did not condemn Russia (although it

stayed away from directly supporting the invasion; there was not one word of the Ukraine war in the party's electoral programme) (Central Election Commission, 2022). Avoiding the war (and focusing on peace) was interpreted as a “dog whistle”, essentially the same as siding with Russia, especially as S! described the EU as a “strangling union” in its electoral programme.

The demand side of populism in Latvia

Russia's invasion of Ukraine dampened the appeal of Latvia's populists and boosted the appeal of the mainstream parties as well as the Radical Right. A July 2022 poll showed that 66% (compared to 37% a year earlier) of Latvians had a negative view of Russia, with just 20% (48% in 2021) having a positive outlook (“Aptauja”, 2022). This clearly strengthened the position of Latvia's most prominent Russia hawks, the NA, as well as Prime Minister Kariņš's New Unity party (Jaunā Vienotība, JV), whose experienced foreign minister Edgars Rinkēvičs (he has held the post since 2011) had emerged as a vocal and active critic of Russia on the European and global stage. There was broad support for the government's backing of Ukraine (second only to Estonia as a percentage of GDP) and the 30,000+ Ukrainian refugees who settled in Latvia (and whose willingness to learn Latvian and integrate into Latvian society was often juxtaposed with those Russian speakers who still do not speak Latvian 30 years after independence and the 10% who remain non-citizens). Actions to limit Russian visas to Europe as well as the government's declaration that it would not accept Russians fleeing the draft, were also supported by Latvians.

Nevertheless, some muted support for populist parties remained.⁵ While Russia's actions pushed many Latvian voters towards the status quo, the long-term trends of comparative economic decline and voter disillusionment with the political elite endured. Russia's invasion did little to shift public attitudes toward the state of democracy. A June 2022 survey by the Latvian pollster SKDS found that just 36% of Latvians are satisfied with the state of domestic democracy while 53% are dissatisfied, which is roughly in line with data from 2021 (37% and 51%, respectively) and 2020 (39% and 49%) (“Iedzīvotāju domas”, 2022). Moreover, the harsh “valley of tears” of the economic and social crisis of the 1990s as well as the deep recession of 2008–09, left scars. Eurostat (2022) data shows that Latvia's poor economic performance since the 2008–09 crisis has left it far behind neighbouring Estonia and Lithuania (in 2021, Latvia's GDP per capita was just 72% of the EU



average, while both Estonia and Lithuania were at 89%). This disenchantment remained, with about 10% of voters supporting the LPV and KuK. The LPV's more refined communication, focusing on economic issues, proved effective as the true cost of the war began to bite.

The SSD finished below the 5% threshold as Russian speakers switched over to S! A poll taken just a few days after Russia's invasion revealed that just 22% of Latvia's Russians supported Ukraine, and roughly the same number supported Russia (21%). The majority claimed to be neutral, although there was undoubtedly an element of self-censorship at play (Domburs, 2022). S! was more appealing to this "neutral" group of Russian speakers.

Discussion and perspectives

Russia's war on Ukraine has shifted Latvia's political centre to the right and mainstreamed many of the National Alliance's long-standing policy positions, such as squeezing the Russian language from the public sphere, dismantling the publicly-funded Russian-language school system, dismantling Soviet-era monuments and renaming Russian streets with Latvian names. There is a public perception, also frequently repeated by party leaders, that the NA was "right" about Russia. However, while the NA remains a party of the Radical Right, its gradual political mainstreaming over the last decade has made it far less populist.

Parties attempting to seize the populist political space left by the mainstreaming of the NA have proven to be less enduring because they are pure populists, with nothing to bind members together beyond anti-elite rhetoric. When the populists join the government, as KPV did in 2018, they lose their *raison d'être* with no "thick" ideology to attach to. However, LPV and S! have been in parliamentary opposition after a new government was formed in December 2022. With little prospect of joining the government, they will likely maintain their populist appeal in the coming years. However, it will likely be targeted less at foreign elites such as the United States, the EU and NATO, who are now so critical to Latvian security and instead focused more on domestic economic issues. S! will also remain in opposition and will draw on the rich seam of resentment of the Russian-speaking population towards the "de-russification" policies that have now become mainstream in Latvia.

4. Latvia First won 6.2% of the vote and 9 seats in Latvia's 100-member parliament, while ZZS won 12.4% (16 seats) and S! 6.8% (11 seats).

References

- Aptauja: Līdz ar karu strauji audzis Latvijas iedzīvotāju negatīvais vērtējums par Krieviju (2022, September 20). *Latvian Public Media*. <https://www.lsm.lv/raksts/zinas/latvija/aptauja-lidz-ar-karu-strauji-audzis-latvijas-iedzivotaju-negativais-vertējums-par-krieviju.a474411/>
- Auers, D. (2017). Populism in the Baltic states. In A. Kudors & A. Pabriks (Eds.). *The Rise of Populism: Lessons for the European Union and the United States of America* (pp. 151–168). Center for East European Studies.
- Central Election Commission. (2022, September). *Stability! Electoral programme*. <https://sv2022.cvk.lv/pub/kandidatu-saraksti/politiska-partija-stabilitatei#programma>
- Deegan-Krause, K. (2007). Populism and the logic of party rotation in post-communist Europe. In O. Gyárfášová & G. Mesežnikov (Eds.). *Visegrad Elections: Domestic Impact and European Consequences* (pp. 141–156). Institute for Public Affairs (IVO).
- Domburs, J. (Host) (2022, March 10). Aptaujas rezultāti: Latvijas iedzīvotāji par Krievijas iebrukumu Ukrainā un Putinu. [TV broadcast] In *Kas notiek Latvijā? Latvian Public Media*. <https://www.lsm.lv/raksts/kas-notiek-latvija/raksti/kas-notiek-latvija-aptau-jas-rezultati-latvijas-iedzivotaji-par-krievijas-iebrukumu-ukraina-un-putinu.a447274/>
- Eurostat. (2022). Volume of indices of GDP per capita, 2021. *Eurostat*. https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=GDP_per_capita,_consumption_per_capita_and_price_level_indices
- Iedzīvotāju domas: Vai Latvijā valda demokrātija? (2022, August 16). NRA. <https://nra.lv/latvija/389245-iedzivotaju-domas-vai-latvija-valda-demokratija.htm>
- Klūga, M. (2021, August 14). Šlesera partijas «Latvija pirmajā vietā» Valsts prezidenta amata kandidāte būs Jūlija Stepanenko. *Latvian Public Media*. <https://www.lsm.lv/raksts/zinas/latvija/slesera-partijas-latvija-pirmaja-vieta-valsts-prezidenta-amata-kandidate-bus-julija-stepanenko.a416932/>
- President urges voters to be on guard against populism ahead of Saeima elections (2021, December 29). *Latvian Public Media*. <https://eng.lsm.lv/article/politics/politics/president-urges-voters-to-be-on-guard-against-populism-ahead-of-saeima-elections.a436629/>
- Spalvēns, R. (2023, January 26). Ārlietu ministrija kļūdījās, ielaižot Latvijā Krievijas medijus, uzsver Šnore. Delfi. <https://www.delfi.lv/news/national/politics/arlietu-ministrija-kludijas-ielaizot-latvija-krievijas-medijus-uzsver-snore.d?id=55162954>
- Lembergs iespējamo NATO spēku Latvijā ievēšanu pielīdzina okupācijai. (2014, April 4). *Vēstis Balss*. <https://www.ventasbalss.lv/zinas/sabiedriba/19435-lemberts-iespejamo-nato-speku-latvija-ievesanu-pielidzina-okupacijai>
- Wiles, P. (1969). A syndrome, not a doctrine: Some elementary theses on populism. In G. Ionescu & E. Gellner (Eds.). *Populism: Its Meaning and National Characteristics* (pp. 166–179). Macmillan.



LITHUANIA



The populist Far Right in Lithuania during Russia's war against Ukraine

Jogilė Ulinskaitė* and Rosita Garškaitė**-Antonowicz

Institute of International Relations and Political Science, Vilnius University

Abstract

In Lithuania, centrist populist parties have been challenging the stability of the party system since 2000. Yet Far Right populist parties have not yet managed to enter the parliament. As Russia's war against Ukraine has unfolded, the Far Right has had to reorient itself in a changing political landscape. On the one hand, the economic and energy crisis resulting from the war seems to provide the perfect conditions for populist mobilization in a low-trust and low-participation society. On the other, the Lithuanian government has benefited from a rally-around-the-flag effect. Lithuanian society has been particularly active in supporting Kyiv and welcoming refugees from Ukraine. In this article, we analyse the rhetoric of the Lithuanian populist Far Right, focusing on how these parties position themselves in light of changing circumstances due to the war and how they reframe criticism of national and international elites.

Keywords: Lithuania; Russia–Ukraine war; Far Right; populism; rally-around-the-flag effect

* jogile.ulinskaite@tspmi.vu.lt

** rosita.garskaite@tspmi.vu.lt

Ulinskaitė, Jogilė & Garškaitė-Antonowicz, Rosita. (2023). "The populist Far Right in Lithuania during Russia's war against Ukraine." In: *The Impacts of the Russian Invasion of Ukraine on Right-wing Populism in Europe*. (eds). Gilles Ivaldi and Emilia Zankina. European Center for Populism Studies (ECPS). March 8, 2023. Brussels. <https://doi.org/10.55271/rp0024>



Introduction

Although centrist populist political parties have been challenging the stability of the party system in Lithuania since 2000, Far Right populist parties have not yet managed to cross the 5% threshold needed to enter the parliament. These groups successfully mobilized support against the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions. Now, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has eroded the significance of that critique and forced Far Right populist parties to reorient themselves in a changing political landscape.

The economic and energy crisis caused by the war might seem like perfect conditions for populist mobilization. However, the Lithuanian government has benefited from a rally-around-the-flag effect, and the ruling party's popularity ratings have soared (Brunalas, 2022). In addition, Lithuanian society has been particularly active in supporting the Ukrainian side. According to a recent survey, two-thirds of Lithuanians supported the Ukrainian side by donating money, volunteering in related organizations, or welcoming refugees from Ukraine into their homes (Stankevičius, 2023). The donation of a military drone crowdfunded by ordinary Lithuanians is a prime example of this public generosity (BBC News, 2022). Furthermore, attitudes towards Russia, which have always been negative, have become even more so. Opinion polls published in January 2023 found that 90% of Lithuanians have an unfavourable opinion of Russia, while 75% have a negative view of Belarus (Pankūnas, 2023).

In this report, we examine the rhetoric of Lithuanian right-wing populists concentrating on how they reframe criticism of (inter)national elites and navigate possible associations with Russia. We conceptualize Far Right actors operating according to the procedural rules of democracy. They can be located at the far right end of the Left–Right ideological scale, with populism, nativism, radicalism, and conservatism as essential characteristics. In their discourse, a nation is seen as a homogeneous unit that must be protected from outsiders or dangerous intruders (Wodak, 2019), such as immigrants. For them, the principle of majority rule is an essential feature of democracy (ibid.), and a strong or even authoritarian-leaning government is required to protect the homeland (Bustikova & Kitschelt, 2009). A strong emphasis is put on family values and a return to “better times” (Wodak, 2019). In addition, the political elite is perceived as corrupt, working against the will of the people and promoting the European Union (EU) agenda (Golder, 2016; Bustikova & Kitschelt, 2009; Wodak, 2019).

The report focuses primarily on the discourse of three Far Right actors: two political parties and a movement. The National Alliance (Nacionalinis susivienijimas, NS) and the Union for Nation and Justice (Tautos ir teisingumo sąjunga, TTS) took part in the last parliamentary elections in 2020 but did not get any mandates. The Lithuanian Family Movement (Lietuvos šeimų sąjūdis, LŠS) has organized several protests in the past two years. The biggest in May 2021 — the “Great March in Defence of the Family” — attracted as many as 10,000 people, an exceptionally high number in a society with low levels of civic engagement and political participation (Žiliukaitė, 2006). Marchers sought to uphold traditional family values and criticize the management of the pandemic. Later in the summer, the LŠS was involved in riots that prevented MPs from leaving the parliament building, and some of its leaders were prosecuted. As a result, the movement’s popularity declined, but it did not abandon the criticism of the pandemic restrictions and even claimed responsibility for ending COVID-19 restrictions in Lithuania. The NS, the TTS and the LŠS are now running candidates in municipal elections scheduled for March 2023. The analysed data consists of communications on official Facebook pages or official websites from the start of the war on February 24 until the end of 2022.

In addition, we provide examples of the discourse of two populist (but not Far Right) leaders closely related to the NS, the TTS and the LŠS. Ramūnas Karbauskis is the leader of the opposition Lithuanian Farmers and Greens Union (Lietuvos valstiečių ir žaliųjų sąjunga, LVŽS), which led the governing coalition in 2016–2020. Members of the NS worked for this party’s MPs and are now running on its list of candidates for municipal councils (as are members of the LŠS). Ignas Vėgėlė, a lawyer and professor of law, became a well-known and popular politician after his vocal opposition to the government’s COVID-19 restrictions. He is currently supported by all the Far Right organizations analysed in this report.

National security: New wine in old “family values” bottles?

At the heart of Lithuanian Far Right ideology is what ideologues call the “defence” of families, meaning a backlash against legal recognition of same-sex relationships, the Istanbul Convention on Combating Violence against Women,¹ and other

1. There is no legal recognition of same-sex relationships in Lithuania. Vilnius has signed the Istanbul Convention, but not yet ratified it.



political issues related to gender and sexual identities. They frame binary genders and heterosexual families as essential to national culture, appealing to the sense in Lithuania that this small nation may disappear due to mass emigration and negative natural population growth. This theme has remained salient in Far Right rhetoric since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine.

In the discourse of the Far Right, one way to support Ukraine is to resist “genderism”, as both the NS and the TTS suggest. For them, Ukraine is one of the greatest defenders of the “natural family” simply because it does not recognize same-sex unions, and Ukrainian public opinion is not favourable. To quote the TTS: “We invite you to support the Ukrainian fight for natural values, the nation-state, and Christian civilization as well as to adhere to these ideals in our state as well” (Gražulis, 2022).

The LŠS goes as far as comparing the “gender propaganda” that the Lithuanian elite allegedly promotes with war propaganda from the Kremlin. The former is even more threatening because it “propagates a war inside our country, among us” (Lietuvos Šeimų Sąjūdis, 2022a). In the rhetoric of politicians, ensuring security means uniting and mobilizing society. That is why Far Right actors and the opposition leader, Ramūnas Karbauskis, criticize the government for subverting the unity of society by debating the Istanbul Convention and the gender-neutral civil partnership bill. According to Karbauskis, it is unseemly to discuss such an irrelevant question as a civil partnership with a war underway (Tapinienė, 2022). Overall, the strategy is to kick the can down the road, saying, “now is not the time”.

European friends and foes

As security has become a top priority as the war has unfolded, populist and Far Right politicians have used the conflict to criticize the national and international political elite. They have sought to delegitimize the Lithuanian government by calling ministers “temporary administrators of the country” incapable of making independent decisions, much like in the Soviet Union and, more recently, the EU. A common claim is that the government is not doing enough to protect the country. Populist and Far Right politicians argue for increased defence spending. The NS has gone further, saying additional social measures are needed to strengthen the country’s security, such as increasing the birth rate, reducing social exclusion, and strengthening patriotic education (Nacionalinis susivienijimas, 2022a).

Since Lithuanians are among the most trusting in the EU,² compared to other Europeans, the Far Right does not target EU membership directly. Nonetheless, they criticize the Lithuanian political elite for prioritizing “foreign forces” over “the will of their citizens” and blame Brussels for “political and cultural dictates”. Vytautas Sinica, one of the leaders of the NS, has recounted with glee how Western Europe used to teach Central and Eastern Europe about equality, diversity, ecology, and cosmopolitanism, but everything has changed. Now Volodymyr Zelenskyy teaches Brussels what European values — namely, nationalism, sovereignty, and independence — mean (Petkus, 2022). The distinction is made in this case, as in many others, between “new” Europe, which is young, full of life, and proud of the nation, and “old”, pragmatic Europe.

Whereas Lithuanian society, in general, was disappointed with the slow speed and limited extent of Western military support for Ukraine, and the government urged NATO members to provide Ukraine with more weapons, a new undertone became evident in Far Right discourse. They argue for strengthening military cooperation with the United Kingdom and the United States, not with Germany, currently leading a NATO brigade in Lithuania. They went further than mocking the reluctance of German Chancellor Olaf Scholz to send arms or diplomatic efforts vis-à-vis Russia by France’s Emmanuel Macron. The key word was “hypocrisy”, and it was argued that the words and deeds of Western leaders differ.

Yet Lithuanian Far Right actors wish to cultivate some friendships in Europe. Since the outbreak of the war, the discourse on counterparts in Europe has been very cautious. For instance, the victory of Giorgia Meloni in Italy was celebrated with emphasis on the “strong” pro-Ukrainian position of her party, Fratelli d’Italia. On the other hand, when criticized for congratulating Victor Orbán for his victory in the 2022 Hungarian parliamentary elections, the leader of the TTS employed a strategy of “whataboutism”. In his rhetoric, Orbán is as pragmatic towards Russia as Scholz or Macron, so why are Germany and France justified by the Lithuanian political and media elites while Hungary is condemned? His answer, unsurprisingly, claimed that “leftists” or “liberals” — who work against “nation-states, the natural family and Christian ethics” — are running the show (Gražulis, 2022).

2. In Lithuania, 69% of citizens say they trust the EU, while the European average is 49% (European Commission, 2022).



Refugees: Overlap with the political elite

Since the invasion, Lithuania has welcomed over 73,000 refugees from Ukraine (UNHCR, n.d.). Even Far Right actors have provided housing support or volunteered to organize the settlement process. In doing this and communicating about their contributions, they have acted in line with the popular pro-Ukrainian sentiment, simultaneously evading associations with the Kremlin. To date, their nativist ideology emerges in discourse only in a very subtle way. Instead of using economic arguments against support for Ukraine, the LŠS leans on the cultural dimension by accusing the elite and their supporters of “ostentatious Ukrainophilia” (Čepaitienė, 2023). Their sympathizers are especially prone to complain about the widespread usage of the colours of the Ukrainian flag instead of Lithuanian ones. In their interpretation, national symbols have been deliberately ceded, and the LŠS is fighting to “take them back”.

Not just Ukrainians seek asylum in Lithuania. Since June 2021, migrants from the Middle East and Sub-Saharan Africa have tried to cross the border with Belarus almost daily. Although more than 4,000 were admitted in June and July 2021, since August 2021, irregular migrants have been denied entry and pushed back. Amnesty International issued a report detailing the practice of pushbacks, which violates international law, and documenting other human rights abuses against refugees and migrants (Amnesty International, 2022). The report emphasized the stark contrast between the treatment of people fleeing the war in Ukraine and victims of Belarusian President Lukashenko’s “asylum politics”. The Far Right NS has grasped the elite and public opinion adequately by saying: “It is likely that in our country there are not many people having doubts about the fact that Ukrainians fleeing the war in contrast to economic migrants sent here by Belarus have an untrammelled right to refugee status”. (Nacionalinis Susivienijimas, 2022a)

The strategy of contrasting “real” Ukrainian refugees and “illegal” and “politically and culturally disloyal” economic migrants does not help them to instigate dissatisfaction with the ruling elite. The government has built a fence along the border with Belarus and is not letting migrants in, framing the issue solely as a matter of national security. The Court of Justice of the European Union also found that preventing irregular migrants from applying for asylum and putting them in automatic detention contradicts European directives (Bakaitė, 2022). Some of the Far Right actors in Lithuania described this judgement as an additional example of how “the EU promotes multiculturalism and mixing of nations” (Petkus, 2022).

They even are inclined to defend the mainstream policy.

Post-pandemic restrictions and economic crisis

The LŠS, NS, TTS, and Ignas Vėgėlė have taken advantage of the prevailing solidarity with Ukrainian society and presented themselves as victims of a brutal regime while framing the Lithuanian government as the aggressor. The LŠS accused the government of using the war as a pretext to impose “a dictatorship, total control of society and censorship of opinion, persecuting critics of its actions and unjustifiably restricting other constitutional rights and freedoms of citizens” (Lietuvos Šeimų Sąjūdis, 2022b). They say the government “actually contributes to Russia’s aggressive ambitions” (ibid.).

Ignas Vėgėlė, who has taken the most advantage of the opposition to pandemic restrictions, is now a potential presidential candidate (Baltic News Service, 2022). As a legal scholar and former chairman of Lithuania’s Bar Council, he has positioned himself as a civil society representative, advocating for citizens’ freedom and rights and demanding accountability of politicians. Since the outbreak of the war, the claim that the Lithuanian government was restricting freedom and human rights has been extended to other contexts, equating it with the Russian authoritarian regime. Ignas Vėgėlė complained that he was being delegitimized by the cultural, media, and political elite (Vėgėlė, 2022) and suggested that the Lithuanian government was actually working for the benefit of Putin.

The NS added to criticism of the government by expressing concern about the state of emergency and linking it to constitutional restrictions on freedom of expression and information and censorship (Nacionalinis Susivienijimas, 2022b). They also introduced another trope to associate themselves with the victims of the war, creating an analogy between Putin’s claim to the “de-Nazification” of Ukraine and EU policy. In the words of one of the NS leaders, “the Lithuanian “soft de-Nazification” is particularly dangerous in that the purposeful destruction of the nation and state are usually covered up by the defence of “European” and “Western” values while avoiding the need to disclose the conceptual origins of these values and their ideological and political content” (Nacionalinis Susivienijimas, 2022a).

Politicians are still using the memory of the 1990s to invoke resentment and feelings of injustice in society (Lietuvos Šeimų Sąjūdis, 2022c). The LŠS and the NS have questioned the country’s post-communist transformation by calling



political elites “privatizers of freedom”. In the words of Vytautas Radžvilas, an NS leader, democracy in Lithuania has steadily declined along with the “plundering” of public goods through privatization (ELTA, 2020). The LŠS argues that Lithuanian parties are “entities, created in the process of *prikhvat-ization*’³ of state assets and pseudo-elite warfare, which take turns in sharing seats in the cabinets of territorial administration, also known as Lithuania” (Lietuvos Šeimų Sąjūdis, 2022c). This way, mainstream political forces are described as self-interested and disconnected from society.

Moreover, they are also depicted as deliberately worsening the living conditions of society. They have been accused of raising the price of food, fuel, taxes, and electricity. Since the liberalization of the electricity market (the change from regulated electricity supply to open market competition), the system has faced challenges, and the price of electricity reached record highs in the summer of 2022. The energy minister, naturally, became one of their most criticized targets. Even more, Ignas Vėgėlė called the liberalization of the electricity market and price fluctuations coercive, while the NS argued it was criminal and portrayed the liberalization and price fluctuations as a malicious scheme. The TTS called it a fraud and the LŠS a “pretext for the predatory privatization of the electricity supply system for the benefit of business groups” (Lietuvos Šeimų Sąjūdis, 2022c). Therefore, although Lithuania had already secured its energy independence and did not face an energy crisis due to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, this did not prevent populist politicians from articulating and stimulating the crisis in the country and blaming the government.

Conclusion

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has had a negative effect (at least temporarily) on right-wing populist politics in Lithuania. All the political, media and economic connections these parties have with the Kremlin or openly pro-Russian activists were put under the magnifying glass. The usual arguments of mainstream politicians and journalists that populists’ favoured causes coincide with the Kremlin’s gained ground in Lithuania, as the society is highly anti-Russian and supports Ukraine. In view of the unfolding war in Ukraine, Far Right actors have found it difficult to present

3. This term — a play on the Russian word *прихватить* (*prikhvatit*, to grab) — became popular in the 1990s. It refers to the (at best) illegitimate and (at worst) downright illegal process of converting public assets to private property across that decade.

themselves as “anti-system patriots” to attack the political elite, which is seen as focused on the national interest. Both an insider (Ramūnas Karbauskis, the leader of the main opposition party) and an outsider (Vytautas Sinica, the leader of the NS) have publicly backed the government’s performance in relation to the war. They were also deprived of the chance to escalate the issue of irregular migration from Belarus as the government handled it in their preferred way (i.e., with a border fence).

Nevertheless, the Far Right actors have attempted to pass through an eye of a needle. It is evident in the populist rhetoric we investigated for this article that right-wing politicians have tried very hard to capitalize on any public grievances and to stimulate them even more, especially concerning the energy crisis and pandemic restrictions. They will continue to base their campaign on creating a sense of insecurity and channelling discontent toward national and EU elites. At the same time, they will most likely continue using a strategy to draw a parallel between the Lithuanian government and Putin’s regime, simultaneously identifying themselves and the whole society as victims. But in practice, their results will be best seen in 2024, when presidential and parliamentary elections will be held. The Far Right in Lithuania will likely try to secure a higher level of support through cooperation with popular but not so extreme, “non-systemic” candidates.

References

- Amnesty International. (2022). *Lithuania: Forced out or locked up refugees and migrants. abused and abandoned*. https://www.amnesty.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Lithuania-report-formatted-final_2.pdf
- Bakaitė, J. (2022, June 30). *CJEU finds Lithuania’s migrant policies in violation of EU law*. Lithuanian Radio and Television. <https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/1730702/cjeu-finds-lithuania-s-migrant-policies-in-violation-of-eu-law>
- Baltic News Service. (2022, October 19). *Survey: Lithuanians would vote for Nauseda and Vegele in presidential election*. Delfi. <https://www.delfi.lt/a/91529047>
- BBC News. (2022, July 7). *Lithuania donates crowd-funded drone to Ukraine*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-europe-62074011>
- Brunalas, B. (2022, March 16). *Partinių reitingų lentelėje baigėsi užsitęsęs štilis: TS-LKD reitingas šoko į viršų, LSDP patyrė didžiausių nuostolių*. Lithuanian Radio and Television. <https://www.lrt.lt/naujienos/lietuvoje/2/1645582/partiniu-reitingu-lenteleje-baigesi-uzsiteses-stilis-ts-lkd-reitingas-soko-i-virsu-lsdp-patyre-didziausiu-nuosoliu>

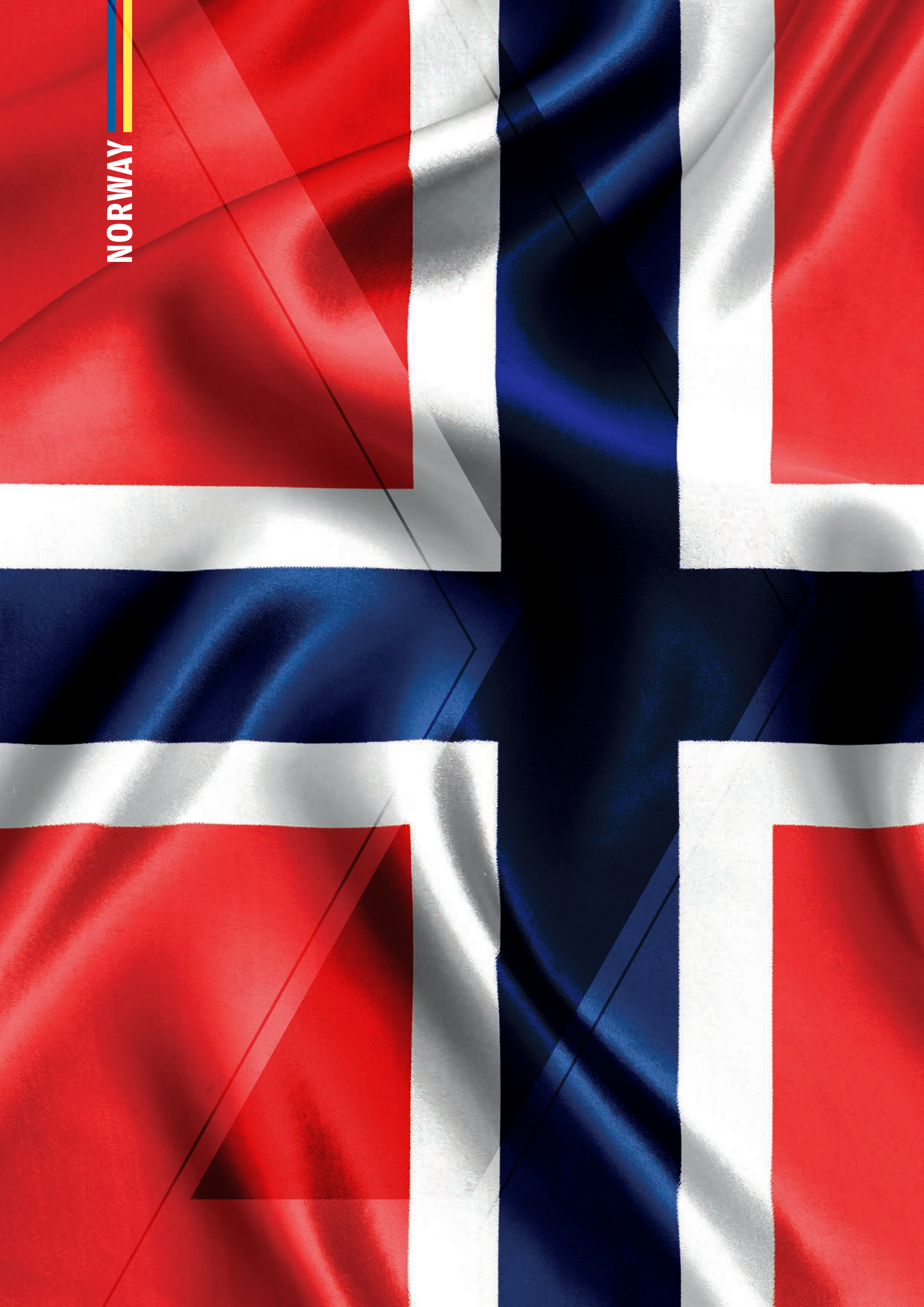


- Bustikova, L., & Kitschelt, H. (2009). The Radical Right in post-communist Europe. Comparative perspectives on legacies and party competition. *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, 42(4), 459–483. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.postcomstud.2009.10.007>
- Čepaitienė, R. (2023, January 9). *Rasa Čepaitienė. Parodomasis patriotizmas. Kauno forumas*. <https://kaunoforumas.com/2023/01/09/rasa-cepaitiene-parodomasis-patriotizmas/>
- ELTA. (2020, September 20). *Radžvilas apie cenzūrą ir koncepciją, keliančią baimę jo oponentams: siūlo panaikinti Konstitucinį Teismą*. Lithuanian Radio and Television. <https://www.lrt.lt/naujienos/lietuvoje/2/1236075/radzvilas-apie-cenzura-ir-koncepcija-keliant-baime-jo-oponentams-siulo-panaikinti-konstitucini-teisma>
- European Commission (2022, September). *Standard Eurobarometer – Summer 2022*. <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2693>.
- Golder, M. (2016). Far Right parties in Europe. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 19(1), 477–497. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-042814-012441>
- Gražulis, P. (2022, April 4). *P. Gražulis: Tautininkai priešinasi Kremliaus penktajai kolonai, atsiriboja nuo melagingų kaltinimų*. Alkas.lt. <https://alkas.lt/2022/04/04/p-grazulis-tautininkai-priesinasi-kremliaus-penktajai-kolonai-atsiriboja-nuo-melagingu-kaltinimu/>
- Lapėnienė, S. (2022, May 9). *While society mobilises, Lithuanian government does little to help accommodate Ukrainian refugees*. Lithuanian Radio and Television. <https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/1690662/while-society-mobilises-lithuanian-government-does-little-to-help-accommodate-ukrainian-refugees>
- Lietuvos Šeimų Sąjūdis. (2022a, March 10). *Lietuvos Šeimų Sąjūdis. Į viską jiems nuspjaut*. <https://seimusajudis.lt/naujienos/lietuvos-seimu-sajudis-i-viska-jiems-nuspjaut/>
- Lietuvos Šeimų Sąjūdis. (2022b, May 19). *“Didžiojo šeimos gynimo maršo 2022” Rezoliucija. Lietuvos Šeimų Sąjūdis*. <https://seimusajudis.lt/naujienos/didziojo-seimos-gynimo-marso-2022-rezoliucija/>
- Lietuvos Šeimų Sąjūdis. (2022c, December 8). *Lietuvos šeimų sąjūdis. Deklaracija Lietuva Pirmiausia*. <https://sc.bns.lt/view/item/453311>
- Nacionalinis Susivienijimas. (2022a, March 1). *Pareiškimas dėl karo pabėgėlių iš Ukrainos*. <https://susivienijimas.lt/pareiskimai-ir-naujienos/pareiskimas-del-karo-pabegeliu-is-ukrainos/>
- Nacionalinis Susivienijimas. (2022b, May 21). *Partijos “Nacionalinis susivienijimas” suvažiavimo dalyvių atviras laiškas šalies vadovams, Seimo nariams ir visuomenei dėl vykdomos šalies “minkštosios denacifikacijos” grėsmių valstybei karo Ukrainoje ir globalios saugumo krizės sąlygomis*. <https://susivienijimas.lt/pareiskimai-ir-naujienos/partijos-nacionalinis-susivienijimas-suvaizavimo-dalyviu-atviras-laiskas-salies-vadovams>

- Nacionalinis Susivienijimas. (2022c, May 21). *Partijos „Nacionalinis susivienijimas“ suvažiavimo rezoliucija dėl būtinų priemonių šalies saugumui ir gynybai*. <https://susivienijimas.lt/pareiskimai-ir-naujienos/partijos-nacionalinis-susivienijimas-suvaziavimo-rezoliucija-del-butinu-priemoniu-salies-saugumui-ir-gynybai/>
- Pankūnas, G. (2023, January 2). *Survey shows Lithuanians have abysmal opinion of Russia, favour Poland and Germany*. Lithuanian Radio and Television. <https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/1856830/survey-shows-lithuanians-have-abysmal-opinion-of-russia-favour-poland-and-germany>
- Pasieka, A. M. (2021). Postsocialist and postcapitalist questions? Far-right historical narratives and the making of a New Europe. *East European Politics and Societies*, 35(4), 975–995. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0888325420977628>
- Petkus, D. (2022, July 1). *Vytautas Sinica. Europos Teisingumo Teismo sprendimas dėl migrantų yra beprotybė* | LAIKMETIS. <https://www.laikmetis.lt/vytautas-sinica-europos-teisingumo-teismo-sprendimas-yra-beprotybe/>
- Stankevičius, A. (2023, January 30). *Nepaisant lietuvių aktyvumo padedant Ukrainai, Pilietinės galios indeksas sumenko*. Lithuanian Radio and Television. <https://www.lrt.lt/naujienos/lietuvoje/2/1877679/nepaisant-lietuviu-aktyvumo-padedant-ukraina-i-pilietines-galios-indeksas-sumenko>
- Tapinienė, R. (2022, May 27). *Karbauskis: kaip Lietuvoje, esant karui Ukrainoje, svarstomi tokie beprasmingi dalykai kaip partnerystė, narkotikų dekriminalizavimas*. Lithuanian Radio and Television. <https://www.lrt.lt/naujienos/lietuvoje/2/1704748/karbauskis-kaip-lietuvoje-esant-karui-ukrainoje-svarstomi-tokie-beprasmingi-dalykai-kaip-partneryste-narkotiku-dekriminalizavimas>
- UNHCR. (n.d.). *Ukraine Refugee Situation*. Retrieved January 25, 2023, from <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine>
- Vėgėlė, I. (2022, March 15). *I. Vėgėlė. Valstybę skaldančios propagandos industrija įsisiubavo*. Alkas.lt. <https://alkas.lt/2022/03/15/i-vegele-valstybe-skaldancios-propagandos-industrija-isisiubavo/>
- Wodak, R. (2019). Entering the “post-shame era”: The rise of illiberal democracy, populism and neo-authoritarianism in Europe. *Global Discourse*, 9(1), 195–213. <https://doi.org/10.1332/204378919X15470487645420>
- Žiliukaitė, R. (Ed.). (2006). *Neatrasta galia = Undiscovered power: Lietuvos pilietinės visuomenės žemėlapis = Map of the civil society in Lithuania*. Versus aureus.
- Žiliukaitė, R., Poviliūnas, A., & Savicka, A. (2016). *Lietuvos visuomenės vertybių kaita per dvidešimt nepriklausomybės metų*. Vilnius University Press. https://www.fsf.vu.lt/dokumentai/Naujienos_Mokslo_pasiekimai/2016/lietuvos_visuomenes_vertybiu_kaita.pdf



NORWAY



The impact of the Russia–Ukraine war on right-wing populism in Norway

*Liv Sunnercrantz**

Department of Media and Social Sciences, University of Stavanger

Abstract

The political right-wing populism topography in Norway has for decades been dominated by the Norwegian Progress Party, which is characterized by a combination of social-conservative values like nativism combined with market liberalism. However, following the invasion of Ukraine, it is not issues of security and sovereignty that take centre stage in the Progress Party's discourse but high energy prices. As a fossil fuel producer, Norway profits from the ensuing energy crisis and Europe's search for other energy providers than Russia. These profits, the Progress Party argues, are unduly awarded to the state treasury while "ordinary people" and entrepreneurs struggle. Populism thus appears in Norway as a way for a right-wing opposition party to challenge the centre-left government.

Keywords: *Norwegian Progress Party; Russia–Ukraine war; energy prices; immigration; populism.*

* liv.sunnercrantz@uis.no

Sunnercrantz, Liv. (2023). "The impact of the Russia–Ukraine war on right-wing populism in Norway." In: *The Impacts of the Russian Invasion of Ukraine on Right-wing Populism in Europe*. (eds). Gilles Ivaldi and Emilia Zankina. European Center for Populism Studies (ECPS). March 8, 2023. Brussels. <https://doi.org/10.55271/rp0025>



The diversity of political populism in Norway

Populism appears in politics amongst parties of the Left, the Right and the political centre in Norway. This diversity is apparent in the diverging ideologies and strategies entangled with populist politics. On the Right, the Norwegian Progress Party (Fremskrittspartiet, FrP) combines neoliberal and nativist ideologies and is most associated with populism in Norway. The traditionally agrarian Centre Party occupies the middle ground. The centre-left Labour Party advances a broad range of liberal, social democratic politics. Finally, on the Left, there are two smaller parties with populist tendencies, the Socialist Left Party (which campaigns on social justice and environmentalism) and the Far Left is the socialist Red Party, which engages in traditional class politics. In the most recent election in 2021, the Centre Party most successfully and thoroughly applied a populist agenda. It did so partly in cooperation with the Labour Party in forming a government but has since toned down its populist appeal.

The precursor to today's Progress Party was Anders Lange's eponymous party (Anders Lange's Party, ALP), formed in 1973 and inspired by right-wing populist developments in neighbouring Denmark. Contemporaneously, a short-lived leftist populist movement attached to the Socialist Left Party demanded a reorientation of society and policy towards local communities and mobilized mostly peripheral coastal areas of Norway through a system critique and the threats associated with Norway's European integration (Bjørklund, 2004). Like the FrP, this early wave of leftist populism mobilized actors dissatisfied with Labour Party governments and the politics of centralization, bureaucracy, and industrialization.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the ALP morphed into the FrP, redefined itself as a libertarian party, and applied more nativist rhetoric. The Muslim immigrant figure was singled out as a scapegoat in the FrP's discourse. This is even though Muslims are not the majority of immigrants to Norway. In the 1980s, the FrP also started to shift to welfare chauvinism, arguing for the defence of the welfare state rather than its retrenchment. But it was not until the 1990s that the party discourse became rephrased around cultural differences and integration as its key concerns.

Although the FrP is relatively moderate by European Far Right standards—and internally divided between two factions (one libertarian, one more national conservative)—it is the strongest anti-immigration voice among parliamentary parties in Norway. Like its sibling Far Right parties across the Nordics today, the

FrP maintains that it is not propagating hate messages against immigrants but instead is concerned with the national interest. The party instead positions itself against the policies of the Labour Party, which it blames for the social ills it claims have resulted from admitting (Muslim) immigrants to Norway (Palonen & Sunnercrantz, 2021). However, FrP has targeted a range of “elites” for criticism in its populist rhetoric over the last few decades, including the EU, the central state administration, liberal leftists, and, of course, the Labour Party. More recently, the party has foregrounded voices sceptical of human-induced climate change and mobilized around continued fossil extraction in Norway, thus targeting supporters of vigorous climate change mitigation and those opposed to fossil fuel use.

In the 2005 and 2009 elections, the FrP increased its voter support to become the second-largest party after the Labour Party. But Labour was able to cobble together a coalition government with the Socialist Left Party and the Centre Party in both cases. In 2013, the Conservative Party moved into second place ahead of the FrP but reached out to the party in coalition negotiations. The two agreed to form a governing coalition, allowing the FrP to enter government for the first time. The coalition was in office until 2017.

Populism in the 2021 elections: Now it is the turn of “ordinary people”

In January 2020, the FrP staged a dramatic exit from the governing right-wing coalition due to policy disagreements with its partners, the Liberal Party and the Christian Democrats. The FrP claimed that the government’s decision to bring a woman who had joined ISIS in Syria and her child back to Norway was the main reason for leaving the government. This left the party with a good margin to reposition itself as an oppositional challenger party in time for the national election in the autumn of 2021. But several internal ideological battles played out between the libertarian and national conservative factions in the autumn of 2020. The deputy leader Sylvi Listhaug took a prominent role alongside party chief Siv Jensen in rooting out radical nationalist elements from the party.

Like other right-wing populist parties in Europe, the FrP has been led by female party leaders since the mid-2000s. When Jensen stepped down as party leader in February 2021, she pointed to Listhaug as her preferred successor. Listhaug was unanimously elected party leader three months later during a party congress. Her



victory speech was laden with neoliberal populist rhetoric: “We shall still maintain the soul of the party, which is that we dare where others are silent. That we challenge the elite and the experts, and we stand up for individuals” (cited in Helljesen, 2021). Listhaug’s election was nevertheless tainted by a debate centred on the complete lack of female representatives among the remaining ten members of the party’s central board (Rognsvåg, 2021).

As a term, populism now carries negative connotations in Norwegian public political discourse. As a derogative, “populism” connotes opportunistic political practices, short-term solutions, and a lack of scruples and principles (Bjørklund, 2004). Populism was avidly used by politicians, journalists, and political commentators in the months leading up to the national elections in September 2021, as the slogan “now it is the turn of ordinary people” took centre stage in the election campaign of the Labour Party and the Centre Party. While this rhetoric was criticized and ridiculed, the two parties gained enough electoral support (26.3% and 13.5%, respectively) to form a coalition government and oust the incumbent right-wing coalition. This centre-left project thus utilizes populist rhetoric to challenge the liberal–conservative status quo coalitions governing since 2013. This follows a broader historical pattern of Nordic populism, which functions as a strategy for fringe parties to challenge an existing hegemony in attempts to gain mainstream positions (Palonen & Sunnercrantz, 2021). A type of “rural populism” fronted by the leader of the Centre Party contributed to their electoral success already in the local and regional elections of 2019.

The Centre Party is one of the few parties that increased its electoral support in the 2021 election, along with other fringe parties like the Socialist Left Party, the Red Party, and the Green Party. Simultaneously, the FrP’s vote share dropped from 15.2% in 2019 to 11.6 % in the 2021 election. This was their worst result since 1993. Aggregated polling results in the past year show a slight increase for the party in the summer of 2022 and a relatively stable downward trend back to 11.8% since then. The Labour Party has experienced a general fall in support since the election (to between 17.8 and 19.6% in the past six months) and the Centre Party (between 5.2 and 7.5 % in the past six months). All the while, the conservative Right party steadily increased from 20.4% in the election to tipping above 30% in support in late 2022 and early 2023 (Stortingsvalg: Hele Landet, n.d.). It is difficult to assess whether this relates to the war in Ukraine. While a direct causal relation seems unlikely, it seems more likely that these figures are indirectly related to the invasion of Ukraine and directly related to a crisis much closer to home, namely, increased

energy prices coupled with the government's inability to live up to its many promises from the election campaign.

The Progress Party strategy in the Ukraine war

The war in Ukraine and the government's handling of the situation do not seem to cause a stir among voters or parties. Most parties are in general agreement on how to handle the situation. Both the Socialist Left and the Red party internally debate and disagree as to whether Norway should send weapons to Ukraine. The FrP also takes a critical stance on Russia's invasion of Ukraine and supports the government's politics on the matter. While the FrP is largely silent in debates regarding the handling of the war in terms of international politics, they take the opportunity to exploit war-related issues such as energy prices, fossil fuel production and farming.

The Progress Party does not share the pure authoritarianism and illiberalism of Putin's regime. The war has seemingly had both direct and indirect effects on the FrP's discourse. First, in reassessing Norwegian defence policy, the party's argumentation takes a more internationalist rather than nationalist turn. The FrP is a strong NATO advocate but is alone in seeing NATO as a genuinely collaborative organization. Since Norway will "play on the same team as the Finns" in case of an invasion from the east, the party argues that Norway should change its defence investment to complement the capabilities of its neighbouring newcomers to NATO (Sweden and Finland).

The fact that Russia shares a long border with Norway has complicated the political disapproval of all things Russian. The border region in northeastern Norway is sparsely populated and potentially vulnerable because of its geographical remoteness from more densely populated and politically prioritized areas in the south. Therefore, Norway and its extended state apparatus maintained bilateral cooperation and relations with Russian counterparts well into 2021. Intriguingly, the FrP's enmity with the Labour Party clashes with their NATO-friendly stance, as the NATO secretary-general is Jens Stoltenberg, a former Labour Party prime minister of Norway. Hence, while the FrP criticizes the Labour Party and Stoltenberg's politics at home – they are not as critical of Stoltenberg's politics as NATO secretary-general. Moreover, the FrP and Listhaug especially endorse good relations with the US. But individual spokespersons from the FrP are more understanding and even defensive of Russian actions, including former party leader Hagen and the spokesperson on foreign relations and defence (Myhre et al., 2022).



While in power, the FrP is quite happy to admit Christian immigrants from Poland and the Baltics – while less enthusiastic about immigrants from the Global South. This pattern is recognizable in the overall media discourse in Norway following the invasion of Ukraine. Shortly after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, Europe faced a refugee crisis similar to that of 2015, when more than 800,000 refugees arrived in Europe by boat across the Mediterranean. European countries once again had to decide how to deal with hundreds of thousands and soon over a million displaced people. Norwegian media narratives of Ukrainian refugees are drastically different from the narratives of refugees from Syria, for example. Debates discuss whether the immense support for and engagement regarding Ukrainian refugees (compared to the more negative storylines of refugees from, say, Afghanistan or Syria) is a sign of sheer racism. Ukrainian refugees feature daily in media reports from the frontline, as well as border crossings, and the many various receptions and accommodations for refugees in Norway.

This differential treatment of refugees eventually gained attention in debate forums. Some argue that “Russia’s invasion of Ukraine reveals systemic racism in European states’ refugee and asylum policies” (Kjellmo Larsen, 2022). The Progress Party—which has promoted very strict asylum and deportation policies for years (see, e.g., Progress Party, n.d.)—now suggests a so-called fast track for Ukrainians who come to Norway by, for example, granting work permits from day one (Progress Party, 2022b, 2022c). What is more, they wish to “immediately stop the retrieval of resettlement refugees from other areas of the world and give priority to helping European refugees from Ukraine” (Progress Party, 2022a).

The energy crisis resulting from the war has opened a window of opportunity for Finnish populist Far Right parties to reclaim their populist and rural roots in antagonizing energy policies and mobilizing the “regular people” through petro-friendly politics and campaigns against spiking prices and VAT on fossil fuels, electricity, and food. Hence, the internationalist free-market ideology is rearing its head again in Norwegian right-wing populism. That Norway profits from the war is no secret. In September 2022, *The Economist* reported that Norway would gain over US\$200 billion in extra revenue a year from the sale of oil, gas, and electricity due to the Ukraine war (The Economist, 2022). The FrP takes this opportunity to argue for increased exploration activity on the Norwegian continental shelf. This argument is framed in terms of energy security and taking “responsibility for making Europe less dependent on Russia’s energy supply” (Progress Party, 2022a). Hence, an emphasized sense of a crisis serves as a useful building block in the

Progress Party's existing fossil fuel policies. Moreover, the party's leader mobilizes against the fact that "the state becomes richer – people become poorer" (Politisk kvarter, 2022).

As a government party, the FrP contributed to tying Norway closer to the European power market through several power cables that connect the Norwegian national grid to those of adjacent countries. These have been the subject of dispute in the past few years. As recently as 2018, the former Progress Party Minister of Petroleum and Energy (2013–16) argued whole-heartedly in favour of the international market model (Hansen & Moe, 2022). The mainstream discourse thus far "represents a political counterweight to sovereignty claims and resource nationalism" (Hansen & Moe, 2022, p. 7), which we might associate with the populist Far Right. However, the FrP changed its rhetoric through 2021 and 2022 from market-friendly internationalism towards energy sovereignty. This is coupled with skyrocketing electricity prices relative to pre-pandemic times. In 2021 and 2022, the exploding electricity prices hit Norwegian citizens and businesses hard, given their propensity for high consumption. Prices were hotly debated, not least during the election campaigns in 2021, and the centre-left government that took office in the autumn of 2021 quickly rolled out a subsidy programme for households in time for the winter months of 2021–22.

The electricity prices increased in the aftermath of the invasion of Ukraine and are routinely blamed on the international market and cables. Nevertheless, the many co-dependent variables that affect electricity prices are so complex that neither politicians nor experts agree on how the prices are set or how much the two cables have affected prices. Nonetheless, the FrP leader Listhaug claimed in November 2022 that "there is no doubt that the high prices in Europe are largely due to the war" (Solvang, 2022) and that the two cables for increased export capacity are also to blame for higher prices. Moreover, the first significant price increase in the winter of 2020–21 followed a long period of low energy prices.

An argument concerning who and what is to blame for the high energy costs developed between the Labour Party and the FrP in the autumn of 2022. Listhaug accused the government of blaming too much on the war and not taking sufficient responsibility for increased prices in the summer of 2021. The Labour Party, on the other hand, accuses Listhaug of playing on polarization and hatred to recruit voters. Media recounts how the social democratic minister of climate and environment sees parallels between Listhaug and Putin:



I wouldn't say in any way that she's doing it on Putin's behalf because I don't believe that for a moment, but that's the kind of reaction he wants, namely, "us against them", internally in the West, that we are divided. (Karlsen, 2022)

Listhaug later condemned these accusations and managed to reassert a focus on the two cables and "naïve European politicians" (Heldahl & Karlsen, 2022). In the end, the complexity of the electricity market has been simplified in media narratives and has become one of the major concerns for Norwegian households. The governing parties' inability to accommodate public grievances of the high prices is often named as one of the reasons why the Centre Party's popular support has dropped from the election results of 13.5% to polling between 4.5–7.5 % through 2022–23.

In October 2022, the FrP suddenly demanded a maximum price for electricity. But this is not an anti-marketization argument since, as Listhaug emphasizes, ownership in the energy market is dominated by state actors (usually in the form of municipal and regional ownership of electricity companies) (Solvang, 2022). The FrP wishes to set a maximum price on electricity for "industry and business" and "common people" at 0.5 NOK per kWh (Progress Party, 2021; Solvang, 2022). True to form, the FrP does not wish to regulate the energy market as such but for the state to provide subsidies covering 100% of the electricity prices over 0.50 Norwegian krone (NOK) per kWh (about €0.05). Businesses and private customers may thus receive support for the difference between 0.50 NOK and up to their billed price (a slightly higher subsidy than the electricity support scheme in place since December 2021). While this proposal did not receive sufficient support in parliament, it shows that the FrP promotes a power policy relatively similar to that which populists on the Left—in the Socialist Left Party and the Red Party—have long since propagated.

Another issue debated since the invasion of Ukraine is that Norway has profited greatly from the ensuing increase in oil and gas prices. Intriguingly, the FrP uses this as a reason for increased subsidies in electricity prices:

The money flows into the treasury from the oil and gas sector. Never before have we made more money from this than now. Of course, we can afford to let some of this benefit ordinary people if there is political will. (Progress Party, 2021)

One could argue that this is related to the “demand side” of right-wing populism. Norwegian political parties seem almost to compete on the matter of who can lower the costs of electricity the most for households and businesses in times of skyrocketing prices in 2022–23. Hence, economic grievances amongst the electorate could be the reason behind the FrP’s U-turn from free-market liberalism to increased state interference. Moreover, the FrP takes on and propagates common-sense explanations that “everybody can see” (Solvang, 2022) when seeking to account for price rises.

Conclusion

The effects of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine on right-wing populism in Norway are mostly indirect. The traditional populists in the Norwegian Progress Party mobilize less on the issue of military defence and international relations and more on high fuel prices, high electricity prices and tighter finances for both private households and the business sector. These domestic issues are framed partly as consequences of the war. It is widely recognized that as a producer of fossil fuels, Norway profits extensively from the war and Europe’s turn away from Russian oil and gas. The FrP equates the increased expenses for business and “common people” with the severity of the refugee crisis and the security threat that the war has triggered.

References

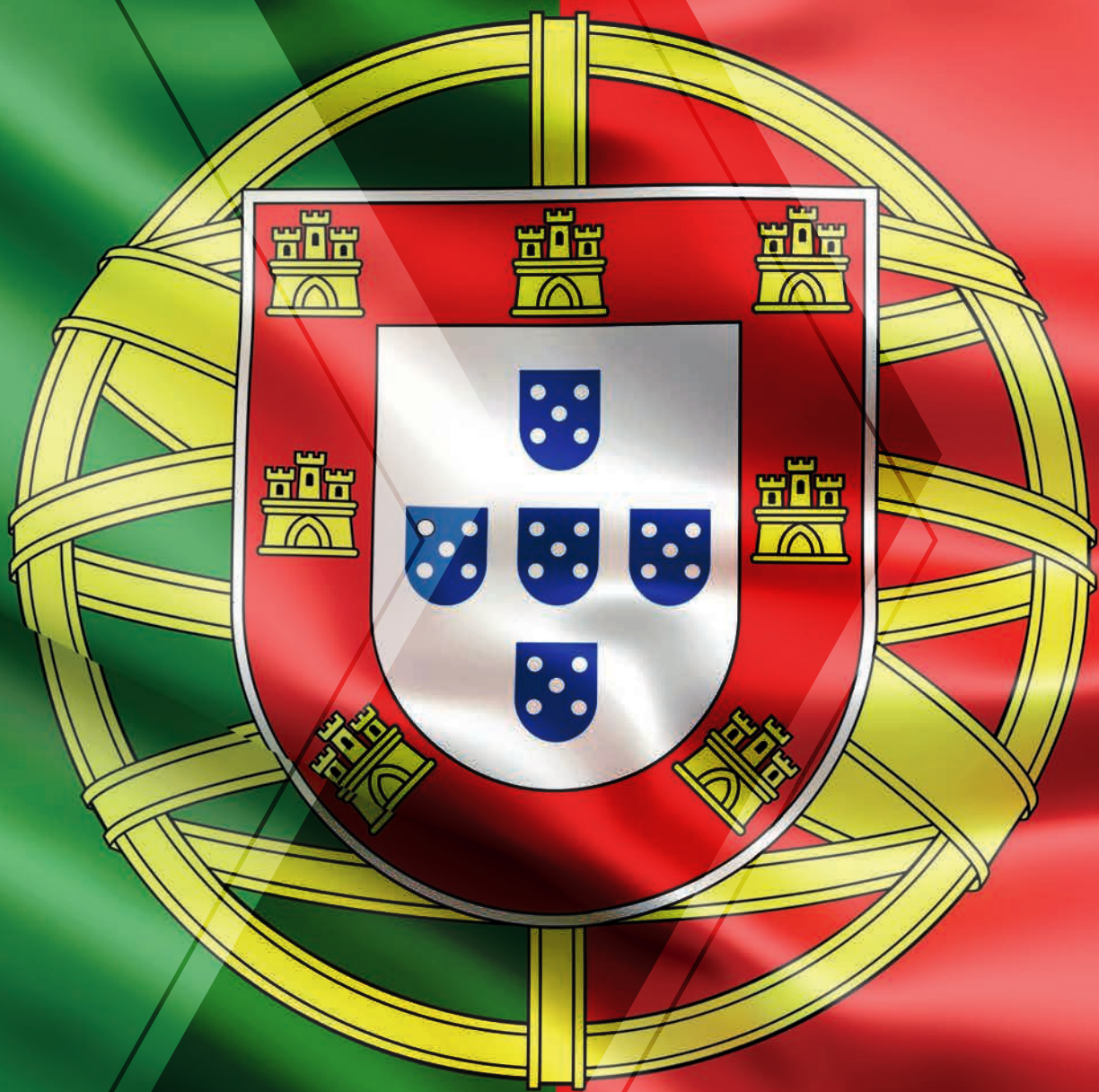
- Bjørklund, T. (2004). Norsk populisme fra Ottar Brox til Carl I. Hagen. *Nytt Norsk Tidsskrift*, 21(03–04), 410–419. <https://doi.org/10.18261/ISSN1504-3053-2004-03-04-16>
- Hansen, S. T., & Moe, E. (2022). Renewable energy expansion or the preservation of national energy sovereignty? Norwegian renewable energy policy meets resource nationalism. *Political Geography*, 99, 102760. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2022.102760>
- Heldahl, H., & Karlsen, M. Ø. (2022, September 21). *Listhaug slår tilbake mot Putin-anklager i strømdebatten: – Spinnvill beskyldning*. Nettavisen. <https://www.nettavisen.no/5-95-661032>
- Helljesen, V. (2021, May 8). *Nå er Sylvi Listhaug Frp-leder*. NRK. <https://www.nrk.no/norge/na-er-sylvi-listhaug-frp-leder-1.15488789>



- Karlsen, M. Ø. (2022, September 20). *Kritiserer Listhaug for «Putin-taktikk»*. Nettavisen. <https://www.nettavisen.no/12-95-3424315854>
- Kjellmo Larsen, H. (2022, March 4). Det er noe som skurrer. *Dagbladet.no*. <https://www.dagbladet.no/meninger/det-er-noe-som-skurrer/75510485>
- Myhre, M. H., Aasland, A., & Holm-Hansen, J. (2022). “Crimea will forever be Russian”: Dissenting Norwegian media discourses on Russia’s annexation of Crimea. *European Politics and Society*, Advance online publication, 1–24. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23745118.2022.2103286>
- Palonen, E., & Sunnercrantz, L. (2021). Nordic populist parties as hegemony challengers. In A. Koivunen, J. Ojala, & J. Holmén (Eds.), *The Nordic economic, social and political model: Challenges in the 21st Century*. Routledge. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4324/9780429026690-8>
- Politisk kvarter. (2022, April 22). *Krigskrisekrav* [Radio broadcast]. NRK Radio. https://radio.nrk.no/podkast/politisk_kvarter/sesong/202204/1_6ad21999-9da9-4c78-9219-999da90c78f9
- Progress Party. (n.d.). *Mottak av flyktninger i Norge*. Retrieved January 23, 2023, from <https://www.frp.no/var-politikk/innvandring-og-integrering/flyktninger>
- Progress Party. (2021, October 20). *FrP vil gi deg billigere strøm*. <https://www.frp.no/nyheter/frp-vil-gi-deg-billigere-strom>
- Progress Party (2022a, March 2). *Situasjonen i Ukraina: Dette mener FrP*. <https://www.frp.no/nyheter/situasjonen-i-ukraina-dette-mener-frp>
- Progress Party. (2022b, March 9). *FrP vil ha tilpasset integreringsløp for ukrainske flyktninger*. <https://www.frp.no/nyheter/frp-vil-ha-tilpasset-integreringslop-for-ukrainske-flyktninger>
- Progress Party (2022c, March 25). *Ukrainske flyktninger må inn i arbeidslivet*. <https://www.frp.no/nyheter/ukrainske-flyktninger-ma-inn-i-arbeidslivet>
- Rognsvåg, S. (2021, March 30). *FrP innstiller bare menn til sentralstyret – etter Listhaug*. NRK. https://www.nrk.no/vestland/frp-innstiller-bare-menn-til-sentralstyret-_etter-listhaug-1.15439527
- Solvang, F. (Host). (2022, November 8). *Valla og co. Vil gi deg strøm til kostpris* [Television broadcast]. NRK TV. <https://tv.nrk.no/serie/debatten>
- Stortingsvalg: Hele landet. (n.d.). *Pollofpolls.no*. Retrieved March 2, 2023, from <http://www.pollofpolls.no/?cmd=Stortinget>
- The Economist. (2022, September 8). *Norway is profiting embarrassingly from war in Europe*. <https://www.economist.com/europe/2022/09/08/norway-is-profiting-embarrassingly-from-war-in-europe>



PORTUGAL



The Ukraine-Russia war and the Far Right in Portugal: Minimal impacts on the rising populist Chega party

Afonso Biscaia and Susana Salgado***

Institute of Social Sciences, University of Lisbon

Abstract

The effects of the Russia-Ukraine war on Portuguese politics have been negligible, leading to only minor changes in political positions or the relative popularity of the parties. Chega was the first right-wing populist political party to achieve a parliamentary breakthrough in Portugal, emerging as the third-largest political force after elections in January 2022. It shares rhetorical features and positions with European counterparts but distinguishes itself by its flexibility. Unencumbered by association with the Russian regime, Chega has been free to take the more popular position among voters, supporting Ukraine. Furthermore, one of its foremost adversaries, the Portuguese Communist Party, took an ambiguous position regarding the invasion of Ukraine, making Chega's decision about positioning clearer. Nevertheless, Chega has used the war instrumentally in service of its established priorities—namely, nationalism, opposition to immigration, and militarism. Moreover, after temporarily setting aside welfare chauvinism, the party reverted to this staple as the war continued. We shed light on the rhetoric and positioning of Chega and its leader, André Ventura, by analysing 47 parliamentary commentaries by Chega MPs in 2021 and 2022 and 28 tweets mentioning Ukraine, Russia, nationals from both countries, or the war posted by Ventura during the same period.

Keywords: Portugal; right-wing populism; Chega; André Ventura; Twitter; legislative proceedings

* joseafonsobiscaia@gmail.com, ** susana.salgado@ics.ulisboa.pt

Afonso, Biscaia & Salgado, Susana. (2023). "The Ukraine-Russia war and the Far Right in Portugal: Minimal impacts on the rising populist Chega party." In: *The Impacts of the Russian Invasion of Ukraine on Right-wing Populism in Europe*. (eds). Gilles Ivaldi and Emilia Zankina. European Center for Populism Studies (ECPS). March 8, 2023. Brussels. <https://doi.org/10.55271/rp0026>



Background: Votes, rhetoric, and ideology

Chega is currently Portugal's largest right-wing populist party and the third-largest political party overall. Established in 2019, Chega's parliamentary breakthrough came the same year when founder and leader André Ventura was elected as the party's lone MP. Then, in 2022, Ventura was joined by 11 new Chega MPs after the party took 7.18% of the vote in snap elections held in January. The Portuguese Far Right landscape includes two other noteworthy parties, Ergue-te! (Rise Up!) and ADN (Alternativa Democrática Nacional). However, they are electorally irrelevant (their combined vote share in the 2022 elections was 0.29%).

The rise of right-wing populism in Portugal came as something of a surprise. With the right-wing Estado Novo authoritarian regime still in living memory, the country had been considered resistant to Far Right mobilization, with news media coverage being consistently critical of populist or radical right-wing actors (Salgado & Zúquete, 2016; Salgado, 2019). Even though Ventura was the sole MP for Chega until 2022, the party began receiving disproportionate media coverage, as usually happens to smaller parties with seats in the national Parliament (Salgado, 2022). Nevertheless, despite the 11 new MPs who joined Ventura in 2022, Chega remains a "one-man show" (Halikiopoulou & Vlandas, 2022). Ventura is the uncontested leader and face of the party, with internal power so concentrated in his hands that Portugal's Constitutional Court deemed the party charter unconstitutional in late 2022 (Pinto de Mesquita & Rodrigues, 2022).

Furthermore, media resistance to right-wing populism should not be equated with the absence of demand for it. For example, intolerant cultural attitudes led nearly 54% of Portuguese respondents to the 2014 European Social Survey to agree with the statement, "Some cultural groups are clearly superior to others" (European Social Survey, 2014). Moreover, "the size of the Roma minority [and] percentage of social assistance recipients" in a given locality are "associated with higher radical-right vote shares", although, somewhat surprisingly, the "classic" factors seen as driving such voters (such as high unemployment and the presence of sizeable immigrant minority communities) do not (Afonso, 2021, p. 5).

Constants in Ventura's rhetoric include references to a homogeneous community of "righteous Portuguese" people (*Portugueses de bem*) sharing certain norms and values and anti-system positioning by constructing an agonistic dichotomy between Chega (which means "enough!") and the "establishment" parties and politicians,

but also the regime itself (Biscaia & Salgado, 2022; Pimenta et al., 2022). Chega also evinces vocal support for the police and enthusiastically deploys penal populism (i.e., exploiting public anxiety about crime for political gain) (Bottoms, 1995).

Chega and André Ventura's rhetoric and policy proposals bear similarities with other radical right-wing populist political actors across the European Conservatives and Reformists and Identity and Democracy groups in the European Parliament. Ideologically, Chega describes itself as "liberal-conservative" (Chega, 2021), and Ventura's rhetoric shares features with European counterparts, such as nativism and authoritarianism. But the party's primary feature is its *pliability*. Put differently, Chega and Ventura constantly seek to "read the room" (Albertazzi et al., 2022) to maximize visibility and media coverage. They are adept at adapting right-wing populist talking points to Portuguese political realities, adopting ambivalent rhetorical strategies, and frequently shifting positions. For instance, research has observed that European populist Radical Right movements do not usually prioritize economic issues (Morini, 2018). Chega follows this tendency, making exceptions for high-profile issues such as fiscal policy and tolls on roads serving economically deprived areas (Jornal de Notícias, 2022; Pires, 2022), but also by being quick to retract unpopular policy proposals, such as minimizing state intervention in the health and education sectors (Mendes, 2022).

Immigration stances encapsulate the party's rhetorical pliability. For instance, despite its low salience among voters (Reis de Oliveira, 2022), Chega's 2021 electoral programme contained several proposals aimed at reducing immigration flows, including rescinding the UN's Global Compact for Migration and rejecting naturalization paths for asylum seekers, using conspiracist discourse (the "Great Replacement") and describing immigrants as "a threat to the survival of the Portuguese as a people with its own identity" (Chega, 2021). At the same time, Ventura seldom mentions immigration in public, and when he has, it has usually been to defend Portugal's border police, the Serviço de Estrangeiros e Fronteiras (SEF), from accusations of misconduct and brutality. In sum, Ventura uses migration instrumentally as a pretext to engage in welfare chauvinism and defend the state authorities.

In line with its European party family's rejection of "any policy designed to create a supra-state or supra-national model" (Identity and Democracy Party, 2019), Chega claims to stand for a "Europe of nations", working toward "integration, not dilution" (Chega, n.d. a). However, the EU and European integration are not



prominent features of its rhetoric, nor does it advance hard Eurosceptic proposals such as reversing European integration or demanding Portugal's exit from the Eurozone (much less the Union itself). In Chega's 2021 manifesto, sovereigntist claims are used only in connection with immigration and administrative issues (Chega, n.d. b). In Portugal, it is parties of the Left, especially the PCP, that monopolize sovereigntist anti-EU, anti-Euro, and anti-NATO discourses. The PCP proposed to "staunchly stand up against submission to the Euro and the EU's impositions and conditionalities, taking back the tools Portugal needs for its sovereign development" as part of its platform for the last European Parliament elections (Partido Comunista Português, 2019).

Taking the same position as the communists would be untenable for Chega since it claims to unreservedly oppose them. Thus, while Chega makes no explicit reference to NATO in its official campaign materials, it often voices its support for Portugal's participation in the alliance, coherent with its general militarism (See, e.g., Assembleia da República, 2022p; Assembleia da República, 2022q). Furthermore, while the party is ideologically close to the Putin regime—for instance, in its opposition to the expansion of LGBTQ rights articulated through "opposition to gender ideology" and the politicization of religion—it does not have the same kind of ties to Moscow as other European right-wing populist parties (Weiss, 2020). For example, it stops short of expressing admiration for Vladimir Putin and has managed to avoid credible accusations of financial ties with the Kremlin.

Interpreting the Russia-Ukraine war

When Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, Chega backed Kyiv. However, the decision was apparently more informed by political expediency than principle. Unlike many other Far Right parties in Europe, such as Matteo Salvini's Lega or Marine Le Pen's Front National, Chega had few established commitments or vulnerabilities vis-à-vis Russia, so it was free to take the more popular position of supporting Ukraine without concerns about being accused of "flip-flopping". A 2022 survey found 78% of Portuguese respondents favour "EU-coordinated defence", and 38% endorse direct NATO military intervention in the conflict (Public Opinion Monitoring Unit, 2022).

In fact, in early 2021, Ventura called for harsher sanctions on the Russian "enemy" in light of ongoing Russian provocation in the Donbas and the annexation of Crimea, demanding they be applied to the entire economy rather than individual

Russians (Assembleia da República, 2021). On the day of the 2022 invasion, Ventura “unreservedly” denounced Putin’s aggression in Parliament, urging Portugal to do “everything in its power, militarily and sanctions-wise [against Russia]” (Assembleia da República, 2022a, p. 18), and used Twitter to warn followers of the “danger” posed by “Putin’s and China’s friends in the Portuguese Parliament” (Ventura, 2022a).

Nevertheless, the Chega leader’s position was not supported unanimously within his party (at least not initially). On February 24, António Tânger Corrêa, one of Chega’s vice presidents, posted on Facebook characterizing the invasion as a legitimate reaction to “NATO encirclement of Russia” and accusing Ukraine’s president, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, of “siding with avowed Nazis”, echoing official Russian justification of the invasion (Malhado, 2022). Tânger Corrêa was backed by high-profile party members, including the famous actress Maria Vieira, a municipal deputy in Cascais near Lisbon, who voted against a local resolution condemning him and used Facebook to deride President Zelenskyy as a “puppet” (Malhado, 2022). These internal tensions were quickly resolved due to Ventura’s centrality within the party structure and a strong exogenous incentive provided by parties on the Left, particularly the PCP.

The oldest active Portuguese political party, the PCP was founded in 1921 and was the pivotal player in the resistance against the Estado Novo regime. It developed in a close, clandestine relationship with the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) and Eastern Bloc states, which it perceived as natural allies (Cunhal, 1997). After democratization in 1974, the PCP resisted the trend toward autonomization from the CPSU and the adoption of “Eurocommunism” exemplified by its Italian, French and Spanish counterparts (Cunhal, 1977). The PCP continues to advocate “progressive patriotic Left policies,” which it believes will lead to a “sorely needed anti-monopolist, anti-imperialist rupture”, and argues for the dissolution of NATO as a “crucial objective towards national sovereignty and world peace” (Partido Comunista Português, 2010), although the party, like Chega, has rejected identification with the Putin regime (Partido Comunista Português, n.d.).

During the February 24 parliamentary debate following Russia’s attack on Ukraine, João Oliveira, a PCP MP, read the situation from this perspective and diagnosed the issue in Ukraine as part of



[T]he same problem we've seen in Yugoslavia, Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, and Syria. The problem is the use of siege tactics, confrontation, and war to impose economic relations that engender injustice, inequality, and appropriation [prescribing] an end to escalating political, economic, and military confrontation by NATO, the USA, and the EU towards Russia and relying on its contribution towards a negotiated political, peaceful, resolution". (Assembleia da República, 2022a, p. 10)

Thus, Chega's choice of Ventura's pro-Ukrainian positioning was made easier by the PCP's position. The party could observe how unpopular the communists' ambivalent positioning was with voters and — since the PCP was the only party to consistently reject condemning the invasion — readily isolate the communists politically.

Exploiting the Russia-Ukraine war

In the weeks after the invasion, Chega's efforts were directed at quelling doubts about its position, loudly proclaiming support for Ukraine. An early example concerned a protest scheduled for February 27 in front of the Russian embassy in Lisbon, organized by the youth wings of all the major political parties. Chega was the only party not invited to participate, part of an orchestrated strategy to establish a *cordon sanitaire* around it (Ribeiro, 2022). In response, Ventura tweeted his condemnation of other parties' "low politics" (Ventura, 2022b). On the same day, Chega organized its own demonstration in front of the Ukrainian embassy, where Ventura was formally introduced to Ina Ohnivets, the Ukrainian ambassador to Portugal. Although Chega's protest turned out to be smaller than the other parties', it did allow Ventura to draw significant media coverage, be photographed standing side-by-side with the ambassador and play to the cameras in the role of party leader-cum-statesman (Rato, 2022). Ventura also suggested an ideological similitude between his party and Ukrainian resistance to invasion, equating its members' "love for country" with "positive nationalism leading Ukrainians to defend themselves fearlessly from Russian aggression" (Assembleia da República, 2022b, p. 16).

The invasion was also used as ammunition against the Left. In a tweet soon after Russia's invasion, Ventura prophesized that the war would be "lethal to Putin and Russian development, but also to the old Portuguese Communist Party, which is absolutely anachronistic in the 21st century. And one has to say 'good riddance!'"

(Ventura, 2022c). When PCP MPs were absent from President Zelensky's address to the Portuguese Parliament (Lopes, 2022), Ventura accused the communists of having "[Ukrainian] women's, children's and senior citizens' blood on [their] hands" (Assembleia da República, 2022e, p. 8). Simultaneously, when the Left attempted to highlight Chega's ideological proximity with the Kremlin, such as when Pedro Filipe Soares of the Left Bloc (Bloco de Esquerda, BE) accused Ventura of "walking hand-in-hand with Marine Le Pen, who walks hand-in-hand with Putin" (Assembleia da República, 2022d, p. 59), Ventura reversed the accusations. Specifically, he pointed to the ambiguous positions of some members of The Left in the European Parliament - GUE/NGL European party group, such as Spain's Podemos, which, according to the Chega leader, "criticized sanctions on Russia and military support to Ukraine" (ibid., p. 60-61). Similarly, in September 2022, when Jerónimo de Sousa, the PCP leader at the time, tried to dispel the perception of proximity between his party and Russia by equating Putin's authoritarianism with Chega's, Ventura sneered in a tweet that "commies are funny: they're incapable of condemning the war in Ukraine, blame the West for the inflation crisis, and reject sanctions on Russia, yet they say the President of Chega is like "Putin"" (Ventura, 2022f).

The ongoing war also presented an opportunity for Chega to display its militarism. The party repeatedly called for increased spending on armed forces with the aim, in MP Diogo Pacheco de Amorim's words, of confronting the "unforeseen hazards of an extremely geostrategically volatile world" (Assembleia da República, 2022e, p. 9) and fulfilling Portugal's obligations towards NATO, as MP Pedro Pessanha stressed more than once (Assembleia da República, 2021, p. 73 , 2022 p. 32).

Immigration was also brought to the fore in connection with the situation in Ukraine. Party whip Pedro Pinto condemned a proposed reorganization of the SEF, saying it would make it easier for "criminals to blend with people who are actually running from a war [...] as is already happening, especially in the Algarve, with migrants coming from Morocco carrying iPhones" (Assembleia da República, 2022g, p. 59). Ventura employed xenophobic rhetoric in his parliamentary speeches outlining Chega's concerns with non-Ukrainian migration to Europe. He asserted that it was "a disservice to Europe" to compare Ukrainians to other migrants coming to Europe, claiming that in the latter case was tantamount to "substitution of the European population by people from North Africa or the Middle East [...] who] treat women as objects, think women should wear the burka to Parliament and believe our Western values should be discarded" (Assembleia da República, 2022k, p. 8).



As the war dragged on and attention moved back to domestic politics, Chega's defence of Ukraine progressively became less solid as it reverted to welfare chauvinist discourse. For example, in early March, André Ventura tweeted about "doing everything we can to stand up for the Ukrainian people" (Ventura, 2022d), only to question Portuguese financial support for Ukraine two months later, tweeting that the money should be spent on pensioners (Ventura, 2022e) and assailing the government's priorities in a parliamentary speech as "upside-down" (Assembleia da República, 2022j, p. 11).

The Russia-Ukraine war also provided avenues for Chega to pursue previous agenda priorities. For instance, Ventura had blasted the government on Twitter for rising gas and energy prices already in 2021 (e.g., Ventura, 2021a, Ventura, 2021b) and continued to do so in 2022, with Ventura demanding government intervention to control gas prices in his first parliamentary intervention after the invasion, and alleging voters prioritized gas prices over the war (Assembleia da República 2022a, p. 18, 2022g, p.18). Other Chega MPs mentioned energy prices in connection to the war in ten further separate parliamentary proceedings (Assembleia da República, 2022c, p. 36; 2022f, p. 13; 2022h, p. 37; 2022j, p. 27; 2021l, p. 71; 2022m, p. 22; 2022n, p. 39; 2022o, p. 23-24; 2022q, p. 25; 2022r, p.16). Other issues touched upon by Chega MPs using war framing included a proposal to lower municipal real estate tax due to an alleged increase in demand due to the conflict (Assembleia da República 2022h, p. 37) and criticism of the National Health Service (SNS) for "killing more people than the war" (2022p, p. 51).

Discussion

Chega and André Ventura's discourses on Ukraine were deployed instrumentally, allowing Chega to continue to trail a path toward normalization as a player in the political system. Initially, it allowed the party to side with the majority opinion, both in Parliament and among voters, and, conversely, take advantage of the fact that one of its main political adversaries did not, and could thus be isolated and portrayed as anachronistic, radical, and out-of-touch, in contrast with Chega's sensible position. Then, when the weight of war waned in voters' minds, Ventura and Chega MPs began to use it as a pretext to articulate pre-existing political priorities, such as militarism, opposition to immigration, and welfare chauvinism.

Chega's strategy was moderately successful. Since the January 2022 election predates the invasion, there were no concrete, immediate electoral gains to be had,

but the party hovered around the 9% mark in opinion polls taken in late 2022 and early 2023 (e.g., ICS–ISCTE Surveys, 2022; Rodrigues, 2023), meaning a slight upward trend. Other parties were hard-pressed to paint Chega's position as unreasonable or out of bounds, and the attempt to isolate PCP was not carried out by Chega alone, as other parties also used PCP's refusal to explicitly concede Russian blame for the war against it. The Communists were steadily losing electoral support. At the 2015 election, they obtained 8.25% of the vote (17 MPs), and by the 2022 election, this had fallen to 4.3% (6 MPs). Still, the PCP seems rather unaffected by developments, as neither the party's overall unpopular positions on Ukraine nor the replacement of former leader Jerónimo de Sousa by the younger, largely unknown Paulo Raimundo has significantly altered its popularity in the polls (e.g., Rodrigues, 2023).

At the time of writing (February 2023), the war in Ukraine seems to have caused few changes to the Portuguese political landscape, even if inflation caused by the ongoing war is a factor in the slightly eroding popularity of the current Socialist Party (PS) government, in office since 2015. This is also the case when looking at Chega as the leading right-wing populist party in the country. The conflict is unlikely to cause deep rifts, as the relative success of Ventura's strategy and his undisputed internal power ensure that doubts and disagreements about the matter will most likely not be voiced. Party positioning regarding key issues is also unchanged and has not impeded Chega's transformation of the Portuguese political system by carving space for and normalizing right-wing populist actors.



References

- Afonso, A. (2021). Correlates of aggregate support for the radical right in Portugal. *Research and Politics*, vol. 8(3). 1-9. DOI: 10.1177/20531680211029416
- Assembleia da República. (2021, March 3). *Diário da Assembleia da República I Série –Número 48* (XIV Legislatura 2rd Sessão Legislativa (2020-2021)). <https://app.parlamento.pt/webutils/docs/DAR-I-048.pdf>
- Assembleia da República. (2022a, February 24). *Diário da Assembleia da República I Série –Número 34* (XIV Legislatura 3rd Sessão Legislativa (2021-2022)). <https://app.parlamento.pt/webutils/docs/DAR-I-034.pdf>
- Assembleia da República. (2022b, March 30). *Diário da Assembleia da República I Série –Número 1* (XIV Legislatura 1st Sessão Legislativa (2022-2023)). <https://app.parlamento.pt/webutils/docs/DAR-I-001.pdf>
- Assembleia da República. (2022c, April 8). *Diário da Assembleia da República I Série –Número 5* (XV Legislatura 1st Sessão Legislativa (2022-2023)). <https://app.parlamento.pt/webutils/docs/DAR-I-004.pdf>
- Assembleia da República. (2022d, April 14). *Diário da Assembleia da República I Série –Número 5* (XV Legislatura 1st Sessão Legislativa (2022-2023)). <https://app.parlamento.pt/webutils/docs/DAR-I-005.pdf>
- Assembleia da República. (2022e, April 21). *Diário da Assembleia da República I Série –Número 6* (XV Legislatura 1st Sessão Legislativa (2022-2023)). <https://app.parlamento.pt/webutils/docs/DAR-I-006.pdf>
- Assembleia da República. (2022f, April 23). *Diário da Assembleia da República I Série –Número 6* (XV Legislatura 1st Sessão Legislativa (2022-2023)). <https://app.parlamento.pt/webutils/docs/DAR-I-009.pdf>
- Assembleia da República. (2022g, April 27). *Diário da Assembleia da República I Série – Número 11* (XV Legislatura 1st Sessão Legislativa (2022-2023)). <https://app.parlamento.pt/webutils/docs/DAR-I-011.pdf>
- Assembleia da República. (2022h, April 28). *Diário da Assembleia da República I Série – Número 12* (XV Legislatura 1st Sessão Legislativa (2022-2023)). <https://app.parlamento.pt/webutils/docs/DAR-I-012.pdf>
- Assembleia da República. (2022i, May 23). *Diário da Assembleia da República I Série – Número 14* (XV Legislatura 1st Sessão Legislativa (2022-2023)). <https://app.parlamento.pt/webutils/docs/DAR-I-014.pdf>
- Assembleia da República. (2022j, May 28). *Diário da Assembleia da República I Série – Número 18* (XV Legislatura 1st Sessão Legislativa (2022-2023)). <https://app.parlamento.pt/webutils/docs/DAR-I-018.pdf>
- Assembleia da República. (2022k, June 1). *Diário da Assembleia da República I Série – Número 19* (XV Legislatura 1st Sessão Legislativa (2022-2023)). <https://app.parlamento.pt/webutils/docs/DAR-I-019.pdf>

- parlamento.pt/webutils/docs/DAR-I-019.pdf
- Assembleia da República. (2022l, June 22). *Diário da Assembleia da República I Série – Número 26* (XV Legislatura 1st Sessão Legislativa (2022-2023)). <https://app.parlamento.pt/webutils/docs/DAR-I-026.pdf>
- Assembleia da República. (2022m, June 29). *Diário da Assembleia da República I Série – Número 29* (XV Legislatura 1st Sessão Legislativa (2022-2023)). <https://app.parlamento.pt/webutils/docs/DAR-I-029.pdf>
- Assembleia da República. (2022n, July 7). *Diário da Assembleia da República I Série – Número 32* (XV Legislatura 1st Sessão Legislativa (2022-2023)). <https://app.parlamento.pt/webutils/docs/DAR-I-032.pdf>
- Assembleia da República. (2022o, July 20). *Diário da Assembleia da República I Série – Número 33* (XV Legislatura 1st Sessão Legislativa (2022-2023)). <https://app.parlamento.pt/webutils/docs/DAR-I-034.pdf>
- Assembleia da República. (2022p, September 16). *Diário da Assembleia da República I Série – Número 38* (XV Legislatura 1st Sessão Legislativa (2022-2023)). <https://app.parlamento.pt/webutils/docs/DAR-I-038.pdf>
- Assembleia da República. (2022q, September 28). *Diário da Assembleia da República I Série – Número 43* (XV Legislatura 1st Sessão Legislativa (2022-2023)). <https://app.parlamento.pt/webutils/docs/DAR-I-043.pdf>
- Assembleia da República. (2022r, October 20). *Diário da Assembleia da República I Série – Número 48* (XV Legislatura 1st Sessão Legislativa (2022-2023)). <https://app.parlamento.pt/webutils/docs/DAR-I-052.pdf>
- Albertazzi, D., Favero, A., Hatakka, N., & Sijstermans, J. (2022, March 15). Siding with the underdog: Explaining the populist Radical Right's response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. *LSE European Politics and Policy (EUROPP) Blog*. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/euoppblog/2022/03/15/siding-with-the-underdog-explaining-the-populist-radical-rights-response-to-russias-invasion-of-ukraine/>
- Biscaia, A., & Salgado, S. (2022). Placing Portuguese right-wing populism into context: Analogies with France, Italy, and Spain. In D. Palau-Sampaio, G. López Garcia, & L. Ianelli (Eds.), *Contemporary politics, communication, and the impact on democracy* (pp. 234–250). IGI Global. DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-8057-8.ch013
- Bottoms, A. (1995). The philosophy and politics of punishment and sentencing. In C. Clarkson & R. Morgan (Eds.), *The politics of sentencing reform* (pp. 17–49). Clarendon Press.
- Chega (n.d. a). *Manifesto para a Europa*. Retrieved January 11, 2023, from <https://partidocheга.pt/index.php/manifesto-para-a-europa/>
- Chega (n.d. b). *Programa Político 2021*. Retrieved February 26, 2023, from https://partidocheга.pt/index.php/programa_politico/
- Cunhal, Á. (1977). Relatório aprovado pelo Comité Central do PCP para o VIII Cong-



- resso, 1976. In Á. Cunhal (Ed.), *A Revolução Portuguesa—O Passado e o Futuro*. Editorial Avante
- Cunhal, Á. (1997). *O Caminho para o Derrubamento do Fascismo—IV Congresso PCP*. Editorial Avante.
- European Social Survey (2014). *ESS round 7 - 2014. Immigration, Social inequalities in health*. Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research. DOI: 10.21338/NSD-ESS7-2014
- Halikiopoulou, D., & Vlandas, T. (2022). *Understanding right-wing populism and what to do about it*. Friedrich Ebert Stiftung. <https://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4122538>
- ICS–ISCTE Surveys (2022). *Sondagem Dezembro 2022*. <https://sondagens-ics-ul.iscte-iul.pt/category/estudos/>
- Identity and Democracy Party (2019). *Platform*. Retrieved January 11, 2023, from <https://www.id-party.eu/platform>
- Jornal de Notícias (2022, January 10). Chega defende taxa única de IRS de 15% e prisão perpétua com revisão de pena. *Jornal de Notícias*. <https://www.jn.pt/nacional/chega-defende-taxa-unica-de-irs-de-15-e-prisao-perpetua-com-revisao-de-pena-14476214.html>
- Lopes, M. (2022, April 20). PCP não participará na sessão do Parlamento com Zelensky. *Público*. <https://www.publico.pt/2022/04/20/politica/noticia/pcp-nao-participa-para-sessao-parlamento-zelenskii-2003237>
- Malhado, A. (2022, June 22) Os defensores de Putin no Chega. *Sábado*. <https://www.sabado.pt/portugal/detalhe/os-defensores-de-putin-no-chega>
- Mendes, M. (2021) “Enough” of what? An analysis of Chega’s populist Radical Right agenda. *South European Society and Politics*, 26(3), 329–353. DOI:10.1080/13608746.2022.2043073
- Morini, M. (2018). Front National and Lega Nord: Two stories of the same Euroscepticism. *European Political Science*, 19(1). 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23745118.2017.1295569>
- Partido Comunista Português (n.d.) *Sobre a situação na Ucrânia: Elementos para a Compreensão*. Retrieved January 11, 2022, from <https://pcp.pt/ucrania>
- Partido Comunista Português (2010, March 16) *Programa do PCP*. Retrieved January 11, 2023 from <https://www.pcp.pt/programa-do-pcp>
- Partido Comunista Português (2019, April 12). *Declaração Programática do PCP para as Eleições para o Parlamento Europeu*. Retrieved January 11, 2023, from <https://www.pcp.pt/declaracao-programatica-do-pcp-para-eleicoes-para-parlamento-europeu>
- Pimenta, D., Gonçalves, E., Zúquete, J.P. (2022) “*The Irregular Populist: André Ventura—The Leader of Chega*” [Report] Team Populism—Leader Profile Series. Retrieved from: <https://www.teampopulism.com>

- Pinto de Mesquita, H., Rodrigues, S. (2022, November 11). TC chumba estatutos do Chega: remetem para “hierarquia militarizada”. Ventura admite congresso. *Público*. Retrieved from: <https://www.publico.pt/2022/11/11/politica/noticia/tc-chumba-estatutos-chega-remetem-hierarquia-militarizada-ventura-admite-congresso-2027373>
- Pires, F. (2022, January 20). Ventura quer acabar com as portagens em Portugal. *TSF-Rádio Notícias*. <https://www.tsf.pt/portugal/politica/ventura-quer-acabar-com-as-portagens-em-portugal-14511580.html>
- Public Opinion Monitoring Unit (2022, March 4) *Public Opinion on the War in Ukraine (March 2022)*. Directorate-General for Communication, European Commission. <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/at-your-service/files/be-heard/eurobarometer/2022/public-opinion-on-the-war-in-ukraine/en-public-opinion-on-the-war-in-ukraine-20220304.pdf>
- Rato, M.M. (2022) André Ventura diz que encontro com embaixadora ucraniana “foi muito importante para o Chega”. *Journal I*. https://ionline.sapo.pt/artigo/763757/andre-ventura-diz-que-encontro-com-embaixadora-ucraniana-foi-muito-importante-para-o-chega?seccao=Portugal_i
- Reis de Oliveira, C. (2022). *Indicadores de Integração de Imigrantes: Relatório Estatístico anual (Coleção Imigração em Números)*. Migration Observatory, High Commissioner for Migration. <https://www.om.acm.gov.pt/publicacoes-om/colecao-imigracao-em-numeros/relatorios-anuais>
- Ribeiro, N. (2022, February 27). Quatro mil pessoas frente à embaixada russa em Lisboa contra a invasão da Ucrânia. *Público*. <https://www.publico.pt/2022/02/27/politica/noticia/quatro-mil-pessoas-frente-embaixada-lisboa-invasao-ucrania-1997016>
- Rodrigues, S. (2023, January 13). Sondagem: PS sofre desgaste com demissões no Governo. *Público*. <https://www.publico.pt/2023/01/13/politica/noticia/ps-sofre-desgaste-demissoes-governo-segundo-sondagem-2034931>
- Salgado, S. (2019). Where’s Populism? Online media and the diffusion of populist discourses and styles in Portugal. *European Political Science*, 18(1), 53–65. DOI: 10.1057/s41304-017-0137-4
- Salgado, S. (2022). Mass Media and Political Communication. In P. Magalhães, A. Costa Pinto, & J. Fernandes (Eds.), *Oxford handbook of Portuguese politics* (pp. 308–322). Oxford University Press.
- Salgado, S., Zúquete, J.P. (2016) Portugal: discreet populisms amid unfavorable contexts and stigmatization. In T. Aalberg, F. Esser, C. Reinemann, J. Strömbäck, and C. de Vreese (Eds.), *Populist political communication in Europe* (pp. 235–248). Routledge.
- Ventura, A. [AndreCVentura] (2021a, April 7) *Sim, o CHEGA propõe que os preços dos combustíveis sejam limitados. Chega de explorar o povo português!* [Tweet] Twitter. <https://www.twitter.com/AndreCVentura/status/1379807301394128904>



- Ventura, A. [@AndreCVentura] (2021b, November 11) *Usei uma das minhas últimas intervenções no Parlamento nesta legislatura para confrontar o Governo com a vergonha dos preços dos* [Video attached][Tweet]. Twitter. <https://www.twitter.com/AndreCVentura/status/1458740680243793925>
- Ventura, A. [@AndreCVentura]. (2022a, February 25) *Agora que a Europa está em perigo, não nos devemos esquecer dos amigos de Putin e da China que andam.* [Image attached] [Tweet]. Twitter. <https://www.twitter.com/AndreCVentura/status/1497227853775130642>
- Ventura, A. [@AndreCVentura]. (2022b, February 26). *Os restantes partidos optaram por excluir o CHEGA da manifestação que ocorrerá amanhã em Lisboa. Nem num assunto desta importância* [Tweet] Twitter. <https://www.twitter.com/AndreCVentura/status/1497561811196985345>
- Ventura, A. [@AndreCVentura]. (2022c, February 28). *A guerra na Ucrânia não será apenas fatal para Putin e para o desenvolvimento da Rússia. Sê-lo-á também para o.* [Image attached] [Tweet] Twitter. <https://www.twitter.com/AndreCVentura/status/1498265716562313224>
- Ventura, A. [@AndreCVentura]. (2022d, March 5). *É importante fazermos tudo o que pudermos para proteger o povo ucraniano. Este passo não vai acabar com a guerra* [Tweet] Twitter. <https://www.twitter.com/AndreCVentura/status/1500171485746454528>
- Ventura, A. [@AndreCVentura]. (2022e, May 23). *Hoje no Parlamento: António Costa prometeu 250 milhões para a Ucrânia, mas recusa-se a devolver aos pensionistas portugueses os rendimentos* [Video attached][Tweet]. Twitter. <https://www.twitter.com/AndreCVentura/status/1528764340358242304>
- Ventura, A. [@AndreCVentura] (2022f, September 5). *Os comunistas são engraçados: são incapazes de condenar a guerra na Ucrânia, culpam o Ocidente da crise de inflação, rejeitam* [Video attached] [Tweet]. Twitter. <https://www.twitter.com/AndreCVentura/status/1566717156833853440>
- Weiss, A.S. (2020). *With friends like these: The Kremlin's Far-Right and populist connections in Italy and Austria*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.



ROMANIA



Romanian populism and transnational political mobilization

Sorina Soare* *University of Florence*

Abstract

Once considered a partial exception to the recent diffusion of populism worldwide, Romania saw Radical Right populism return to Parliament in 2020. The Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR) successfully campaigned on a platform of defending the Christian faith, freedom, the traditional family, and the nation. Although the party was initially considered the result of individual entrepreneurship linked to its founding leaders, it has successfully built on diffused networks of societal activism whose origins could be traced back to the early 2000s. However, the AUR's track record of discourse aligned with Kremlin rhetoric calling for Western economic, political and cultural hegemony to be resisted and rolled back saw a temporary decline in voters' support for the party. However, the party managed to rebuild consensus strategically by drawing on voters' increased anxiety regarding the economic effects of the war. This report offers a cogent analysis of the political performance of the AUR, examining the party's formative phase as well as its evolution since 2020, alongside a discussion of the impact of the war in Ukraine on Romanian party politics.

Keywords: *Radical Right; populism; Romania; reunification; nativism; societal activism.*

* sorinacristina.soare@unifi.it

Soare, Sorina. (2023). "Romanian populism and transnational political mobilization." In: *The Impacts of the Russian Invasion of Ukraine on Right-wing Populism in Europe*. (eds). Gilles Ivaldi and Emilia Zankina. European Center for Populism Studies (ECPS). March 8, 2023. Brussels. <https://doi.org/10.55271/rp0027>

The author thanks Marina Popescu, Daniela Vintila and Emilia Zankina for helpful comments.



Introduction

The literature dealing with the diffusion of populism across new and old democracies usually considers Romania a partial exception. While different variants of populism received electoral support and influenced the governmental agenda during the 1990s, in the 2010s, the supply of parliamentary populist parties dwindled if one only considers the most unambiguous cases. In 2012, amidst an economic crisis, widespread corruption, political instability and severe institutional clashes, the People's Party–Dan Diaconescu (PPDD) gained some electoral support. The party was able to capitalize on being new in politics and standing for “the people” in opposition to “the elite”, but only for a short while. The PPDD platform combined populism with authoritarian discourses around “social order” and a peculiar form of nativism in which the defence of the Romanian community and the endorsement of the project of reunification with neighbouring Moldova coexisted with an odd ethnicization of merit in a slogan claiming targeted collaboration with foreigners (Gherghina & Soare, 2021). By 2014, several parliamentarians had defected from the PPDD, and in 2015, the party merged with the National Union for the Progress of Romania (UNPR). For the next half-decade, nativism, authoritarianism, and populism dwelt outside the parliamentary arena (Soare & Tufis, 2019). Only in the 2020 elections did Radical Right populism return to the Romanian Parliament with a strong showing from the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR).¹

Yet public discourse and parliamentary debate point to populism's polymorphism and resilience in Romania, with a reach far into the mainstream political forces that are central to defining governmental alternatives (Soare & Tufis, 2019). Dragoman (2021), for instance, finds populism even in the anti-corruption platform of the Save Romania Union (USR), a party that is probably most often associated with liberal *opposition to populism* in Romania. Dragoman sees in the USR discourse “recombinant populism”, which is notable for connecting anti-communist stances with anti-corruption ones. Indeed, in Romanian politics, USR representatives have habitually accused traditional political actors — namely, the Social Democrats (PSD) and the Liberals (PNL) — of dishonesty and of serving their own interests. However, Engler (2020) has identified this kind of rhetoric as par for the course for *centrist anti-establishment parties*, which — apart from their anti-establishment and anti-corruption rhetoric — do not differ from the established parties they criticize.

1. Information on the party's profile can be obtained from its website (<https://partidulaur.ro/echipa/>)

Similarly, the USR can be considered part of the group of anti-establishment reform parties identified by Hanley and Sikk (2016), committed to liberal democracy and the market economy.

A borderline populist position can also be traced in the Social Democratic Party (PSD), per forthcoming updated research on Romania from Populist (<https://populist.org/>). A successor of the communist-era governing party, the PSD (and its predecessors) has been in Parliament since the first post-communist elections, with regular participation in government. The formerly socialist party's first ideological turn came at the end of the 1990s when the PSD endorsed market-liberal economics and cultural liberalism. Starting in 2012, though, the party increasingly came to champion left-wing populist economics and right-wing cultural traditionalism and adopted a Eurosceptic stance on issues from time to time. However, the PSD remained within the coordinates of mainstream party politics as an electorally dominant actor competing on the Left–Right political spectrum.

The AUR is undoubtedly the most noteworthy and universally recognized example of Radical Right populism in Romania today. This report focuses only on the AUR, given its peculiarities and significance today. As the war in Ukraine has unfolded, the AUR has aligned with the other parliamentary parties in condemning Russia's invasion and voicing concerns for the security of the community of co-ethnic Romanians living in Ukraine. However, the party's track record of discourse aligned with Kremlin rhetoric calling for Western economic, political and cultural hegemony to be resisted and rolled back saw the AUR initially penalized in terms of electoral support. Despite that, the party strategically invested in the heightened anxiety among voters regarding the economic effects of the war. It adapted its public stances to the need to defend the national interest by promoting forms of economic and energy protectionism, by promoting the idea that national resources (including energy) should be primarily directed towards Romanians and that foreign companies should receive limited access (if any) to these strategic resources. The latest opinion polling shows that the AUR has recovered from the decline in its electoral fortunes registered in the spring of 2022 and remains anchored as the third party in voters' preferences.

The remainder of the report is structured as follows. The first section details the origins of the AUR and party development in its formative phases. The second section focuses on the evolution of the party since it returned to Parliament after the 2020 elections. The third section focuses on the impact of the war in Ukraine on



Romanian party politics while also summarizing the main findings of the analysis.

Where did the Alliance for the Union of Romanians come from?

The AUR's programme combines an ethnically defined emphasis on the "people's will" with authoritarianism, understood as the belief in a strictly ordered community. This belief set encompasses traditional concerns about "law and order" but also culturally authoritarian positions like opposition to same-sex marriage, a hard line on LGBTIQ+ rights, and legislative proposals that claim to protect children from sexual propaganda in kindergartens, schools and the media. Due to the overlap between the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2020 electoral campaign, the AUR skilfully leveraged opposition to the government's vaccination strategy and unpopular public safety measures, such as the obligatory use of masks, mandatory vaccination, and vaccine certificates. Although the party leadership did not openly oppose vaccination, AUR representatives regularly emphasized opposition to forcing citizens to get vaccinated. One of its leaders repeatedly endorsed the protests against the government strategy, reasoning that the AUR sides "with the people who are right-headed, who want justice" (Deutsche Welle, 2021).

The AUR's rise was a great surprise in Romanian politics. The party garnered 9.1% of the overall vote in the 2020 legislative elections, including 541,938 votes for the Senate (9.17% of the total cast) and 535,831 votes for the House of Deputies (9.08%) (<https://parlamentare2020.bec.ro/>). As a result, the party saw four senators and thirty-three deputies elected. While the general turnout was the lowest since the end of communism, in the Romanian diaspora, turnout hit an all-time high. Previous studies have observed that Romanian non-resident voters have traditionally tended to vote disproportionately for centre-right candidates and parties over left-wing and populist parties (Vintilă & Soare, 2018). Still, in 2020 one in four Romanians abroad voted for the AUR; the party came first in the section polls organized in Cyprus and Italy and second in France, Germany and Spain (Ulceluse, 2020).

The available data allow us to clarify who voted for the AUR in Romania, but to the extent of my knowledge, no exit polls were conducted with Romanian voters living abroad. Exit polls conducted inside Romania show the typical AUR voter as a middle-aged male with a medium level of education. There was a strong correlation between conservative votes in a recent referendum related to the

definition of the family in the Romanian Constitution and the vote share of the AUR in the 2020 legislative elections (Pora, 2020). Recent data (Soare & Tufis, 2023) also show that emigration from Romania mattered: the higher the emigration rate across different Romanian regions, the better the AUR scored in those areas. Moreover, other exit polls stressed that the AUR's electoral success rested on voter disenchantment with traditional politics in the context of deteriorating socioeconomic conditions and rising economic inequality (Pora, 2020).

What looked like an unexpected electoral success resulted from a strategic investment in low-cost online campaigning with simple messages and Manichean stances claiming that all mainstream politicians were corrupt, the values of the Christian family were under threat, and the like (Doiciar & Crețan, 2021). The party was also very active in on-the-ground canvassing both in Romania and among non-resident voters in the West European diaspora (Andrei, 2020). Probably most importantly, the party benefitted from ties to political movements that pre-date its legal registration in 2019. In this early period, the AUR capitalized on the extensive societal activism of the party's founding co-presidents, George Simion and Claudiu Târziu² (Soare & Tufis, 2023). Although the trajectories of these two men in terms of political activism do not fully overlap, their activities have converged on several key themes: the goal of unifying Romania and the Republic of Moldova, an emphasis on tradition (traditional family values), and the defence of the Christian faith.

The challenges of winning seats in the national Parliament

Like many other populist parties, when it arrived in Parliament, the AUR faced a deficit of credibility among the other parliamentary parties. This was coupled with a bad image in the mainstream media. As a result, in February 2021, 40 Romanian intellectuals and representatives of civil society organizations signed an open letter expressing strong concern about the AUR's impact on Romanian democracy. They publicly called on the other parliamentary parties to establish a tight *cordon sanitaire* around the AUR by forswearing any cooperation or coalition with it (Europa Liberă România, 2021). For a while, the traditional parties followed this strategy of political exclusion by regularly blocking or voting against the AUR's legislative initiatives. It was,

2. Târziu's CV is listed on his personal website (<https://claudiutarziu.ro/despre-mine/curriculum-vitae/>).



however, impossible to exclude the AUR completely. For example, Claudiu Târziu, former co-president of the AUR and a senator representing Bucharest since 2020, managed to get elected as president of the Senate's Commission for Romanians Abroad.

Despite using folksy expressions and displaying raw and even violent behaviour (Deutsche Welle, 2022), the AUR was not hermetically isolated. In the middle of the 2021 governmental crisis, the AUR backed a motion of no confidence submitted by USR-PLUS, the junior partner in the governing coalition. At the beginning of 2022, different Romanian journalists wrote about a possible merger between AUR and the People's Movement Party (PMP), founded by supporters of Traian Băsescu, then president of Romania, with other minor parties. The merger, which in the end fell through, was supposed to become a movement to circumvent the AUR's international isolation and open direct access to the European People's Party that the PMP was part of. This strategy was complemented by direct lobbying from the extraterritorial branches that AUR successfully created across the different communities of Romanian emigrants who built local connections with possible sister parties, such as the Vox party in Spain and the Fratelli d'Italia (Soare & Tufis, 2023).

In recent years, the AUR has worked on developing a broader political agenda and building transnational ties. In 2022, for instance, the AUR founded the Mihai Eminescu Conservative Political Studies Institute in Bucharest, aiming to support scholarship and research on conservative themes and to raise citizen awareness of conservative values and ideas. As the head of the newly created institute, Târziu gave the opening speech at the first International Conference organized in Bucharest under the title "The Europe we believe in". The party invited representatives from the European Conservatives and Reformists Group, the Polish Law and Justice Party (PiS), and the Fratelli d'Italia to the conference together with representatives from Israel's Likud, France's Reconquête, and Portugal's Chega! (Partidulaur.ro, 2022). As emphasized in Târziu's speech, this event was seen as an occasion for intense networking with parties sharing conservative views.

Consequently, the AUR presented itself as a mainstream conservative party seeking to join a broader European and international campaign against the moral degradation purportedly produced by the spread of neo-Marxist ideology. Echoing one of the leading figures in the pantheon of European neo-conservatism, Ryszard Legutko and his *The Demon in Democracy* (Behr, 2021), Târziu and the other guests elaborated the thesis of the decadence of Western liberal democracy and the need to protect traditions following the model set by Poland and Hungary after

2010 (Aurnews.ro, 2022). It is yet too soon to evaluate the success of this networking. Still, the November 2022 event represented a radical change from Simion's failed attempt to join a similar meeting organized by Vox in Madrid in February 2022 (Dutulescu, 2022).

Overall, in the first two years of parliamentary representation, the AUR representatives remained vocal in accusing the government of damaging Romanians' living standards and for its mismanagement of the COVID-19 crisis. However, despite the continuity in discourses and behaviour, the first cracks in the party structure soon became visible. According to different media reports, the cracks were born out of two different visions of the party's future. While Târziu aimed to bring the AUR into the European neo-conservatism mainstream (in the mould of Hungary's Fidesz or Poland's PiS), Simion was more interested in maintaining the emphasis on the radical grassroots. The tensions between the two orientations exploded in public when Simion endorsed Călin Georgescu as an honorary president of the party. Georgescu was a highly controversial choice given his lionization of historical Far Right figures in Romanian politics, including Corneliu Zelea Codreanu and Ion Antonescu, antisemites both (Pavel, 2022). In the face of intense criticism, Simion was forced to back down and renounce his support for Georgescu and a raft of other controversial figures in Romanian politics.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine further accelerated this process, as Călin Georgescu was among the leading figures taking a pro-Russian position and publicly backing Putin, telling a news reporter, "He [Putin] is a leader, one of the few" (În Linie Dreaptă, 2020) while also helping to organize a visit of Alexander Dugin, the Eurasianist ideologue with ties to the Kremlin, to Romania in 2014 (ziare.com, 2014). At the AUR National Congress in March 2022, the party's dual leadership was abandoned, with Simion beating out Târziu to assume the sole presidency of the party. Simion continues to exhibit the kinds of public behaviours in Romania that characterized his pre-2019 societal activism and made him credible with the grassroots base of the party. He is uninhibited when it comes to standing up for "ordinary people", uses everyday or even coarse language to attract attention and burnish his "every man" credentials, and will readily exploit private events—including his own wedding—to stay in the public eye and be seen mixing with ordinary people.

While continuing to reinforce its organization on the ground in Romania and abroad, the AUR remains very active online, with a heavy presence on Facebook,



TikTok, and Instagram. According to Romanian experts, the party's extensive online networks are rife with conspiracy theories, misinformation, and Russian propaganda (Despa & Albu, 2021). The popular perception of the AUR as being close to Russia and the anti-European Union (EU) and anti-NATO rhetoric led to an abrupt drop in the party's popularity. Opinion surveys published just before the Russian invasion of Ukraine found 22% of respondents intended to vote for the AUR. By May 2022, this share had dropped to 16.3%. Yet, with increased *war fatigue*, *rising energy costs*, and *high inflation*, the party's voter support had returned to 22% by September 2022 (Anghelus, 2022). Internal tensions in the AUR have also calmed down as the party organization has consolidated and its ideology refined.

The war in Ukraine and its influence on Romanian politics

As the Russian invasion of Ukraine unfolded, all Romanian parliamentary parties rapidly aligned towards vocal condemnation of the Kremlin, backing the pro-Ukrainian position adopted almost universally in the West and raising concerns for the community of Romanian co-ethnics in Ukraine. This endorsement echoed the diffused perception of trust in the Western partnerships among the Romanian electorate. A January 2022 poll showed that the prospect of Russian aggression against Ukraine had increased Romanian voters' confidence in NATO and the EU. An overwhelming majority of voters (77%) believe Romania should intensify its political and military ties with the West; only 10.4% agreed that Romanian foreign policy should be oriented to the East and closer relations with Russia and China cultivated. However, compared to other international leaders, trust in Vladimir Putin remained high, in line with his image as a strong leader, with pronounced support among the young (Lupitu, 2022).

The pro-Ukrainian alignment came as a surprise, given the pro-Russian stances taken by prominent figures in the AUR in the past, their positive views of Putin's strong leadership and, more generally, their vocal endorsement of the Kremlin's fierce defence of national traditions and Orthodox Christianity. However, despite different media reports arguing a pro-Russian party might take up to 7% of the vote in Romania (Ancheteonline.ro, 2020), the AUR's official message was nuanced. In the aftermath of the December 2020 elections, Simion argued that "Russia, throughout the ages, from the Tsarist Empire to the Soviet Union and Putin's Russia today, has done a lot of harm to Romania" (Andrei, 2020). Moreover,

he pointed to his dogged campaigning for the reunification of Romania with Bessarabia (most of which lies in today's Moldova), which put him *directly at odds with the Kremlin*, which seeks to retain meddle in Moldovan affairs and has troops stationed in the breakaway region of Transnistria (Andrei, 2020). Consistent with these public statements against Russian imperialism, Simion had no hesitation in condemning Russia's military invasion of Ukraine in February 2022: "We are worried about the fate of the ethnic Romanians there [in Ukraine] and the repeated threats on the territory of Romania" (Mazilu, 2022).

At the same time, various AUR representatives have constantly expressed support and admiration for how traditions, values, and religion are defended in Russia. The Russian propaganda machine has picked up on this. At the end of 2021, the local outlet of the Kremlin-backed Sputnik media published a list of top personalities and political parties in Romania. At the top of their list was Diana Șoșoacă, a former AUR senator known for her anti-EU and anti-NATO stances. The Sputnik article also held the AUR out as "the absolute surprise of the Romanian political class" and praised its clear stance in defence of the national interest and domestic capital (Leonte, 2021). In parallel, the media chronicled a vast constellation of (former) AUR members with a record of avowedly pro-Russian positions in the public sphere. In addition, several newly registered parties rose to prominence in the public arena with pro-Russian messages grafted onto different conspiracy theories (Șuțu, 2022). A case in point is the Patriots of the Romanian People party founded by Mihai Lasca, a former AUR parliamentarian who vocally endorsed Putin's hardline position on homosexuality and lambasted President Zelenskyy's supposed "provocations" and "refusal to make peace" with Russia. Similarly, the new outfit SOS Romania welcomed Șoșoacă into the fold and aligned with her pro-Russian narrative of the war in Ukraine. Similar positions have been promoted by the so-called Roexit Party (a nod to Britain's exit from the EU) and the Alliance for the Homeland, both founded by figures who once found a home in the AUR but who were eventually expelled from the party or decided to resign.

The diffusion of pro-Russian stances, however fringe, is far from a recent phenomenon and goes beyond the AUR constellation (hotnews.ro, 2015). Various experts and reports have chronicled diffuse networks of support in the media, among civil society organizations or in the political, economic, cultural, and religious arenas (Fati, 2022). Many politicians have lobbied on behalf of Russian economic interests (mainly in the field of energy) since the early 2000s. Since the beginning of the war, some — including former foreign affairs ministers Andrei Marga and Adrian Severin



and Adrian Năstase, a former prime minister — have parroted Kremlin propaganda that Kyiv, more or less explicitly, provoked the conflict and drawn attention to reports of discrimination against Romanian co-ethnics in Ukraine (Fati, 2022).

Overall, the consensus across the parliamentary parties in Romania has championed the government in its consistent backing for the Western coalition supporting the Ukrainian resistance since February 2022. The AUR has adapted to this consensus, although not without putting its own twist on the framing. For example, party president George Simion has leveraged increasing energy prices to attack both Western companies operating in the Romanian energy market and the Romanian government for exploiting the country's natural resources without sharing the benefits with the Romanian people. The party's position echoes the data on electoral support. A recent analysis published by the CPD SNSPA (2022) captures how confidence in the West (the EU, NATO, the United States) and the East (Russia) has evolved over time and how voters of the main parties position themselves on this topic. The analysis confirms that Romanian voters retain strong pro-Western attitudes. It also shows that very few express vocal support for or trust in Russia, with inactive young people (unemployed and with low levels of education) and people with populist attitudes being the most positive toward Moscow. Strikingly, this group of respondents reports getting most of its news and information online. While the analysis finds that the voting intention for the AUR is a predictor of trust in Russia, it also observes that support for Moscow has dropped significantly over the past year, with most mainstream party voters expressing a lack of confidence in Russia.

Conclusion

This report has shown that the AUR's rise in the Romanian Parliament is partly due to disenchantment with traditional politics. The other part of the explanation is connected to pre-existing dense networks of social ties that have allowed the AUR to successfully present itself as a credible counterpoint to the established political consensus regarding liberal democratic values while simultaneously promoting a return to tradition as a safety net in turbulent times. Some party members' customary obsequiousness towards the Kremlin has been chronicled by a range of media reports, although the party has remained cautious in its official positions. Still, before February 2022, a number of party representatives were on the record praising the Putin regime and Russia generally as offering credible alternatives to the "decadent" liberal values of the West and as a hedge against economic exploitation from Western companies.

As the war in Ukraine has unfolded, some former AUR members have even parroted the Kremlin line, portrayed the aggression as justified and occasionally accused the government of failing to protect the Romanian minorities who call Ukraine home. Yet, the official message has focused more on the frame of economic protectionism, particularly regarding exploding energy prices. While carefully edited out of the AUR's public statements, pro-Russian positions lie just below the surface in the minds of the AUR electorate and, most specifically, Romania's inactive young voters.

References

- Ancheteonline.ro (2020, December 2). *Jobbikul de pe plaiurile natale. Cum și-a creat Rusia un partid în România*. <http://www.ancheteonline.ro/2020/12/jobbikul-de-pe-plaiurile-natale-cum-si-a-creat-rusia-un-partid-in-romania/>
- Andrei C. (2020, December 9). Interviu. George Simion despre cine e în spatele AUR, legionari, Rusia și politicieni. *Europa Liberă România*. <https://romania.europalibera.org/a/interviu-george-simion-despre-cine-e-%C3%AEn-spatele-aur-legionari-rusia-%C8%99i-politicieni/30990612.html>
- Anghelus M. (2022, December 31). SONDAJ Tabloul momentului: ce partide pierd procente în ultima lună din an și la ce scor a ajuns AUR. Ștefureac: „Electoratul va taxa populismul/demagogia”. *PSNEWS*. <https://psnews.ro/sondaj-tabloul-momentului-ce-partide-pierd-procente-in-ultima-luna-din-an-si-la-ce-scor-a-ajuns-aur-stefureac-electoratul-va-taxa-populismul-demagogia-729030/>
- Aurnews.ro (2022, November 12). *Claudiu Târziu (AUR), președintele Institutului Conservator „Mihai Eminescu”: Europa se află astăzi într-o fază de degradare, în primul rând morală, din cauza ideologiei neomarxiste și a politicilor distructive emenate de Bruxelles*. <https://aurnews.ro/2022/11/12/claudiu-tarziuaur-presedintele-institutului-conservator-mihai-eminescu-europa-se-afla-astazi-intr-o-faza-de-degradare-in-primul-rand-morala-din-cauza-ideologiei-neomarxiste-si/>
- Behr, V. (2021). Towards a transnational and social history of anti-liberalism. Insights from the trajectory of Ryszard Legutko. *European Politics and Society*. Advance online publication. doi.org/10.1080/23745118.2021.1956237
- CPD SNSPA (2022). *Atitudini ale publicului românesc față de SUA, UE, NATO și Rusia în vreme de criză*, <https://civicparticipation.ro/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Atitudini-SUA-NATO-RUSIA-2022.pdf>



- Despa O., & Albu, B. (2021, October 8). In 'echo-chambers' of nationalist Romanian party, Russia's favourite narratives. *Balkaninsight*. <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/10/08/in-echo-chambers-of-nationalist-romanian-party-russias-favourite-narratives/>
- Doiciar, C., & Crețan, R. (2021). Pandemic populism: COVID-19 and the rise of the nationalist AUR party in Romania. *Geographica Pannonica*, 25(4), 243–259.
- Dragoman, D. (2021). "Save Romania" Union and the persistent populism in Romania. *Problems of Post-Communism*, 68(4), 303–314. doi.org/10.1080/10758216.2020.1781540
- Dutulescu, A. (2022, February 3). George Simion ar fi încercat să intre la congresul suveraniștilor de la Madrid și nu ar fi fost primit. Simion: „Nu am fost dat afară”. *Digi24.ro*. <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/politica/george-simion-ar-fi-incercat-sa-intre-la-congresul-suveranistilor-de-la-madrid-si-nu-ar-fi-fost-primit-simion-nu-am-fost-dat-afara-1825859>
- Deutsche Welle. (2021, December 22). *Romanians protest COVID certificates*. <https://www.dw.com/en/romanians-protest-covid-certificates/a-60219391>
- Deutsche Welle. (2022, February 8). *AUR inaugurează politica violenței patriotice: până când?* <https://www.dw.com/ro/aur-inaugureaz%C4%83-politica-violen%C8%9Bei-patriotice-p%C3%A2n%C4%83-c%C3%A2nd/a-60694255>
- Engler, S. (2020). Centrist anti-establishment parties and their protest voters: More than a superficial romance? *European Political Science Review*, 12(3), 307–325, doi10.1017/S1755773920000132
- Europa Liberă România (2021, February 3). *Societatea civilă cere coaliției de guvernare să înceteze dialogul cu AUR*. <https://romania.europalibera.org/a/societatea-civil%C4%83-cere-coali%C8%9Biei-de-guvernare-s%C4%83-%C3%AEnceteze-dialogul-cu-aur/31084163.html>
- Fati, S. (2022, October 10). Ce face SRI cu lista agenților pro-ruși. *Deutsche Welle*. <https://www.dw.com/ro/ce-face-sri-cu-lista-agen%C8%9Bilor-pro-ru%C8%99i/a-63389071>
- Gherghina, S., & Soare, S. (2021). Electoral performance beyond leaders? The organisation of populist parties in postcommunist Europe. *Party Politics*, 27(1), 58–68, doi.org/10.1177/135406881986362.
- Hanley, S., & Sikk, A. (2016). Economy, corruption or floating voters? Explaining the breakthroughs of anti-establishment reform parties in Eastern Europe. *Party Politics*, 22(4), 522–533. doi.org/10.1177/135406881455043
- Hotnews (2015, October 27). *Infografic Propaganda rusa in Romania: 5 portrete*. https://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-russia_report-20534316-infografic-propaganda-rusa-romania-5-portrete.htm

- În Linie Dreaptă. (2020, June 30). *Călin Georgescu despre Vladimir Putin: "E un lider, printre putinii lideri"* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z5Os-2SGT93I&ab_channel=%C3%8EnLinieDreap%C4%83
- Leonte, C. A. (2021, December 15). Propaganda rusă și-a ales favoriții în 2021: Șoșoacă, Teodosie și AUR, capete de afiș/În topul Sputnik au intrat și președintele Academiei Române, Ioan-Aurel Pop, Terheș sau Liviu Dragnea. *G4Media.ro*. <https://www.g4media.ro/propaganda-rusa-si-a-ales-favoritii-in-2021-sosoaca-teodosie-si-aur-ca-pete-de-afis-in-topul-sputnik-au-intrat-si-presedintele-academiei-romane-ioan-aurel-pop-terhes-sau-liviu-dragnea.html>
- Lupitu, R. (2022, January 26). Sondaj INSCOP: Perspectiva unei agresiuni a Rusiei în Ucraina a crescut puternic încrederea românilor în NATO, UE și SUA. 70% consideră că NATO va apăra România. *Caleaeuropeana.ro*. <https://www.caleaeuropeana.ro/sondaj-inscop-perspectiva-unei-agresiuni-a-rusiei-in-ucraina-a-crescut-puternic-increderea-romanilor-in-nato-ue-si-sua-70-considera-ca-nato-va-apara-romania/>
- Mărgărit, D. (2020). *Insurgent conservatism in Romania*. Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Romania.
- Mazilu P. (2022, February 24). Proteste în fața Ambasadei Federației Ruse în România. *Mediafax*. <https://www.mediafax.ro/social/proteste-in-fata-ambasadei-federației-ruse-in-romania-jandarmii-nu-au-amendat-niciun-participant-20548663>
- Partidulaur.ro (2022, November 11). *AUR organizează conferința internațională "Acea Europă în care credem". Invitații și programul evenimentului*. <https://partidulaur.ro/aur-organizeaza-conferinta-internationala-acea-europa-in-care-credem-invitati-i-si-programul-evenimentului/>
- Pavel, A. (2022, February 18). Video Călin Georgescu anunță că a oprit discuțiile cu partidul extremist AUR/ Fostul "premier", motiv de tensiune între Târziu și Simion, are dosar penal pentru elogiarea vinovaților de genocid și crime de război. *Digi24.ro*. <https://www.g4media.ro/video-calin-georgescu-anunta-ca-a-oprit-discutiile-cu-partidul-extremist-aur-fostul-premier-motiv-de-tensiune-intre-tarziu-si-simion-are-dosar-penal-pentru-elogierea-vinovatilor-d.html>
- Pora, A. (2020, December 12). Profil votanți. AUR: vârsta medie 41 ani, studii superioare 22%, din zone cu comunități religioase. *Europa Libera România*. <https://romania.europalibera.org/a/profil-votan%C8%9Bi-partide-aur-v%C3%A2rsta-medie-41-ani-studii-superioare-22-din-zone-cu-comunit%C4%83%C8%9Bi-religioase/30997174.html>
- Soare, S., & Tufis, C. (2023). Saved by the diaspora? The case of the Alliance for the Union of Romanians. *European Political Science*, Online First, doi.org/10.1057/s41304-022-00408-3
- Soare, S., & Tufis, C. D. (2019). Phoenix populism: Radical Right parties' mobilisation in Romania after 2015. *Problems of Post-Communism*, 66(1), 8–20. doi.org/10.1080/10758216.2018.1460158



- Șuțu, C. (2022, November 15). Minionii lui Putin în România. Partidele de buzunar, cu gura mare, care fac propagandă pentru Rusia. Digi24.ro. <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/politica/minionii-lui-putin-in-romania-partidele-de-buzunar-cu-gura-mare-care-fac-propaganda-pentru-rusia-2147781>
- Ulcuse, M. (2020, December 17). How the Romanian diaspora helped put a new far-right party on the political map. *LSE EU Politics Blog*. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2020/12/17/how-the-romanian-diaspora-helped-put-a-new-far-right-party-on-the-political-map/>
- Vintilă, D., & Soare, S. (2018). *Report on Political Participation of Mobile EU Citizens: Romania*. (Country Report 2018/10). Global Citizenship Observatory (GLOBALCIT), European University Institute. cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/59406/RSCAS_GLOBALCIT_PP_2018_10.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y
- Ziare.com (2014, June 26). *Ideologul lui Putin, vizita fulger la Bucuresti*. <https://ziare.com/vladimir-putin/presedinte-rusia/ideologul-lui-putin-vizita-fulger-la-bucuresti-1307863>



SERBIA



Balancing on a pin: Serbian populists, the European Union and Russia

*Dušan Spasojević** Faculty of Political Science, University of Belgrade

Abstract

This report investigates the consequences of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on the Serbian party system. The Serbian case has two unique characteristics. The first is the final status of Kosovo, which Serbia has traditionally relied on Russian support over (as a member of the UN Security Council). However, Ukraine has also respected the territorial integrity of Serbia and did not recognize Kosovo. The second characteristic is Serbia's ruling party, the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS). Unlike many other Eastern European populist parties, the SNS is formally pro-European Union. Since the beginning of the war, the ruling parties have been under international pressure to join sanctions against Russia; on the other side, the opposition splits between right-wing supporters of Russia and left-wing and liberal parties with weak support for international sanctions. This report aims to analyse the potential change in the ideological positions of Serbian parties — especially the populist ones — due to the significant changes in the international landscape occasioned by Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Keywords: *Serbia; populism; European Union; Russia; cleavages.*

* dusan.spasojevic@fpn.bg.ac.rs

Spasojević, Dušan. (2023). "Balancing on a pin: Serbian populists, the European Union and Russia." In: *The Impacts of the Russian Invasion of Ukraine on Right-wing Populism in Europe*. (eds). Gilles Ivaldi and Emilia Zankina. European Center for Populism Studies (ECPS). March 8, 2023. Brussels. <https://doi.org/10.55271/rp0028>



Background

Serbian politics has revolved around identity issues since the beginning of party pluralism. Milošević's authoritarian rule (1991–2000) was based on leveraging nationalism and conflicts during the break-up of Yugoslavia. After his defeat in 2000, the new ruling coalition of the Democratic Opposition of Serbia split between modernist and traditionalist forces based on similar identity-based issues: war crimes prosecutions, foreign relations — especially Serbia's integration into the European Union (EU) — and finally, the status of Kosovo. Competition between these two sides was the critical process of Serbian politics during the first post-Milošević decade. In 2008, pro-EU forces led by the Democratic Party (DSS) made what seemed to be the decisive electoral victory that led to the establishment of a national consensus on European integration.

In this report, I will briefly describe the Serbian party system with particular emphasis on populist actors and populism-related issues. This part will be followed by a description of changes caused by the Russian invasion of Ukraine, focusing on the 2022 parliamentary elections in Serbia and a comparison with the period after the campaign. The final part will be dedicated to the “demand side” of politics – public opinion surveys and the electoral results of parties with specific positions on the war in Ukraine.

The Serbian party system – an overview

Since 2012, the Serbian party system has been dominated by the Serbian Progressive Party (Srpska Narodna Stranka, SNS). The SNS was founded by the Far Right, nationalist, and populist Serbian Radical Party (SRS) after its electoral defeat in 2008. The new party declared itself a moderate centre-right and pro-European people's party (Stojić, 2018), increasing its coalition potential and enabling electoral victory in presidential and parliamentary elections in 2012. Since 2014, the party has consistently won almost 50% of the vote and ruled under the very popular president, Aleksandar Vučić, as a predominant party with several coalition partners, including the Socialist Party of Serbia or SPS (Milošević's former party) and minority Hungarian and Bosniak parties, among others.

Due to ideological baggage carried over from its radical period before 2008, the SNS initially moderated its political views to present itself as something completely new. The SNS tried to avoid most of the old identity issues and to promote issues

such as economic growth and combating corruption. Corruption proved critical during the 2012 and 2014 electoral campaigns as the SNS accused previous governments of being “thieves and tycoons” and responsible for the corrupted transition from communism. In a classic populist manner, SNS leaders contrasted the corrupt ruling elites with the “ordinary” people. The SNS claimed to represent ordinary Serbs who had been left behind socioeconomically by the transition to democracy and a market economy (Spasojević, 2019).

In contrast to many Eastern European populist parties, the SNS had to formally maintain pro-EU positions as Serbia is a candidate country. This meant that criticism against the EU had to be expressed in vague and general terms; simultaneously, the SNS conveyed significant respect for individual European leaders. For example, Vučić spoke very highly of Merkel and had many meetings with the German chancellor, even as a part of electoral campaigns. The SNS developed an extensive catch-all ideological profile, including the balance between the East and the West. The previous DSS government already defined a similar foreign policy posture emphasizing “the four pillars” (the EU, the United States, Russia, and China), and it was primarily related to the question of the final status of Kosovo. In other words, as most EU countries recognized Kosovo’s independence, Serbia relied on Russia and China (as permanent members of the UN Security Council) as counterweights to the EU and the United States’ support for Kosovo’s independence.

As time progressed, the SNS felt more confident in power and increasingly foregrounded non-European actors in Serbia’s political landscape. Simultaneously, the EU integration process stalled, both because of enlargement fatigue on the EU side and a dearth of reforms on the Serbian side. During Donald Trump’s presidency, relations with the United States intensified as there was more understanding of an “alternative” solution to the Kosovo issue, partition between Serbs and Albanians. This solution was perceived as practical but “against the European values” (an ethnic division of territory) and as a potential trigger for other similar cases in the region. Conversely, Russia and China have been praised as reliable partners that recognize Serbian interests and do not put pressure on Serbia like Europe. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Serbian government always emphasized medical support from China and Russia, in contrast, to aid from the EU.

However, this should not be understood as Serbia giving up on European integration – the process is still ongoing, and government officials often refer to EU values and cooperation with the EU institutions and EU representatives praising



Serbian progress. Also, the SNS limits its right-wing populist policies primarily to regional issues and for a domestic audience while adhering to a pro-EU approach internationally. For example, the Serbian government took a very cooperative stance during the 2015 “refugee crisis”, the Serbian prime minister is openly lesbian, and Belgrade hosted the 2022 EuroPride (after initially cancelling the event, the Serbian government recanted, but the parade failed to attract the typical attendance). EU legitimacy enables the Serbian regime to undermine the opposition and relativizes criticism of autocratic rule (Spasojević, 2022). Support and legitimacy of this kind has been termed “stabilitocracy” (Bieber, 2018).

The SNS is not the only populist party in Serbia. Parties like Dveri, Zavetnici, Dosta je Bilo (Enough is Enough), which has run in past elections under the banner of the Sovereignists, the SRS, and perhaps even the DSS are in many ways further to the right of the SNS. In total, these parties garner as much as 15% of the electorate, with each party winning 2–3% of votes. This group is heterogenous – the SRS and the DSS are the old parties from the 1990s, while the rest emerged during the last waves of populism. Most of these parties object to EU integration and demand strict anti-immigrant policies and the establishment of stronger ties with Russia. Some opposed COVID-19 measures and the government’s vaccination policies, and most accuse the current regime of being prepared to recognize Kosovo’s independence. At the same time, there are frequent accusations that they cooperate with the government and do not represent the “real” opposition. These claims are based on the fact that representatives of these parties have access to pro-government media, in contrast to the liberal and left-wing opposition parties.

Finally, since 2018 there have been examples of left-wing populism, such as the grassroots Ne davimo Beograd (“Do not let Belgrade d(r)own”) movement to participate in Belgrade elections. In 2022 they became a part of a parliamentary coalition with environmental groups and small regional parties, establishing a left-wing populist presence in the institutions.

The supply side of right-wing populism and their political environment

The Russian invasion began almost simultaneously with the kick-off of the electoral campaign in Serbia. The elections were scheduled for April 3, which gave parties an opportunity to react and adapt to new circumstances. Having the most resources, the

ruling SNS immediately reacted and shifted the entire campaign from usual electoral promises of progress and rapid development toward stability – president Vučić argued that the world as we know it will collapse and that our goal should be to preserve ourselves. The main concerns the SNS and government officials raised were energy (as the Serbian energy sector is heavily dependent on Russian supplies) and food. As a result, the Serbian government was pressured to introduce sanctions on Russia. Still, it seems that they used the electoral campaign and technical mandate of the government as an excuse, at least initially. In later statements, the SNS representatives claimed that Serbia would not impose sanctions if it could resist pressure from the West. Finally, however, Serbia voted for the United Nations Assembly Resolution that demanded the end of the Russian offensive in Ukraine on 2 March.

Far Right populist parties saw the invasion as an opportunity and took a position that resonated with their constituency's established anti-West (and pro-Russian) values. In this sense, the war gave new impetus to old arguments, with the war cast as a classic proxy war of the West against Russia, that Ukraine was under the sway of the Western powers, and Serbia should not take sides and impose sanctions on Russia. The arguments of these parties varied from the moderate position of the DSS (Serbia should not pick sides and should retain principled positions respecting the international law and territorial integrity of Ukraine and, therefore, should not recognize the separatist Donbas and Luhansk republics) and anti-EU positions of Dveri, Dosta je Bilo and Zavetnici (the EU integration process has stalled and thus there is no incentive to harmonize foreign politics with Brussels and to jeopardize relations with Russia and Belarus), toward the more critical SRS, which demanded strong support for Russia. The right-wing parties were already in a good position because of a recent campaign against the constitutional changes supported by the EU in January 2022.

The ruling SNS expressed positions close to Far Right populists. The SNS is often classified as pro-Russian. The Socialists rejected the idea of joining the sanctions regime against Russia as it would go against Serbian national interests. They referred to the NATO bombing of Serbia in 1999, asking why the international public was not interested in Serbian civilian victims. President of the Socialist Party, Ivica Dačić, argued that it would take another 25 years for Serbia to become an EU member and that Belgrade could thus happily shelve policy harmonization for the foreseeable future.

Other (non-populist) parties tried to avoid this issue during the campaign, hoping the war would end quickly. However, most non-populist parties believed the war would only provide incentives for nationalism and identity politics,



traditionally perceived as a vital element of the regime and right-wing parties. Therefore, in the first several weeks of the campaign, the Party of Freedom and Justice (SPP), Serbia's largest opposition party, argued against the sanctions on the ground they affect ordinary people and not the regime (often referring to the Serbian experience during the 1990s with claims that sanctions did not harm Milošević at all). Still, most non-populist parties demanded that Serbia condemn Russian aggression on Ukraine. However, as the war progressed toward the end of the campaign, several parties, including the DSS, the PSG (Movement of Free Citizens) and the left-wing party Moramo (We Must), spoke out strongly in favour of Ukraine and called for sanctions on Russia.

These voices were strengthened after the elections when the SSP supported the sanctions and even asked for a parliamentary session on this issue. It is unclear if these changes resulted from public opinion, war events (e.g., atrocities, destruction of civilian infrastructure), or international pressure on these parties. In the post-electoral period, pro-EU liberal and leftist parties started to demand sanctions against Russia daily and to warn that Serbia could be an isolated part of Europe once again if it did not change politics.

Radicalization after the elections also happened on the Right, where parties gathered in a coalition that aimed to prevent sanctions on Russia. These issues have been intertwined with developments in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro and presented as Western pressure on Serbian interests to disrupt relations between Serbia and Russia to facilitate Kosovo's independence. In contrast to other European parties, being pro-Russian in Serbia is not an obstacle, so these parties could freely express their views.

Finally, the SNS position after the election remained similar for months – although there was a clear majority in the parliament, the government was formed just before the legal deadline – this deflected international pressure for a long time and enabled the SNS to escape from initial pressure. Party position remained neutral, and Vučić insisted on the complexity of the Serbian position and the necessity to put Serbian interest first; this led to a number of warning signs from both Russia and the West, but so far, it seems like there still is some manoeuvre space for him.

The demand side of right-wing populism

Since the beginning of the invasion, the war in Ukraine has become the most critical issue in Serbian media. Based on a recent report from the Center for Research, Transparency and Accountability (CRTA, 2022a), a Serbian human rights outfit, most of the media coverage is pro-Russian (although with some moderation compared to the initial phase of the war), with the most substantial imbalance observed in national TV stations (especially TV Pink and TV Happy) and tabloids (*Informer* and *Večernje novosti*). Biased reporting is moderate during the news sections and quite open during the morning talk shows (open pro-Russian propaganda by pro-government journalists and analysts). The CRTA report also shows that most fake news is pro-Russian and anti-NATO.

Considering this media landscape and established attitudes on foreign politics of the Serbian population, it is not surprising that a survey conducted in May 2022 (CRTA 2022b) showed that 66% of citizens claimed to be “closer to Russia” in the conflict, in contrast to only 12% who were pro-Ukraine; also, 72% agreed with the statement that Russia has been provoked by NATO expansion. These figures changed over time to some extent – a similar study conducted in September of 2022 showed a small decline in support for Russia and the number of citizens supporting the sanctions rising to 20% (Miletić, 2022). Other surveys show that Serbian citizens might change their position in the case of outside pressure, the threat of sanctions from the West or in the case of Russia recognizing Kosovo independence (on several occasions, Putin used the Kosovo argument to justify the independence of the Donbas and Luhansk republics) (Euronews Srbija, 2022).

Because the 2022 electoral campaign took place after the war started, many commentators argued that the invasion helped Far Right parties surpass the 3% threshold (in 2020, none of those parties had entered parliament). The same assessment was shared by President Vučić just after the elections when he accused the Far Right parties and the SPS of being opportunistic and irresponsible to Serbian interests because they allegedly used the pro-Russian sentiments of the voters to gain more support. However, if we observe mid-term trends (and compare results with the 2016 elections, as those were the last ones with the full participation of the opposition), it seems that there is a small growth of both the Far Right group and the SPS, probably on behalf of the SNS share. Although it could be argued that it is the consequence of the war, data already showed the gradual growth of the Far Right parties even before the war due to strong campaigns against COVID-19



measures and already mentioned constitutional changes in January 2022.

Table 1: Electoral results of populist and “pro-Russian” parties, 2016-2022

	2016		2020		2022	
	Votes	%	Votes	%	Votes	%
SNS	1,823,147	48.0	1,953,998	60.0	1,635,101	44.0
DSS	190,530	5.0	72,085	2.2	204,444	5.5
Dveri	27,690	0.7	Boycott		144,762	3.9
Zavetnici			45,950	1.4	141,227	3.8
Sovereignists	–	–	73,953	2.3	86,362	2.3
SRS	306,052	8.0	65,954	2.0	82,066	2.2
<i>Far Right populists (total)</i>	<i>524,272*</i>	<i>13.7</i>	<i>257,942**</i>	<i>5.7</i>	<i>658,861</i>	<i>8.3</i>
SPS	413,770	11.0	334,333	10.0	435,274	11.7

Source: Republic Electoral Commission

* In 2016, the Sovereignists could not be classified as Far Right. Dveri and DSS ran as a coalition that year.

** In the 2020 elections, some Far Right voters voted for the monarchist party POKS (85,888) and right-wing SPAS (123,374); in 2022, POKS split between DSS and Dveri, and SPAS joined the SNS.

Concluding remarks

The issue of Russian aggression merged with already existing political cleavages and reinforced some of them. None of the relevant parties dramatically changed their position due to war and the change in the international landscape; however, parties with strong ideological positions gained more strength and new topics that reinforced divisions between them. At the same time, catch-all parties found themselves in problems as balanced politics became much more complicated.

In terms of populist parties, Far Right populists gained additional issues and incentives to preserve strong anti-EU positions and to oppose the introduction of sanctions on Russia as it would weaken the Serbian position on Kosovo. At the same time, they gained the opportunity to reinforce narratives on the hypocrisy of the West and politics of power instead of politics of principles (e.g., territorial integrity). On the other side, the SNS, as a moderate right-wing and populist party that balances between East and West, found itself in a delicate situation. Although the SNS mastered balancing between powers in the last ten years, the space for manoeuvres is shrinking. So far, Serbia’s government did vote “against” Russia in the UN General Assembly twice, but it also rejected demands to impose sanctions. Moreover, the recent conflict in Kosovo regarding licence plates led to the withdrawal of Serbs from Kosovo institutions, which intensified the situation and

raised concerns about the conflict to the highest levels since early 2000. On one side, this makes the situation for president Vučić and the SNS even more complicated, while on the other, it decreases the pressure regarding the sanctions.

In general terms, the war in Ukraine put the Serbian position in the spotlight and emphasized old divisions and issues. Most of them are identity-based and related to significant foreign policy issues, which remind us of previous periods of great divides – in the late 90-ties and before the decisive 2008 elections. However, the current party system does not reflect the divisions – the SNS has a stable government with coalition partners, and the bilateral opposition cannot agree on most of the issues. Also, there are many concerns about the quality of Serbian democracy and recent trends of autocratization. In other words, although there seems to be a challenge in foreign affairs for the Serbian government, there is significant stability in the internal political arena.



References

- Bieber, F. (2018). Patterns of competitive authoritarianism in the Western Balkans. *East European Politics*, 34(3), 337–354. doi:10.1080/21599165.2018.1490272
- CRTA. (2022a). Media monitoring: The war in Ukraine cast a shadow over all other topics. *Center for Research, Transparency and Accountability*. <https://crt.rs/en/media-monitoring-the-war-in-ukraine-cast-a-shadow-over-all-other-topics/>
- CRTA (2022b). Survey: Democracy on the Margin of the War. *Center for Research, Transparency and Accountability*. <https://crt.rs/en/survey-democracy-on-the-margin-of-the-war/>
- Euronews Srbija. (2022, November 26). *Nova istraživanja, stari odgovori: Većina građana protiv sankcija Rusiji, ali nekoliko faktora može da poljulja taj stav*. <https://www.euronews.rs/srbija/politika/66756/nova-istrazivanja-stari-odgovori-vecina-gradana-protiv-sankcija-rusiji-ali-nekoliko-faktora-moze-da-poljulja-taj-stav/vest>
- Milojević, A., & Krstić, A. (2019). Dimensional approach to populism: Party communication during 2014 Elections in Serbia. In M. Dragičević Šešić & M. Nikolić (Eds.), *Situating populist politics: Arts and media nexus* (pp. 143–160). Institute for Theatre, Film, Radio and Television, Faculty of Dramatic Arts, Belgrade.
- Miletić, M. (2022, November 25). U Srbiji raste podrška uvođenju sankcija protiv Rusije *Radija Slobodna Evropa*. <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/srbija-podrska-sankcijama-protiv-rusije/32149039.html>
- Republic electoral commission <https://www.rik.parlament.gov.rs/>
- Spasojević, D. (2019). Transforming populism – From protest vote to ruling ideology: The case of Serbia. In V. Beširević (Ed.), *The new politics of decisionism* (pp., 125–140). Eleven Publishing.
- Spasojević, D. (2021). Two and a half crises: Serbian institutional design as the cause of democratic declines. *Political Studies Review*, 20(4), 550–563. doi: 10.1177/14789299211056197.
- Stojić, M. (2018). Party responses to the EU in the Western Balkans: Transformation, opposition or defiance? Palgrave MacMillan.



SLOVAKIA



The Russia–Ukraine War and the Radicalization of Political Discourse in Slovakia

Peter Učen^{*}

Abstract

The report opens with a reflection on the political actors who have been labelled and analysed as populists in the modern history of Slovakia. Then, it assesses the impact of the Russian aggression in Ukraine by taking into account the broader group of radical challengers to the liberal-democratic notion of “politics as usual” in Slovakia who operate beyond the populist Radical Right. Overall, the report finds that while the Russia–Ukraine war has contributed to the radicalization of the public discourse in Slovakia, it has not engendered new populist or radical actors nor caused notable changes in the ideational profiles and political strategies of existing ones.

Keywords: *radicalization; Slovakia; Radical Right; Direction–Social Democracy (SMER); Russia–Ukraine war*

The argument presented in this report is that while Russia’s aggression in Ukraine has contributed to a radicalization of the political discourse in Slovakia, the main avenue of such radicalization was not the Radical Right or right-wing populism. The Radical Right parties were pro-Russian long before Putin’s war of aggression, have not changed their stance as a consequence of it, and have studiously avoided any suggestion of support for it, at least as far as the invasion itself is concerned. The issue did not cause significant realignment or institutional changes in the Radical Right scene. Nor are Radical Right parties the sole purveyors of an oblique pro-Russian stance. They may have been outperformed in this respect by a non-radical, centre-right party with motivations rooted in Slovakia’s domestic political conflict.

^{*} peter.ucen.pu@gmail.com

Učen, Peter. (2023). “The Russia–Ukraine War and the Radicalization of Political Discourse in Slovakia.” In: *The Impacts of the Russian Invasion of Ukraine on Right-wing Populism in Europe*. (eds). Gilles Ivaldi and Emilia Zankina. European Center for Populism Studies (ECPS). March 8, 2023. Brussels. <https://doi.org/10.55271/rp0029>



A brief historical outline of (suspected) populists in Slovakia

Accurate or otherwise, reflection on the populist phenomena in Slovak politics has often suffered from the same general problems afflicting populist studies and anti-populist activism and journalism elsewhere. In the case of academic treatments, we have witnessed conceptual stretching, confusing populism with its thicker ideational fellow-travellers (nativism, authoritarianism), and promoting populism to the status of the all-encompassing category subsuming other ideational constructs to which, in practice, populism often serves as a means to convey their messages more efficiently. Beyond the academy, anti-populist movements have also engaged in broad-brush engagement, with “populist” becoming an “officially sanctioned slur” for politics in general, which risks throwing the baby out with the bathwater and, in any event, constitutes a morally unacceptable way of marshalling popular support against bogus messages and dangerous ideas. With this caveat in mind, it is helpful to summarize the several ways of “doing politics” in Slovakia’s modern history that have been—accurately or otherwise—labelled as “populist”.

At first, the populist label was a part of various attempts at capturing and explaining the tribulations the young and underdeveloped Slovak liberal-democratic polity was experiencing in the 1990s. These included the post-1989 surge in Slovak ethnic nationalism demanding broad political autonomy or secession from the federal republic of Czechoslovakia, created in 1989–90 and dissolved in December 1992, when the Czechs and Slovaks went their separate ways.

Another powerful source of such reflection was a combination of effective nationalist and populist mobilization under the auspices of the shrewd populist politician Vladimír Mečiar. His political success and attempt to retain power led the Slovak polity to the verge of having its liberal content entirely hollowed out and continuing as an illiberal democratic facade. Later a series of articulate, yet varying, anti-establishment appeals by new political parties distancing themselves from mečiarist populism as well as the civic-democratic and largely liberal opposition that defeated it in the 1998 elections were analysed as forms of “populism”.¹

Among the parties labelled populist from this first wave of anti-establishment challengers, Direction–Social Democracy (SMER) came to dominate and shape Slovak politics in the 2000s and continues to do so to the present day. In the past

two decades, the party has undergone a series of ideological and strategic transformations, of which some can be clarified with the help of the notion of populism, while others should not be. The second decade of this century has witnessed the rise of a second generation of anti-establishment challengers, which includes the anti-corruption and market liberal Freedom and Solidarity (SaS) party in 2010 as well as the anti-corruption movement Ordinary People and Independent Personalities (OLaNO). While often called populist, these parties' appeals—undeniably anti-establishment in their nature—have been primarily informed by anti-corruption and calls for integrity in politics.

A few years later, a genuinely Radical Right outfit, the People's Party—Our Slovakia (LSNS), broke through on the regional level and entered the national parliament in 2016. Finally, in 2016 the Slovak polity witnessed the rise of the conservative We are Family party, which described itself explicitly as on a mission to “purify” Slovak politics and did not shy away from Radical Right tropes on occasion, particularly about immigration. As expected, both of these two new challengers have been analysed in terms of populism and extremism. All of these actors, at certain points in their political activity, presented—in varying degrees and forms—some kind of challenge to “politics as usual” in the Slovak polity. Populism—properly conceptualized—has been, and continues to be, a part of the appeal of some of them. Yet, in itself, populism hardly explains the nature of the challenges confronting Slovak politics.

Right-wing populism and other (radical) challengers since the 2020 elections

Not all challenger parties in the Slovak political system are right-wing populists. Some would qualify as mainstream right-wing parties that (on occasion) adopt a “populist style”, but a sustained combination of nativism and authoritarianism and populism is not the defining aspect of their appeals. Moreover, the right-wing populists do not present the single dominant threat to the quality of liberal democracy in Slovakia.

-
1. The author has contributed to this state of affairs by popularizing the term “centrist populism” with reference to these parties, the politics of which—he now contends—could certainly better be explained by a conceptual elaboration on the term “anti-establishment politics” rather than populism proper.



As for the political fate of the challengers listed above, SaS has never been Radical Right, and in the meantime, it has practically become the mainstream party. OĽaNO retained and repeatedly reinvented its anti-establishment appeal and the *form of the anti-party*, deliberately eschewing a meaningful organizational structure. The movement described itself as a platform for promoting independent (read: non-partisan) personalities to the parliament to address problems in the political process, hence the name.² Characteristically, the movement has undergone a series of reinvention cycles before each election since 2012, in terms of candidates but also electoral appeals. The typical OĽaNO candidate list has been a rather odd mix of anti-corruption activists and whistle-blowers (often with centrist or liberal inclinations) and conservative activists from the traditional Christian as well as newer charismatic (Pentecostal) milieus. The glue that has held this somewhat motley crew of candidates has been a staunch commitment to combat political corruption.

While OĽaNO satisfies both conditions—being right-wing and populist—it has never become a Radical Right party. Following a vote of no-confidence in the OĽaNO-led government in December 2022, an internal discussion started regarding the separation of the party’s “liberal” and “conservative” wings. The latter might take the movement in a more radical direction by engaging in culture wars and vigorous opposition to “gender ideology” and the rights of trans people.

The We are Family party broke out in 2016 as a socially conservative and paternalistic party for ordinary people. The party explicitly cast its approach in contrast to the elitist manner of previous conservative champions in Slovakia. The party appeal is primarily based on the curious charisma of the party leader Boris Kollár—a millionaire with an eccentric private life (normally incompatible with any version of conservatism). Kollár is known for occasional anti-immigrant and anti-refugee rhetoric outbursts. But more importantly, We are Family is a political project of predatory opportunists who try to marshal support from a paternalist but the largely non-Left and likely non-religious electorate. Being both right-wing and populist, We are Family is not a Radical Right party. Like in the case of OĽaNO, it lacks the combination of nativism and authoritarianism at the core of its ideology. While the party leader in the past expressed sympathies for Austria’s FPÖ, Italy’s Lega, and France’s FN, currently, such alliances do not bring any political profits to the party’s project.

2. In Slovakia, independent candidates are barred from running in parliamentary elections.

The People's Party—Our Slovakia (ĽSNS)—nowadays officially known by its prefix Kotlebistas—ĽSNS (K-ĽSNS)—broke out on the regional level in 2013 and made it into the parliament in 2016. The party has been analysed in terms of both the Radical Right and political extremism. In fact, it is part of the family of Central European Far Right parties—such as Hungary's Jobbik—which, from the point of view of traditional comparativist schemes, could best be described as a hybrid of Radical Right and extremist political programmes. While ĽSNS was established by extremist cadres, for the sake of public consumption, it has developed a political programme that is radical and vaguely anti-systemic, albeit carefully avoiding refutation of democracy. However, while placing extremist ideas on the back burner for the sake of smoother participation in the game of democratic politics, the party has offered a series of dog-whistle gestures aimed at its extremist supporters (and mocking the establishment). One such gesture—handing out checks to needy families in the amount of €1,488 —saw party leader Marián Kotleba accused of propagating extremism and put on trial. The pending threat of four years in prison caused tension within the party. Kotleba started preparing for eventual prison time by packing the party leadership with loyalists. This alienated the group around Milan Uhrík, MEP, who led a splinter group which left the party to establish the Far Right Republika party in 2020. The split resulted from purely personal and organizational disagreements rather than programmatic and tactical clashes. The new Republika adopted slightly more consensual stances while the rump ĽSNS embarked upon further radicalization, including a return to anti-Roma marches. As a result, Republika took over most of the electoral support of the old ĽSNS, and the rump party has since languished with low-single-digit support in opinion polls.

Both ĽSNS and Republika are Radical Right and populist parties. They also stand out notably from the rest of the political spectrum in terms of their attitude to the Russia–Ukraine war. Paradoxically, their closest ally in both the fight against “the system” and the positions taken on the war is the left-wing populist SMER, which bills itself as a social democratic party.

The once anti-establishment party SMER has undergone a series of transformations over the two decades. While continuing to identify as a social democratic party, SMER has lately come to rely on appeals that are both socially paternalistic (in a generally leftist vein) as well as culturally conservative. The latest addition to its ideological tool belt has been authoritarianism. Thus, the party, which started life with a younger, urban and educated voter base, has ended up as a radical actor with messages appealing to a historically paternalistic left-wing



electorate (pensioners), conspiracists, and those who question Slovakia's geopolitical orientation. In fact, SMER has become the functional equivalent of the Radical Right for members of these constituencies that identify as left-wing.

Like Mečiar in the 1990s, SMER's malleability has been conditioned by the need to shield party cadres and external allies from the consequences of losing power. Over decades, the party has come to be dominated by a "cabal" of senior party politicians and external actors exhibiting all the signs of state capture. Politicians have thus traded protection to external "fixers" and oligarchs for material benefits. The whole extent of the captors' activities was revealed following an extensive report published on the murder of the investigative journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée Martina Kušnírová in February 2018. A substantial part of the public concluded that SMER party elites were morally responsible for the murder by instituting the system of "our people" (the nickname given to the cabal) with the pervasive feeling of impunity provided by such cover, which encouraged one of the fixers to mastermind the murder. The change of public mood cost party leader Robert Fico the prime ministership when the popular (and less tainted) Peter Pellegrini preemptively replaced him as party leader.

Fico, a former prime minister, launched a campaign to undermine the integrity of investigations of high-profile corruption cases that evolved around himself, his party peers and their allies in business and the state administration. Such campaigns were primarily based on challenging the investigations as biased, politically motivated and infringing on the rule of law. It also included accusations of foreign interference in Slovak politics and in the investigations themselves.

The radicalism of Fico's campaign increased in the aftermath of the February 2020 elections when the opposition alliance came to power on the back of electoral appeals for de-oligarchization, and ending systemic corruption and state capture—as symbolized by Fico's circle. This estranged the wing of the party around Peter Pellegrini, which split from SMER in 2020 to establish the party Voice–Social Democracy (HLAS). HLAS leaders could plausibly claim to have been outside the "our people" cabal and therefore felt less exposed to the consequences of the anti-corruption investigations. They objected to the anti-systemic shift in SMER's appeals, preferring to position themselves in the political centre and burnish their prospective governing credentials. HLAS quickly bested SMER in popularity ratings, and the breakaway soon took over a substantial part of the original organization. This only caused Fico to further radicalize his appeals, which have

increasingly come to rely on the mobilization of a part of the anti-systemic and “alternative geopolitics” electorates.

The role of the Russia–Ukraine war in the radicalization of Slovak politics

First, the actors primarily responsible for the overall radicalization of the political discourse and the ruling OĽaNO have been SMER, Republika and ĽSNS. As noted, ĽSNS and Republika are Radical Right outfits, and the reasons for their extreme conduct are both ideological and tactical. For the failing ĽSNS, radicalization is seen as a way to bring former voters who now prefer Republika back into the fold. This is effectively a fight over the ownership of the Radical Right issue space in Slovak politics. For Republika, a slight moderation might be an advisable strategy, but they still need to retain the anti-system but non-extremist voters inherited from ĽSNS. The two Radical Right parties’ relationship with SMER is logical and paradoxical. In many respects, currently, they are tactical allies—particularly SMER and Republika. However, radicalized SMER represents a clear and present danger of poaching anti-systemic voters of Republika.

In the case of SMER, the reasons for the radical conduct are mainly tactical. Like ĽSNS, the party found itself bested by its splinter, HLAS. The polls, however, show that a significant part of HLAS’s support still considers SMER as the alternative regarding their voting choice. While SMER fights for its former voters, the party also seeks to complement them with the radicalized anti-systemic voters from the two Radical Right parties. These efforts are incredibly intense as their motivation is the return to power and undoing any possible damages resulting from the high-profile corruption cases against SMER’s cadres and allies. The strategy—characterized by an utter absence of inhibition combined with Fico’s considerable political skills—has worked. SMER has become the second-most popular party in Slovakia, lagging behind HLAS by a margin of only 3–4 percentage points.

Secondly, the primary motivations of the radicalization efforts regard domestic politics. The issues of geopolitics, the relations with Russia and taking sides in the Russia–Ukraine war play an important but secondary role in attempts to mobilize anti-systemic voters to engineer a return to power and a purging of those who currently occupy the offices of state. In one way or another—and with varying degrees of intensity—all three parties claim that Slovakia’s support for Ukraine in



the current effort to face Russia's aggression is against the national interest and threaten the country's welfare.

The outbreak of the war did not bring any substantial shifts in the popular support for political parties, including the Radical Right. The polls also confirmed that supporters of SMER and Republika were the most inclined to prefer Russia's victory in the conflict. Public opinion data collected in September 2022 by the polling organization Globsec suggest that 47% of Slovaks would prefer a Ukrainian victory as opposed to 19% who support Russia. This compares with 55% of Republika supporters backing Russia and 36% of SMER sympathizers. Of SMER's constituency, 34% responded that they did not care either way.

While all the parties surveyed here condemn Russia's act of aggression, this should not be read as a condemnation of the ideas behind the Kremlin's move. Open support of the Kremlin has certainly been rare and mainly limited to individuals on social media. Among the politicians, ĽSNS MP Slavěna Vorobelová, who replaced Marián Kotleba after he lost his parliamentary seat, said to the press that "she would not go and fight" if Russia invaded Slovakia because, among other things, the conflict was not between Russia and Slovakia but between the United States and Russia. Most of the time, political actors siding with Russia have opted for various indirect and proxy expressions of pro-Russian sentiment, such as the second part of Vorobelová's statement.

From among these, the most frequent were:

1. Praise of geopolitical realism and arguments regarding the legitimate spheres of influence of players like Russia. This included references to various Western experts in the international relations field (such as John Mearsheimer) who advance this line of thinking in an attempt to look competent in foreign policy.
2. Narratives shifting the responsibility for the war from Russia to Ukraine, the West, NATO and the United States. These included claims that Russia had a legitimate case for aggression or that it was provoked and manipulated to invade Ukraine by the West. The "proxy war" argument has also been used to assert that the conflict was between the United States and Russia and that Slovakia ought thus to stay out of the fray. All three parties in question referred to geopolitical realism in such a manner. Also, in January 2023, both MEPs elected on the ĽSNS ticket—one of them becoming, in the meantime, the leader of Republika—voted against the resolution of the

European Parliament calling for the establishment of the international tribunal dealing with Russia's war crimes in Ukraine.

3. Calls for ending the war and “unnecessary suffering”. This narrative was a euphemism for stopping the military support to Ukraine—thus facilitating Ukraine's surrender and Russia's victory. For example, SMER's chair of the Parliamentary Foreign Affairs Committee criticized the Slovak mainstream political discourse as “having resigned on the language of peace and diplomatic solutions” and becoming “limited to hardening of the sanctions and supply of weapons to Ukraine”. Similarly, SMER's chairman Robert Fico asserted that should his party become a part of the new government, “it would preclude a supply of a single cartridge to Ukraine” because such a policy would “only prolong the problem”.
4. Related to this were arguments appealing to the economic interests of the country. These involved an open criticism of the Western sanctions targeting Russia. This was the official position of SMER and HLAS, who declared that the “solution of the impact of war required an active foreign policy emphasizing the enforcement of the national economic interests”. On other occasions, SMER and the Radical Right linked the sanctions to higher energy prices, as shown, for example, by Republika's billboard campaign slogan, “We will rescind the sanctions and make energy cheaper”.

All the arguments contributed to the overall narrative of the betrayal of the national interest perpetrated by the ruling majority: According to ĽSNS and Republika, the “government did it all to prolong the war and involve Slovakia in it”, which was proof that the “government was serving foreign interests”. In contrast, ĽSNS praised the “neutral position of Hungary in the conflict” as an example to follow. In a similar vein, according to Republika, “the government involved Slovakia in global issues while it was better to take the neutral position”, described by the party as “a total failure to defend our sovereignty”.

Conclusion

In the last couple of years, the political discourse in Slovakia has notably radicalized. The topic of the Russian aggression in Ukraine, however, has not been the main reason for such radicalization in general or regarding the populist Radical Right parties in particular. Instead, the main reason was the conflict over the political and



criminal consequences of investigating the high-profile corruption cases involving people linked to the previous government. However, the Russian aggression in Ukraine, to some degree, informed the radicalization process in the last year. Mostly, it has provided additional arguments for the “geopolitical” dimension of domestic political polarization. For SMER, ĽSNS and Republika, it has offered a means to distance themselves more convincingly from the post-2020 election majority. With the different motivations described above, SMER and the two Radical Right parties seek to enlarge and further encapsulate the estranged anti-systemic constituency and divide it among themselves. Their principal argument—taking the various forms described earlier—is that the current establishment’s geopolitical orientation, as best illustrated in supporting Ukraine in the current war, presents a grave danger to the national interest of Slovakia—a betrayal similar to the anti-national activities taking place in the domestic arena.



SPAIN



The Spanish Radical Right under the shadow of the invasion of Ukraine

*Hugo Marcos-Marne** University of Salamanca

Abstract

Despite the geographical distance, the war in Ukraine has brought to the fore links between the Russian establishment and Radical Right forces in Spain. Both scholars and pundits have taken an interest in the question, which spread to party competition, quickly turning into a (discursive) race away from Putin as the consequences of war become more evident. Despite the war's unquestioned relevance and previous links between Russia and the Radical Right in Spain (albeit less established than in other European countries), a systematic analysis of the effects of the invasion is missing. This report addresses this gap by focusing on the impact of the Ukraine invasion on party discourse and public opinion in Spain. It analyses records of proceedings from the Spanish Parliament, Twitter messages posted by the VOX party and its leader, and survey data gathered since February 2022 by the Spanish Center for Sociological Research (CIS). The main findings at the party level highlight the relatively weak associations between the Kremlin and The Radical Right in Spain (compared to other European countries), as well as efforts to separate from Putin after the invasion started. A more complex pattern of preferences is identified at the individual level.

Keywords: *Radical Right; populism; Russia–Ukraine war; VOX party; Spain*

* marcosmarne@usal.es

Marcos-Marne, Hugo. (2023). "The Spanish Radical Right under the shadow of the invasion of Ukraine." In: *The Impacts of the Russian Invasion of Ukraine on Right-wing Populism in Europe*. (eds). Gilles Ivaldi and Emilia Zankina. European Center for Populism Studies (ECPS). March 8, 2023. Brussels. <https://doi.org/10.55271/rp0030>



Introduction

Located on opposite sides of the European continent from Spain, Russia has seldom exerted much economic and political influence on the country. Whatever influence Moscow had has only declined since European Union (EU) sanctions were introduced in 2014, which adversely affected bilateral trade (Dunaev, 2018; Féas, 2022). These changes have shaped connections between Russian political and economic elites and the Spanish Radical Right.

This report focuses on Russia's links to VOX, the most electorally successful but certainly not the only party with a radical right-wing orientation in Spain.¹ Other relevant parties in the Spanish party system mentioned in this report are the Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE), the Partido Popular (PP), and Unidas Podemos (UP). The PSOE—a centre-left party that belongs to the group of the Socialists and Democrats in the European Parliament (EP)—received the most votes in the most recent national elections. The PP, currently the main opposition party in Spain, lies on the centre-right and belongs to the European People's Party group in the EP. For its part, UP is a Radical Left party that belongs to the European United Left (GUE/NGL) in the EP and is part of the coalition government led by Pedro Sánchez (Bakker et al., 2020). The UP is itself an electoral coalition dominated by the parties Podemos and Izquierda Unida (IU), which have often been characterized as populist outfits (Ramiro & Gomez, 2016; Marcos-Marne et al., 2020). VOX is universally classified as a Radical Right party because it adheres to authoritarian and nativist ideas (Ferreira, 2019; Mudde, 2004). Populist ideas also appear less consistently in the discourses of the party (Marcos-Marne et al., 2021; Rooduijn et al., 2019).

For a long time, Spain was a European outlier in lacking an electorally successful Radical Right party (Alonso & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2015), but this ended in 2019 when VOX broke through in national elections (Turnbull-Dugarte et al., 2020).² VOX's emergence confirmed the disintegration of Spain's established two-party system, and while the 2019 elections saw a left-wing national government elected, VOX's success quickly had institutional consequences at the subnational level. For

-
1. For additional information on the complex relations between comparatively small groups of the Radical Right and Russia, see Albin (2022).
 2. To be clear, radical right-wing parties existed in Spain before VOX attained institutional representation following the regional elections in Andalucía in 2018. However, these were mainly marginal groups that never achieved the electoral success VOX attained nation-wide in April 2019.

example, the PP was only able to form a coalition government in Madrid after VOX was persuaded to abstain and the party's votes were necessary to ensure the PP's regional government in Murcia. In Castilla y León, VOX entered coalition government alongside the PP.

Analysis of relations between VOX and Russia before the invasion of Ukraine falls into several distinct categories. First, in organizational and financial terms, VOX and Russia share several international allies on the Far Right (e.g., Viktor Orbán, Marine Le Pen, and Matteo Salvini), and organizations associated with VOX (i.e., Hazte Oír-CitizenGO) have received funding from Russian oligarchs close to the Kremlin (Datta, 2021). Second, in ideological terms, there is a strong complementarity between the Kremlin and VOX primarily based on nationalism (with a strong emphasis on opposing the EU as a supranational project) and authoritarianism (including resolute opposition to gender equality). There is thus a strong ideological affinity between VOX and the Kremlin, which is not necessarily reflected in deep financial ties (especially when compared to Russia's support for other Radical Right forces in Europe).

To be clear, voices that speak in favour of Putin have continued among VOX politicians even after the invasion of Ukraine started (Testa, 2022). Even before the invasion (and since), party leader Santiago Abascal has pointedly refrained from criticizing Putin in public interviews due to ideological connections (González, 2019, 2022). However, ties have never been as blatant and significant as in other European countries. So then, how has the invasion of Ukraine affected these relations?

The Radical Right parties and Russia after the invasion

At the level of party discourse, the invasion of Ukraine forced VOX to take a comparatively less ambiguous position towards Russia and its president, Vladimir Putin. In this vein, Abascal largely supported both the arrival of refugees³ and sending war supplies to Ukraine, a position that he combined with strong criticism against the EU (both for being too weak and too expansionist) and the Spanish

3. This measure was not supported by all members of VOX, as can be seen in statements issued by VOX Andalucía (Morillo, 2022).



government (blaming UP for having relations with the Russian government). In March 2022, alongside all the parliamentary groups except the Grupo Mixto,⁴ VOX supported an official statement supporting Ukraine and against the invasion by Vladimir Putin. In the same debate, Abascal directed robust discourse against members of the government, accusing them of supporting the invasion of Ukraine indirectly due to government links with Russia via “El Grupo de Puebla”, their critical positions towards NATO, and previous criticisms directed against the Ukrainian government for (allegedly) giving support to Radical Right groups (Congreso de los Diputados, 2022a).

In Spain’s “state of the nation” debate held in the Spanish Parliament in July 2022, VOX’s MPs avoided any positive statements about Russia, the Kremlin, or Vladimir Putin, even if they did accuse Prime Minister Sánchez of using the war in Ukraine to deflect responsibility for the economic crunch (“It is not Putin, it is not Franco, it is not the virus. It is you, Pedro Sánchez, the government, and the erratic economic policy that explains to a great extent the economic collapse suffered...” (Congreso de los Diputados, 2022b, p. 27). Although a systematic analysis of VOX discourse on Twitter is beyond the scope of the current report, there are also enough examples to support the view that the party turned (more) critical toward Russia after February 2022:

Putin’s arrogance progresses due to the silence of many cowardly leaders and the support of tyrants from all around the world, like those from the Grupo de Puebla, formed by socialists and communists from the Spanish government. (Abascal, 2022a)

Putin’s allies are sitting in the government, and Pedro Sánchez should expel them immediately. Spain must support Ukraine unanimously, and there is no room for half-measures. (VOX, 2022)

I celebrate the Spanish Parliament’s support for the Ukrainian president. Zelenskyy has exhibited heroic behaviour in front of the criminal and deadly attack led by Putin, which would have made most Western politicians flee by helicopter. That deserves our recognition. (Abascal, 2022b)

4. The Candidatura de Unidad Popular (CUP), which counts two MPs in Spain’s parliament, decided not to support the official statement as it failed to mention the role of NATO and the United States in the origins of the conflict.

Overall, the invasion of Ukraine has been politicized in the Spanish political landscape, and repertoires of competition have included accusing political opponents of being allies of Putin and his government.⁵ VOX took part in this trend despite its previously ambiguous discourses towards Russia and the Kremlin, mostly focusing its discursive efforts on criticizing UP. However, consistent with the ambiguous relations highlighted above, VOX did not concentrate its communication strategy on the war. Indeed, at the time of writing, only 11 mentions of Putin, 20 of Ukraine, and 8 of Russia have been posted by VOX's official Twitter account since February 2022. Abascal's Twitter account had posted ten mentions of Putin, six of Ukraine, and two of Russia in the same period.

Voters of the Radical Right and Russia after the invasion

Data gathered by the Spanish Center for Sociological Research (CIS) allows for a public opinion perspective on the effects of the war in Ukraine among voters of the Radical Right, focusing on two main topics: the degree of concern about the war in Ukraine and support for different measures to help Ukraine (sending humanitarian help, hosting refugees, putting pressure on Putin to withdraw the army, and advocating for direct NATO intervention).⁶ To allow for comparisons, we grouped respondents in each survey of the CIS by vote recall (which party the respondent voted for) in the last national elections (held in November 2019), considering the four parties that garnered the highest vote share: the PSOE, the PP, VOX and UP.

The lines in Figure 1 represent the share of voters for each of the four main parties declaring little or no concern at all about the war. These values evidence that most of the respondents were at least somehow concerned about the war, as the percentage plotted never reaches 30% or even 15% for the two main parties. They further suggest an overall growing lack of concern about the war among voters of all parties, with comparatively higher values displayed by voters of VOX and UP. Last, they indicate that voters of VOX were the least concerned about the war in

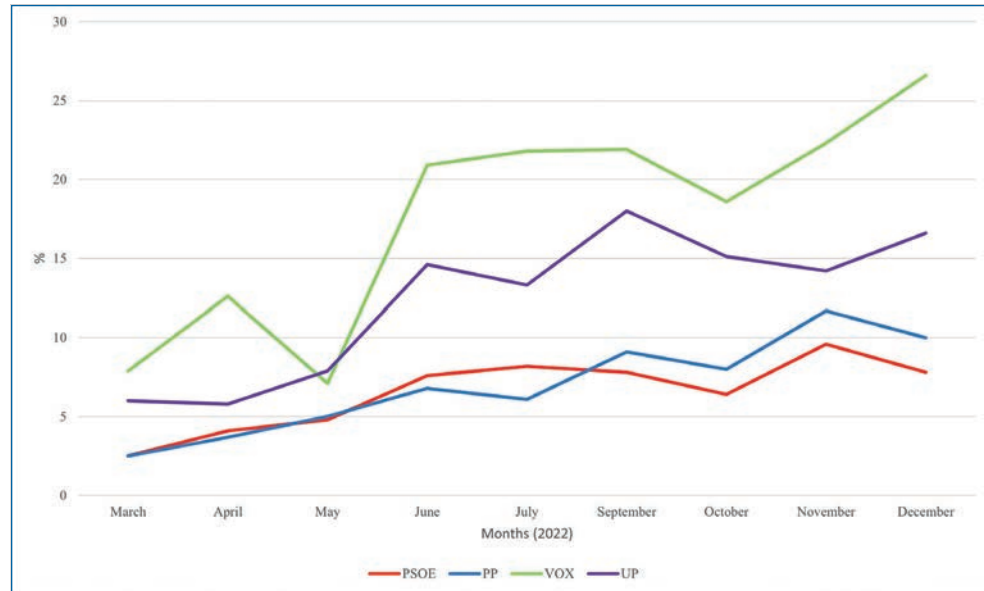
5. Criticisms directed towards Russia have traditionally had traction among the Radical Right in Spain, and VOX emphasized links between Russia, as the successor to the USSR, and current members of the government belonging to the Spanish Communist Party.

6. The CIS surveys used in this section can be retrieved from the Center for Sociological Research (n.d.).



eight out of nine surveys conducted by the CIS between March and December 2022 (in May, voters of VOX and UP reported almost the same level of concern with the selected indicator).

Figure 1. Share of respondents reporting little or no concern about the war in Ukraine by party voted for at the last election (March-December 2022).



Source: Author's elaboration based on data from the Center for Sociological Research (Study 3355, 3359, 3363, 3366, 3371, 3375, 3380, 3384, and 3388).

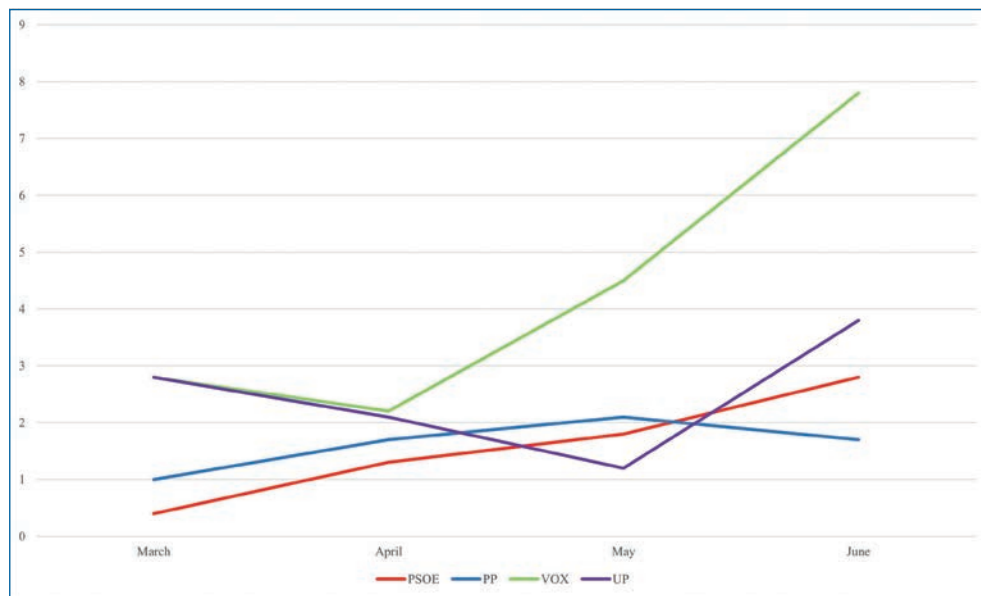
Beyond levels of concern, a battery of questions referring to specific measures regarding the invasion of Ukraine were asked in four different surveys between March and June. Four of them were selected for this report and refer to sending humanitarian help to Ukraine, hosting refugees from Ukraine, putting pressure on Putin to withdraw the army from Ukraine, and supporting a NATO direct intervention on Ukrainian territory.

Figures 2 to 5 show the percentage of voters for each party that disagree or disagree strongly with each of these measures. It can be seen in Figure 2 that respondents who declared to have voted for VOX were the least disposed to sending humanitarian help to Ukraine (a trend particularly visible in May and June). Voters of VOX also opposed more clearly the hosting of refugees from Ukraine (Figure 3), but the evolution of preferences in this group seems to diverge from the others. Voters of PSOE, PP, and UP start with very low levels of disagreement that grow only marginally with time. The trend for voters of VOX is more U-shaped as it starts with much higher levels of disagreement in March and April, almost joins the three other parties in May, and deviates again in June with higher levels of debate.

I speculate this trend could be explained because discourses of VOX towards Ukrainian refugees, comparatively much more positive than previous refugee crises, had an effect among its voters that vanished with time as the invasion went on in time, and less public attention was devoted to it.

VOX's voters also express reluctance towards the notion the government should pressure Putin to withdraw Russian forces from Ukrainian territory (as do UP voters, albeit less so, see Figure 4). Last, the distribution of preferences vis-à-vis direct NATO intervention in Ukraine shows that UP voters most strongly disagreed with this proposal (Figure 5). This might be explained by the traditional negative relationship between NATO and the (radical) Left in Spain (Viñas, 1988).⁷ In this case, the position of VOX voters was indistinguishable from that of PSOE and PP voters.

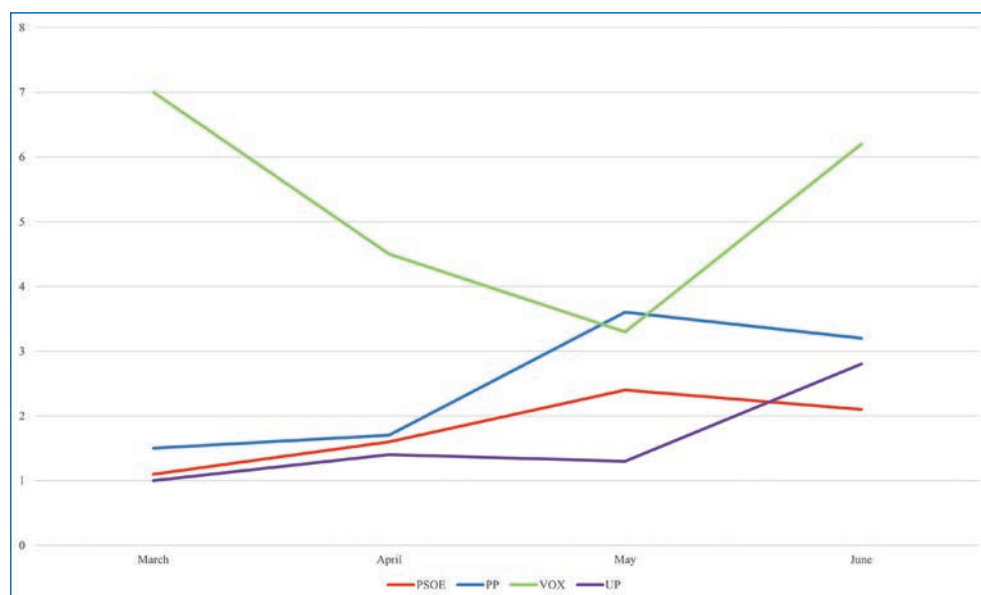
Figure 2. Share of respondents who disagree with sending humanitarian help to Ukraine, grouped by party voted and CIS survey wave (March-June 2022)



Source: Author's elaboration with data from the Center for Sociological Research (Study 3355, 3359, 3363, and 3366).

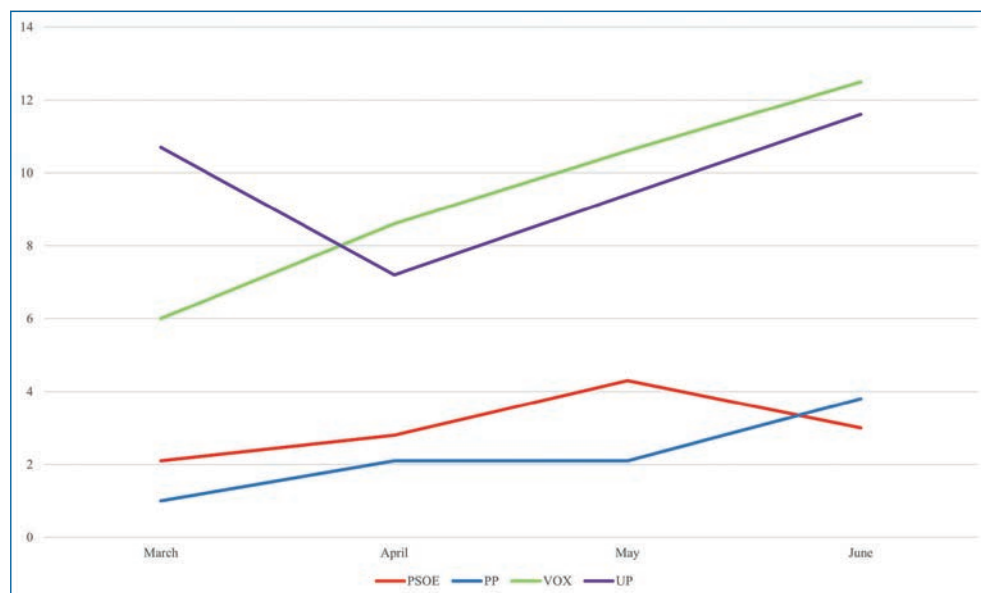
7. This position has been mainly based on anti-imperialism, anti-militarism and non-alignment infused with a critical view of the foreign action of the United States. PSOE's turn from criticizing to supporting Spain's participation in the NATO in 1986 was a major political issue that put to an end the overall agreement of left-wing forces in this regard. The radical left-wing IU was born in 1986 at the height of mobilization against NATO and has remained opposed to NATO since then.

Figure 3. Share of respondents who disagree with hosting refugees from Ukraine, grouped by party voted and CIS survey wave (March-June 2022)



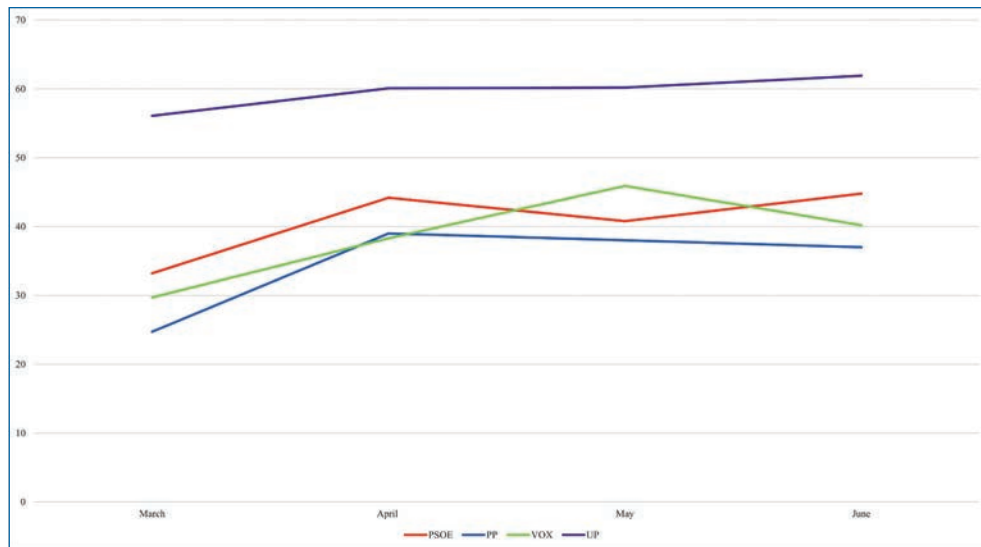
Source: Author's elaboration with data from the Center for Sociological Research (Study 3355, 3359, 3363, and 3366).

Figure 4. Percentage of respondents who disagree with putting pressure on Putin to withdraw the Russian army, grouped by party voted and CIS survey wave (March-June 2022).



Source: Author's elaboration with data from the Center for Sociological Research (Study 3355, 3359, 3363, and 3366).

Figure 5. Percentage of respondents who disagree with direct NATO intervention in Ukraine, grouped by party voted and CIS survey wave.



Source: Author's elaboration with data from the Center for Sociological Research (Study 3355, 3359, 3363, and 3366).

Final remarks

The weak and somewhat ambiguous links between VOX and the Kremlin transformed after the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Although not very frequent, the main messages from VOX on the war have criticized Putin's government, presented Ukraine in a positive light, and often accused members of the Spanish government of collaborating with Russia. Therefore, the invasion of Ukraine has been integrated into the discourse of VOX as a second-order element used to undermine the position of rival parties within a more integrated discourse, including nationalist and authoritarian elements. Although further analysis would be needed to test the proposition, we might speculate that the party's limited public profile on the war reflects the fact that any pro-Ukraine message would not sit well with the party's virulent anti-EU positioning, together with the ideological affinities between VOX and the Kremlin that persist despite the war.

At the individual level, VOX voters are comparatively less concerned about the war, which seems consistent with the low-profile strategy mentioned above. They are also comparatively more reluctant to help Ukraine by sending humanitarian help, hosting refugees, or calling on Putin to withdraw. Overall, the findings from this report suggest that the association between Russia and VOX can be better explained by focusing on the radical right-wing component of the party's discourse (crucially, nationalism and authoritarianism) rather than the populist one.

References

- Abascal, S. [@Santi_ABASCAL]. (2022a, February 27). *La soberbia de Putin avanza gracias al silencio de muchos líderes cobardes y al apoyo de tiranos de todo el mundo* [Tweet]. Twitter. https://twitter.com/santi_abascal/status/1498023264354025474?lang=es
- Abascal, S. [@Santi_ABASCAL]. (2022b, April 6). *Hilo: Celebro que el presidente ucraniano recibiera el apoyo de las Cortes Generales* [Tweet]. Twitter. https://twitter.com/santi_abascal/status/1511621442428940289
- Albin, D. (2022, February 24). *Así se posiciona la ultraderecha española en el conflicto entre Rusia y Ucrania*. Publico. <https://www.publico.es/internacional/posiciona-ultraderecha-espanola-conflicto-rusia-ucrania.html>
- Alonso, S., & Rovira Kaltwasser, C. (2015). Spain: No country for the populist Radical Right? *South European Society and Politics*, 20(1), 21–45. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13608746.2014.985448>
- Bakker, R., Hooghe, L., Jolly, S., Marks, G., Polk, J., Rovny, J., Steenbergen, M., & Vachudova, M. (2020). *2019 Chapel Hill Expert Survey. Version 2019.1*.
- Center for Sociological Research (n.d.). *Barometers*. Retrieved February 28, 2023, from https://www.cis.es/cis/openm/ES/11_barometros/index.jsp
- Congreso de los Diputados (2022a, March 2). *Plenary Session 156*. Cortes Generales. https://www.congreso.es/public_oficiales/L14/CONG/DS/PL/DSCD-14-PL-163.PDF
- Congreso de los Diputados (2022b, July 14). *Extraordinary Plenary Session 195*. Cortes Generales. https://www.congreso.es/public_oficiales/L14/CONG/DS/PL/DSCD-14-PL-202.PDF
- Datta, N. (2021). *Tip of the iceberg: Religious extremist funders against human rights for sexuality and reproductive health in Europe 2009–2018*. European Parliamentary Forum for Sexual and Reproductive Rights.
- Dunaev, A. (2018, March 5). *Why Spain doesn't fear the "Russian threat"*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. <https://carnegiemoscow.org/commentary/75698>
- Féas, E. (2022, March 2). *Los efectos de la invasión de Ucrania sobre la economía española*. Elcano Royal Institute. <https://media.realinstitutoelcano.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/comentario-feas-los-efectos-de-la-invasion-de-ucrania-sobre-la-economia-espanola.pdf>
- Ferreira, C. (2019). Vox como representante de la derecha radical en España: un estudio sobre su ideología. *Revista Española de Ciencia Política; Número 51, Noviembre 2019*. <https://recyt.fecyt.es/index.php/recp/article/view/72190>
- González, M. (2019, March 29). Abascal dice que rechazó reunirse con Putin “por prudencia”. *El País*. https://elpais.com/politica/2019/03/29/actualidad/1553857495_047024.html

- González, M. (2022, August 26). Los vínculos de Vox con Dugin, el ideólogo de cabecera de Putin. *El País*. <https://elpais.com/espana/2022-08-26/los-vinculos-de-vox-con-dugin-el-ideologo-de-cabecera-de-putin.html>
- Marcos-Marne, H., Plaza-Colodro, C., & Hawkins, K. A. (2020). Is populism the third dimension? The quest for political alliances in post-crisis Spain. *Electoral Studies*, 63, 102–112. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2019.102112>
- Marcos-Marne, H., Plaza-Colodro, C., & O'Flynn, C. (2021). Populism and new Radical-Right parties: The case of VOX. *Politics*, Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1177/02633957211019587>
- Morillo, I. (2022). *Vox rechaza que Andalucía acoja refugiados o niños de la guerra de Ucrania*. El Confidencial. https://www.elconfidencial.com/espana/andalucia/2022-03-02/vox-rechaza-que-andalucia-acoja-refugiados-o-ninos-de-la-guerra-de-ucrania_3384598/?utm_source=twitter&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=ECDiarioManual
- Mudde, C. (2004). The Populist Zeitgeist. *Government and Opposition*, 39(4), 541–563. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1477-7053.2004.00135.x>
- Ramiro, L., & Gomez, R. (2016). Radical-Left populism during the Great Recession: Podemos and its competition with the established Radical Left. *Political Studies*, 65(1_suppl), 108–126. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0032321716647400>
- Rooduijn, M., Van Kessel, S., Froio, C., Pirro, A., De Lange, S., Halikiopoulou, D., Lewis, P., Mudde, C., & Taggart, P. (2019). *The PopuList: An Overview of Populist, Far Right, Far Left and Eurosceptic Parties in Europe*. www.popu-list.org.
- Testa, G. (2022). Los líderes de Vox en Ceuta, con Putin. *El Faro de Ceuta*. <https://elfarodeceuta.es/lideres-vox-ceuta-putin/>
- Turnbull-Dugarte, S. J., Rama, J., & Santana, A. (2020). The Baskerville's dog suddenly started barking: Voting for VOX in the 2019 Spanish general elections. *Political Research Exchange*, 2(1), 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2474736X.2020.1781543>
- Viñas, Á. (1988). Spain and NATO: Internal debate and external challenges. In J. Chipman (Ed.), *NATO's southern allies* (pp. 152–206). Routledge.
- VOX [@vox_es] (2022, February 25). *Lastra, Enrique Santiago, Irene Montero... Los aliados de Putin están en el Gobierno y Pedro Sánchez debe expulsarlos inmediatamente* [Tweet]. Twitter. https://twitter.com/vox_es/status/1497185372467568663



SWEDEN



The repercussions of the Russian Invasion of Ukraine on the populist Radical Right in Sweden

*Niklas Bolin** Mid Sweden University

Abstract

The populist Radical Right Sweden Democrats (SD) have long been excluded from cooperation with other parties. As other parties have moved closer to the party's more restrictive migration policy, and as older party leaders from the extreme Far Right have departed, some of the arguments in support of isolating the SD have waned. However, the party is still criticized for its ambiguous attitude towards Russia. But although individual politicians have openly expressed pro-Russian views, the current SD leadership has repeatedly rejected such accusations. The party's position became increasingly relevant in 2022 when the Russian invasion of Ukraine coincided with the parliamentary elections. This article analyses the attitude of the SD towards the Putin regime and how this developed in response to the invasion of Ukraine. It also looks at how this has affected the public perception of the party and to what extent its position on Russia will continue to be important in the public debate.

Keywords: *Radical Right; Sweden Democrats; Russia; Ukraine; elections*

* niklas.bolin@miun.se

Bolin, Niklas. (2023). "The repercussions of the Russian Invasion of Ukraine on the populist Radical Right in Sweden." In: *The Impacts of the Russian Invasion of Ukraine on Right-wing Populism in Europe*. (eds). Gilles Ivaldi and Emilia Zankina. European Center for Populism Studies (ECPS). March 8, 2023. Brussels. <https://doi.org/10.55271/rp0031>



Introduction

There has long been a debate about the stance of European populist Radical Right parties towards the Putin regime. Traditionally, many of them are described as pro-Russian parties and are often criticized for their admiration of the Kremlin. In Sweden, the picture has been mixed. Their political opponents have repeatedly criticized the populist Radical Right Sweden Democrats (SD) for their ambiguous attitude towards Russia. However, although individual politicians have openly expressed pro-Russia views, the leadership of the SD has repeatedly rejected such accusations.

The party's position became increasingly relevant in 2022 when the Russian invasion of Ukraine coincided with parliamentary elections. With mainstream parties on the Right having, in many ways, moved closer to the SD on immigration and law and order issues, the stance on Russia was potentially one of the key remaining obstacles to ending the party's isolation. In this report, I analyse how the Russian invasion of Ukraine has affected the SD. More specifically, I describe the party's stance towards the Kremlin and how this has developed in response to the invasion of Ukraine. Further, I discuss how the invasion has affected the public perception of the SD and how the party's position on Russia will remain relevant in the public debate. The analysis is based on available research, media reports and official party documents.

The Radical Right scene in Sweden

With the partial exception of the short-lived populist New Democracy party in the early 1990s, Sweden, unlike many other European countries, had not experienced an electorally successful populist Radical Right party at the beginning of the twenty-first century (Rydgren, 2002). Since then, the story has changed drastically. The first SD members were elected to the national parliament in 2010, and their progress ever since has been remarkable, to say the least. In fact, the party has yet to experience an electoral loss and has increased its vote share at every election since it first ran in 1988. In terms of Radical Right electoral success, Sweden is no longer an exceptional case (Rydgren & van der Meiden, 2019).

Even though the SD have steadily increased their support in the electorate, the party has long been completely excluded from cooperation with other parties. An important reason for this *cordon sanitaire* can be found in the SD's history. Unlike

most other parties in the populist Radical Right family in Europe, the party was founded by outright racist groups with links to neo-Nazism (Larsson & Ekman, 2001). Although the party has worked hard to build a more respectable facade, the SD's marginalization has remained. After the 2014 parliamentary elections, six parties concluded the so-called December Agreement to ensure that the SD would remain without influence while at the same time allowing a government to be formed without an explicit majority in the Riksdag (Aylott & Bolin, 2019; Bjereld et al., 2016).¹

Government formation was even more difficult after the 2018 election. The four parties of the centre-right Alliance could have formed a government if they had been willing to rely on the parliamentary support of the SD. However, two of them, the Centre Party and the Liberals, preferred the incumbent centre-left minority coalition to continue rather than make any kind of concession to the Radical Right (Teorell et al., 2020). The agreement between the Social Democrats and the two centrist liberal parties ended a decade of wide-ranging cooperation between the four parties of the Alliance. It also had implications of great importance because it was decisive in bringing the SD in from the cold. The Moderates and the Christian Democrats immediately began to initiate a policy of *détente* with SD. The *cordon sanitaire* that had prevailed until then was lifted. Later, the Liberals also decided to withdraw their support for the centre-left to reunite with their former Alliance partners.

Even though they all lost ground compared to the 2018 election, their joint election result in September 2022 with the SD was enough for a majority. Thus, they were able to form a government by the end of the year. Although the SD is not formally a member of the governing coalition, it has concluded a far-reaching agreement with the three centre-right parties, securing formal political influence for the first time (Aylott & Bolin, 2023).

The Sweden Democrats and Russia

As other parties have moved closer to the party's more restrictive migration policy, and as older party leaders from the extreme Far Right have departed, some of the arguments in support of isolating the SD have waned somewhat. For example, in recent years, the SD's stance on international cooperation and the European Union

1. The Left Party was the only other party not included in the agreement.



(EU) has come to the fore. Relatedly, there has been a recurring debate on the SD's position towards the Kremlin. Critics argue that the party, or people associated with it, have shown sympathy for Putin's government and have taken positions aligned with Russian interests. For example, a report on how the European Parliament voted on Russia-related matters in 2014 found that the SD were one of the most Russia-friendly parties (Bolin, 2015). Indeed, the two Sweden Democrats MEPs were the only Swedish representatives voting against ratification of an Association Agreement with Ukraine (Christodoulou, 2014).

Similarly, people closely associated with the SD, unlike politicians from other Swedish parties, have on several occasions participated in Russian state-supported media platforms such as Sputnik and Russia Today (RT). Researchers characterize the latter as "an opportunist channel that is used as an instrument of state defence policy to meddle in the politics of other states" (Elswah & Howard, 2020, p. 623). In addition, there are several examples of how leading SD politicians have expressed appreciation for Russia or participated in contexts that have been interpreted as indirect support of the Putin regime. On several occasions, both former and current MPs have expressed themselves in favourable terms about election processes in Russia after being invited by the regime to function as election observers or having participated in conferences arranged by the regime (Sundbom, 2018).

Those who harboured suspicions about the SD's attitude towards the Russian regime were given further fuel when in an interview just a week before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the party's leader, Jimmie Åkesson, refused to say whether he preferred Joe Biden or Vladimir Putin as a political leader (Odmalm, 2022). The leadership of the SD has, however, denied all accusations of being a pro-Russian party. It is also hard to find Russia-friendly statements in official party documents. Russia was not mentioned in the early party programmes and election manifestos. However, in recent years, especially since the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, the party has become increasingly critical of Russian developments (e.g., Shekhovtsov, 2018, p. 238). For example, the latest election manifesto for 2022 states that "Sweden should advocate clear sanctions against [...] Russia and other countries with negative development" (Sweden Democrats, 2022, p. 57).

There are also signs that the SD have become more critical of Russia in practical politics. In stark contrast to the report mentioned above, a recent assessment of the degree of "assertiveness towards Russia", SD comes out as the most critical of Russia among all Swedish parties represented in the European Parliament (VoteWatch,

2022). The appreciative attitude towards the Kremlin among some of the other Radical Right parties has also been presented as a reason the SD chose not to join the same party group in the European Parliament as, for example, France's National Rally and Italy's Lega (McDonnell & Werner, 2019).

The impact of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on Swedish domestic politics

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in early 2022 made it even more pressing to fend off any accusation of complicity towards Russia. Among other things, it significantly impacted the willingness to join NATO. Although Sweden became a member of the EU in 1995, it has maintained a policy of nonalignment and did not join NATO during the Cold War like neighbouring Nordic countries, Denmark and Norway. However, relations with NATO have developed considerably. In the 1990s, Sweden began cooperating more closely with NATO on peacekeeping missions and crisis management operations. Although Sweden is not a member of NATO, it has increasingly participated in the alliance's activities and developed close relations with NATO countries (Wieslander, 2022).

Even though Sweden's relations with NATO have become closer, there has always been a party-political divide, with centre-left parties opposing NATO membership and centre-right parties being more supportive of it. As late as November 2021, the Social Democratic defence minister assured its party congress that as long there was a Social Democratic government, an application for NATO membership was unthinkable. The SD have also been against NATO accession historically, and they have instead called for increased cooperation with other Nordic countries, including developing a joint Nordic defence force (Sweden Democrats, 2019). Despite the long-standing opposition to NATO, Åkesson declared in April 2022 that the party was ready to support a Swedish application for NATO membership if Finland applied simultaneously (Arenander & Nilsson, 2022). When the Social Democrats also made a 'drastic U-turn' (Hinnfors, 2022), the Swedish government took the same path as Finland and decided to apply for NATO membership (Aylott & Bolin, 2023).

Despite SD's more openly critical stance towards the Russian regime and its new position on membership in NATO, political opponents still consider the party's position untrustworthy. That this is still thought to have a deterrent effect on the



electorate became apparent when the Social Democrats called a press conference just a week before the election to report on cases where the SD had acted in favour of Russian interests and thus posed a security risk. The Moderate prime ministerial candidate, Ulf Kristersson, was asked how he would prevent the SD's links to Russia from affecting Swedish foreign and security policy if the election resulted in a parliamentary majority for the right-wing opposition. Åkesson unsurprisingly rejected this and tweeted that the statements were reminiscent of how the opposition would be dealt with in a dictatorship. More startling, however, was that Kristersson also came to the SD's defence and argued that the Social Democratic stunt was unworthy, not least as it was the simultaneous positional changes in the Social Democrats and the SD that made a Swedish NATO application possible (Petersson, 2022). It was clear that alleged connections between SD and Russia were no longer seen as an obstacle to including the SD as part of a new political majority.

The demand for the Radical Right in the aftermath of the invasion

The last parliamentary term has been clearly marked by the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine. This has meant that the main political issues of SD have been less salient in the public debate. These crises also seem to have affected support for political parties somewhat. A rally around the flag effect can be observed, where both the outbreak of the pandemic in the spring of 2020 and the Russian invasion in the spring of 2022 boosted the popularity of the governing Social Democrats (Esaiasson et al., 2021; Novus/SVT, 2022). Support for the SD also seemed to decrease somewhat in connection with the outbreak of the war, but the impact on the electoral outcome of 2022 was small. Some of the political issues that became important in the 2022 election campaign, partly because of the war, were favourable to the SD, and the party won 20.5% of the vote, becoming the second-largest party in parliament.

Despite the spectacular Swedish shift in attitude towards NATO membership and the fact that there were still parties that opposed this, the issue was absent from the election campaign. Other issues indirectly connected to the war, such as rising inflation and electricity prices, gained great importance (Aylott & Bolin, 2023). While the governing party blamed the war in Ukraine and chose to refer to it as "Putin's price hikes", the opposition argued that it was mainly about how the government had mismanaged Swedish fuel and energy policy for years. Judging by

the exit polls, the opposition benefited the most from the salience of these issues in the campaign.

The Sweden Democrat's traditional issue, immigration, came further down on the list of voters' most important issues. A possible explanation is that several other parties have altered their policies in a more restrictive direction and, in this way, narrowed the distance of the mainstream to the SD's position. In addition, it is noteworthy that the SD was positive about receiving Ukrainian refugees. According to the party, this was in line with its previous policy that Sweden should help countries in its nearby area. Åkesson (2022) also justified the position on both cultural and economic grounds as he argued that Ukraine is both religiously and culturally more similar to Sweden "compared to clan societies in the Horn of Africa" and that Ukrainian refugees differ from previous migration "of low-educated, or even completely uneducated, people". As a result, Åkesson claimed, "the burden on society, economically, socially and culturally, will not be as devastating as with previous mass immigration from culturally distant countries" (ibid.).

Concluding remarks

Despite its continuous electoral progress, the Sweden Democrats have been in the political cold for a long time. Not until the two liberal centre parties chose to support a Social Democratic government in 2018 did the Moderates and the Christian Democrats approach the SD seeking to return to office. Previously, the SD's history and attitude toward immigration had been the main reasons for excluding the party from cooperation. However, in the wake of the 2015 "refugee crisis" and the SD's electoral progress, other parties have also moved towards a more restrictive immigration policy. The SD's deviant approach to international cooperation and its ambivalent stance towards Russia have remained obstacles to it being fully accepted as a political cooperation partner.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine meant that the SD's attitude towards the Kremlin was given further attention. Officially, the party has also taken a stand against Russia's actions and for support and assistance to Ukraine. The party has even advocated a relatively generous reception of Ukrainian refugees. Given the party's very restrictive immigration policy, this can be seen as a departure from its traditional line.



Despite the clear stance on Ukraine, the SD are not yet rid of their Russia-related problems. While the current parties in government no longer see the SD's position towards Russia as problematic, both the opposition and political commentators continue to argue that the party's murky connections to Russia are an acute security risk and that the leadership should more clearly uphold a red line against any actions that are in Russia's interests (Johansson Heinö et al., 2023). The issue was given further attention again at the beginning of 2023 when a central figure in the alternative media environment around the SD, previously accused of Russian connections, helped the anti-Muslim activist Rasmus Paludan to get permission to burn a Qur'an near the Turkish embassy in Stockholm. The incident worsened already strained relations between Turkey and Sweden, further frustrating Sweden's NATO application (Rankin, 2023). In addition, political opponents criticized the SD for being "useful idiots" for the Kremlin (see, e.g., Lindberg, 2023) and not taking responsibility for people associated with the party, thus potentially serving the interests of Russia. However, the SD leadership rejected any responsibility for the incident and, more generally, any alternative media favouring Russian interests even though individuals associated with the party frequently appear in them.

Although there is much to suggest that the isolation of the SD is a thing of the past, it cannot be ruled out that the issue of NATO and, indirectly, the SD's relationship with Russia will influence these relations. There is no evidence that the SD has direct links to Russia. Nevertheless, SD members and persons associated with the party appear from time to time in contexts that can be interpreted as pro-Russian. As a result, the SD leadership probably will be wary of any pro-Russian sentiments among its ranks and will continue to reject any accusation of acting in accordance with Russian interests. However, it is doubtful that this will prevent the opposition from criticizing the party's connections to Russia.

References

- Åkesson, J. (2022, March 31). Det är skillnad på flyktingar och ”flyktingar”. Aftonbladet. <https://www.aftonbladet.se/debatt/a/k6jJAa/akesson-det-ar-skillnad-pa-flyktingar-och-flyktingar>
- Arenander, I., & Nilsson, E. (2022, April 9). Åkessons besked om Nato: ”Har svängt”. Svenska Dagbladet. <https://www.svd.se/a/PoG8v5/jimmie-akesson-svanger-om-nato-nar-finland-gor-det>
- Aylott, N., & Bolin, N. (2019). A party system in flux: The Swedish parliamentary election of September 2018. *West European Politics*, 42(7), 1504–1515. doi:10.1080/01402382.2019.1583885
- Aylott, N., & Bolin, N. (2023). A new right: The Swedish parliamentary election of September 2022. *West European Politics*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2022.2156199>
- Bjereld, U., Eriksson, K., & Hinnfors, J. (2016). Förhandla eller dö. Decemberöverenskommelsen och svensk demokrati i förändring. Atlas.
- Bolin, N. (2015). A loyal rookie? The Sweden Democrats’ first year in the European Parliament. *The Polish Quarterly of International Affairs*, 11(2), 59–77.
- Christodoulou, L. (2014, September 16). Sweden Democrats voted against EU–Ukraine agreement. Sveriges Radio. <https://sverigesradio.se/artikel/5966926>
- Elsawah, M., & Howard, P. N. (2020). “Anything that causes chaos”: The organizational behavior of Russia Today (RT). *Journal of Communication*, 70(5), 623–645. doi:10.1093/joc/jqaa027
- Esaiasson, P., Sohlberg, J., Ghersetti, M., & Johansson, B. (2021). How the coronavirus crisis affects citizen trust in institutions and in unknown others: Evidence from “the Swedish experiment”. *European Journal of Political Research*, 60(3), 748–760. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12419>
- Hinnfors, J. (2022). Socialdemokraterna: högervridning och hot utifrån In N. Bolin, K. Falasca, M. Grusell, & L. Nord (Eds.), *Snabbtänkt 2.0 22. Reflektioner från valet 2022 av ledande forskare* (p. 39). Demicom, Mittuniversitetet.
- Johansson Heinö, A., Melin, C., Oksanen, P., Poohl, D., Silberstein, W., Schenström, U., & Scherman, J. (2023, January 31). SD:s rysskopplingar är en akut säkerhetsrisk. Aftonbladet. <https://www.aftonbladet.se/debatt/a/jlKMyn/sd-s-ryska-kopplingar-ar-en-akut-sakerhetsrisk>
- Larsson, S., & Ekman, M. (2001). *Sverigedemokraterna: Den nationella rörelsen*. Ordfront.
- Lindberg, A. (2023, February 4). Jomshof skojar inte om att bränna 100 koraner. Tack SD! Hälsar Vladimir Putin. Aftonbladet. <https://www.aftonbladet.se/ledare/a/P4jAk7/richard-jomshof-skojar-inte-om-att-branna-100-koraner>



- McDonnell, D., & Werner, A. (2019). *International populism: The Radical Right in the European Parliament*. Hurst.
- Novus/SVT. (2022). Væljarbarometer Maj 2022. <https://novus.se/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/novusvaljarbarometer2022maj.pdf>
- Odmalm, P. (2022). Ombytta roller i valet 2022 – när nationalismen blev viktig igen för den radikala populistishögern. In N. Bolin, K. Falasca, M. Grusell, & L. Nord (Eds.), *Snabbtänkt 2.0 22. Reflektioner från valet 2022 av ledande forskare* (p. 29). Demicom, Mittuniversitetet.
- Petersson, B. (2022). I skuggan av Putins krig: Valrörelsen och borgfreden som försvann. In N. Bolin, K. Falasca, M. Grusell, & L. Nord (Eds.), *Snabbtänkt 2.0 22. Reflektioner från valet 2022 av ledande forskare* (p. 104). Demicom, Mittuniversitetet.
- Rankin, J. (2023, January 27). Burning of Qur'an in Stockholm funded by journalist with Kremlin ties. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jan/27/burning-of-quran-in-stockholm-funded-by-journalist-with-kremlin-ties-sweden-nato-russia>
- Rydgren, J. (2002). Radical Right populism in Sweden: Still a failure, but for how long? *Scandinavian Political Studies*, 25(1), 27–56. doi:10.1111/1467-9477.00062
- Rydgren, J., & van der Meiden, S. (2019). The Radical Right and the end of Swedish exceptionalism. *European Political Science*, 18(3), 439–455. doi:10.1057/s41304-018-0159-6
- Shekhovtsov, A. (2018). *Russia and the Western Far Right: Tango noir*. Routledge.
- Sundbom, H. (2018). Sweden: Fertile Soil for Influence OPS? In A. Polyakova (Ed.), *The Kremlin's Trojan Horses 3.0* (pp. 23–29). Atlantic Council.
- Sweden Democrats. (2019). *Sverigedemokraternas principprogram 2019*. <https://sd.se/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/sverigedemokraternas-principprogram-2019.pdf>
- Sweden Democrats. (2022). *Sverigedemokraternas Valplattform 2022: Inriktningsprogram för Sverigedemokraternas inflytande över svensk politik under nästa mandatperiod*. <https://sd.se/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/sverigedemokraternas-valplattform-2022-april.pdf>
- Teorell, J., Bäck, H., Hellström, J., & Lindvall, J. (2020). 134 dagar. Om regeringsbildningen efter valet 2018. Makadam.
- VoteWatch. (2022). EU–Russia: latest trends among EU political parties. https://drive.google.com/file/d/1P-QOpOHZS9p_ZcwHoRDp8rcG9b57b5_j/view
- Wieslander, A. (2022). “The Hultqvist doctrine”–Swedish security and defence policy after the Russian annexation of Crimea. *Defence Studies*, 22(1), 35–59. doi:10.1080/14702436.2021.1955619



THE NETHERLANDS



Disagreement among populists in the Netherlands: The diverging rhetorical and policy positions of Dutch populist Radical Right parties following Russia's invasion of Ukraine

*Chris Nijhuis**, *Bertjan Verbeek*** and *Andrej Zaslove****

Radboud University Nijmegen, the Netherlands

Abstract

The Netherlands boasts a wide array of populist Radical Right parties, from the Freedom Party (PVV) and Forum for Democracy (FvD) to Correct Alternative 2021 (JA21). To complicate matters further, the left-wing Socialist Party (SP) is also considered a populist party. Mirroring the diversity of responses to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in the rest of Europe, Dutch populist parties have reacted in myriad ways. Whereas the PVV condemned the Russian invasion, the FvD remained highly supportive of Putin. Interestingly, while many European populist Radical Right leaders, following public opinion, pivoted away from support for Russia, the FvD has maintained its support for Putin's regime throughout 2022. JA21, on the other hand, has followed the non-populist parties, calling for tougher sanctions on Russia. This report maps the diverse positions of the three populist Radical Right parties regarding Russia. However, we also seek to explain why they have chosen such diverse paths. The report focuses on supply-side considerations, such as the impact of the parties' relative degree of populism, their attaching ideology, and their position in the highly fragmented party system.

Keywords: *populism, Foreign policy, the Netherlands, Russia–Ukraine war, Party for Freedom (PVV), Forum for Democracy (FvD)*

* Chris.nijhuis@ru.nl, ** bertjan.verbeek@ru.nl, *** andres.zaslove@ru.nl

Nijhuis, Chris; Verbeek, Bertjan & Zaslove, Andrej. (2023). "Disagreement among populists in the Netherlands: The diverging rhetorical and policy positions of Dutch populist Radical Right parties following Russia's invasion of Ukraine." In: *The Impacts of the Russian Invasion of Ukraine on Right-wing Populism in Europe*. (eds). Gilles Ivaldi and Emilia Zankina. European Center for Populism Studies (ECPS). March 8, 2023. Brussels. <https://doi.org/10.55271/rp0032>



Introduction

The 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine has proven to be particularly problematic for the European populist Radical Right, challenging an alleged core feature of even the more moderate bedfellows: their desire to challenge the dominant liberal world order. This report focuses on the Dutch populist Radical Right's response to the Russian-Ukrainian war. We map and account for the diverging responses of three parties: the Partij voor de Vrijheid (Party for Freedom, PVV), Forum voor Democratie (Forum for Democracy, FvD), and Correct Alternative 2021, widely known as JA21. The puzzle that drives our report is the remarkable divergence in reaction to the war among these parties.

Our contribution is structured as follows. After a short description of the rise and the growth of the Dutch populist Radical Right, we argue why the Netherlands is a relevant case for tracking populists' reactions to the war. Next, we present how these parties' narratives regarding Russia developed in the 2010s. Third, we offer three possible explanations for the differences between these narratives, focusing on their degree of populism, their attaching ideology, and their position in the party system. Finally, we will discuss what effect the narratives have had on the official Dutch position towards the war as well as on the position of the three parties in the Dutch political system.

This contribution is positioned at the interface of comparative politics and International Relations theory (IR). Congruent with the approach within comparative politics that sees populism as a "thin ideology" (Mudde, 2004), we expect a populist party's foreign policy preference to be a mix of its idea of the divide between elites and the people and the broader ideology from which it borrows. Similarly, we expect that the closer the party is to the corridors of power, the more likely its foreign policy preferences will be reflected in governmental policies (Verbeek & Zaslove, 2017). Congruent with the "second image reversed" approach in IR scholarship, we assume that international crises pose a challenge to political parties domestically (Verbeek & Zaslove, forthcoming). Especially when such events are perceived as threatening national survival, they may upset the dominant security narrative underlying a country's political discourse, thus affecting initial threat management but usually dissipating after some time. It may also provoke a rally around the flag effect for the incumbent government (Lee, 1977). Such upheavals may impact politicians' domestic positions. The Russia-Ukraine war may thus prove an advantage or disadvantage to populist parties.

Why the Netherlands?

From the perspective of comparative politics, the Netherlands is intriguing. On the demand side, since the mid-2000s, 18–22% of the electorate has consistently voted for a populist party (of the Left or the Right). However, on the supply side, the (right-wing) populist landscape is highly volatile, with a plethora of populist parties that pop up and then (often) disappear. At the time of writing in early 2023, right-wing populist parties hold 29 of the 150 seats in the lower house of the Dutch parliament. The largest is Geert Wilders's PVV, with 17 seats. Thierry Baudet's FvD lost three of its eight lower house seats to the breakaway Groep Van Haga in May 2021. In the Dutch Senate, the FvD lost 11 of its 12 senators to three breakaway groups despite its tremendous success in the 2019 regional elections, which defines the election of senators. The 2021 parliamentary elections ushered in JA21 (three seats) — itself another breakaway from the FvD — as well as the BoerBurgerBeweging (Farmer Citizen Movement, BBB), which is less easy to classify as right-wing populist. Three months before the 2023 regional elections, scheduled for May 30, JA21 and the BBB were riding high in the polls, polling 7–9 and 11–13%, respectively (Louwerse, n.d.). The Netherlands is thus a political system where many right-wing populists compete for the same electorate (de Jonge, 2021). It also boasts a left-wing populist party, the Socialist Party (SP) (Meijers & Zaslove, 2021). However, since the report focuses on the populist Radical Right, we do not analyse the SP further.

The Netherlands is similarly intriguing from an IR perspective. In the first decades of the twenty-first century, as the United States sought to progressively limit its role in Europe, the country worked hard to improve its relationship with Russia, especially after the Obama Administration announced the “pivot to Asia”. The climax of these efforts should have been the celebration of 400 years of Dutch–Russian relations in 2013. However, 2013 ended awry due to unease over the Kremlin's anti-LGBT+ policies, Russia's jailing of Dutch environmentalists, and the Dutch arrest of a Russian diplomat over domestic violence (Walker, 2013). Nevertheless, the 2014 annexation of Crimea did not alter the broadly shared desire for better relations between Russia and the West.

This fundamentally changed with the downing of Malaysia Airlines flight MH17 over eastern Ukraine, almost certainly shot down by Russian-controlled forces in the area. More than 190 Dutch citizens were killed. The Dutch narrative of Russia quickly soured when Russia proved unwilling to cooperate with the



official inquiry. The Dutch official reaction to the 2022 war was very outspoken, calling for tough sanctions against Russia. This call came despite the Dutch government's decision to end gas production in the Groningen gas field in the country's earthquake-prone north, making the Netherlands somewhat more dependent on gas imports from Russia (Sterling, 2022). However, Dutch dependence on Russian gas is low compared to other European countries. The new dominant narrative on Russia, which changed from (coveted) friend to (potential) enemy, was problematic to right-wing populists. The rally around the flag caused by the MH17 tragedy and, later, the war has made it more difficult for right-wing populists to claim that the elites were neglecting the people's interests. Also, the reliance on international cooperation in NATO, the European Union (EU) and the International Energy Agency (IAE) made it more challenging to sustain the criticism of global liberal institutions as a "corrupt elite".

Dutch right-wing populist narratives of Russia

The three major right-wing populist parties in the Dutch parliament (FvD, JA21, PVV) differ substantively in their narratives of engagement with Russia. Newcomer JA21 sticks closest to the Dutch government's line. Wilders's PVV explicitly condemns Russian aggression and accepts the temporary hosting of limited numbers of Ukrainian refugees. Overall, however, it remains more concerned with the consequences of Dutch foreign policy for the Dutch people rather than with direct involvement in the Ukrainian war effort. Baudet's FvD, although never formally endorsing the Russian attack, has shied away from condemning Moscow. Instead, it seeks to paint a broader picture of geopolitical change ("the great reset") in which the EU's support for "colour revolutions" in the post-Soviet sphere has prepared the ground for this war. Before describing the narratives in more detail, we emphasize that for the FvD and the PVV, resistance against the EU–Ukrainian association treaty through a non-binding referendum in 2016 was important in mobilizing domestic electoral support. The 2022 war poses the populist Radical Right with a dilemma: either support a country they previously called corrupt and not worthy of European support or continue to be critical of Ukrainian at the risk of ending up in the pro-Russia camp (see Coticchia & Verbeek, in press).

The PVV, being the oldest of the three, had consistently criticized the EU's opening to Ukraine in the 2010s. It did not condemn the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 (only a parliamentary minority of the CDA, D66, and the Greens

supported a condemnation of Russia). The downing of MH17 made the PVV more critical of Russia, but the party argued that EU support for Ukraine had contributed to further escalation in the Donbas. In 2016, Wilders strongly opposed the association treaty with Ukraine and moved closer to Russia by describing Putin as a “true patriot” and depicting Russia as an ally in fighting terrorism and immigration (de Jong, 2018). Nevertheless, in its electoral manifesto, the PVV insisted that the perpetrators of the MH17 shooting be brought to justice (Partij voor de Vrijheid, 2020, p. 48). Wilders condemned Russian aggression in 2022 but considered the earlier prospect of Ukraine’s NATO membership an escalatory step.

In Wilders’s tweets and the PVV’s contributions to parliamentary debate, the war itself was seldom addressed but rather instrumentalized through the prism of the needs of the Dutch people. Wilders tweeted on March 18 2022: “I have sympathy for Ukrainians, but I represent the one million Dutch citizens who have elected me” (Wilders, 2022). During parliamentary debates, the PVV emphasizes the cost of the war for the Dutch people, linking high inflation and gas prices to sanctions on Russia. This is consistent with the PVV’s welfare chauvinist economic positions. Regarding parliamentary actions, the PVV and the FvD supported an unsuccessful motion to declare Dutch neutrality in the conflict in late February and an unsuccessful motion to stop sanctions against Russia in early June, while JA21 opposed both motions (Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal, 2022a, 2022c). The PVV hinted at a willingness to house a limited number of Ukrainian refugees (preferably in the region or by expelling other refugees). Furthermore, the party leverages sympathy with Ukrainian refugees rhetorically (by labelling them “real refugees”) as a counterpoint to other refugees (which they label “the wrong kind of foreigners”) (Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal, 2022b).

The FvD has never formally approved Russia’s actions but has consistently argued that prior EU and NATO offers of (eventual) membership to Ukraine, including the association treaty, were conducive to the war. Starting from the notion that morality in international relations is absent, Baudet invests considerably in communicating a perspective that, he claims, qualifies the dominant story on the war in the West. Through blogs, tweets, and the organization of a conference in Amsterdam to present an alternative perspective, he presents arguments that align with the Russian narrative, including the demand for the protection of the Russian-speaking minority in Ukraine. Positioning his view within a warning against the so-called “great reset”, Baudet presents NATO expansion, the colour revolutions, and the Arab Spring as part of an American ambition to achieve regime change



across the globe (Baudet, 2022). Whereas Wilders thus downplays the war and focuses on the needs of the Dutch people, Baudet frequently engages with the events and interprets the war from the perspective of his view on world politics. Unlike many populist Radical Right parties, the Forum is not welfare chauvinist but rather market liberal. The cultural dimension and the larger global narrative are much more important for Forum's justification of its support of Putin than is its market liberalism.

In its inaugural manifesto, JA21 did not address the Russian annexation of Crimea and Donbas or its involvement in the MH17 crash (JA21, 2021). In response to the 2022 invasion, the party called for tougher sanctions on Russia, increased defence spending, and using the funds appropriated from Russian oligarchs to rebuild Ukraine. Interestingly, since the start of the invasion, the party has adjusted some of its stances towards Ukraine. Early on, JA21 opposed the supply of weapons to Ukraine, a position they abandoned shortly after the start of the invasion. While the party opposed a parliamentary motion before February 2022 calling for unconditional support for Ukrainian sovereignty, it holds Russia (and Putin personally) solely responsible for the invasion (unlike the PVV and the FvD). However, JA21 remains opposed to Ukrainian membership of the EU, in line with their general opposition to EU enlargement. Like the PVV, JA21 rhetorically links the housing of Ukrainian refugees with other refugees (labelling the current situation as an asylum crisis). It further argues that Ukrainians should stay in neighbouring countries. The Dutch government should do more to support these countries and impose a cap on Ukrainian refugees in the Netherlands, thereby preventing Ukrainians from seeking help on Dutch soil (Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal, 2022b).

Explaining position diversity on the Dutch populist Radical Right

Three factors help account for the diverse positions of the populist Radical Right vis-à-vis the Russian invasion of Ukraine: we focus on the combination of the party's degree of populism and its attaching ideology and the nature of the party system.

Anti-elitism is an essential component of populism. A populist party's anti-elitism emanates, in part, from its location within the party system. In other words, the more populist a party is, the more likely it will set itself against the established

parties. The most reliable indicators of populism suggest that both the PVV and the FvD score high on the populist dimension (above 8 on a 0–10 point scale) (Meijers & Zaslove, 2021). At present, no existing measure of JA21's populism exists. However, JA21's actions within parliament, its conduct during the electoral campaign, and its party programme show that JA21 is less populist than its right-wing companions (references to the “pure people” and the “corrupt elite” are less prevalent).

The higher levels of populism displayed by the PVV and the FvD partly explain why these parties remain critical of the Dutch government's handling of the situation following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The fact that JA21 has not opposed the Dutch government's policies is consistent with its lower level of populism. Nevertheless, it remains puzzling why the PVV mostly followed the government and condemned the Russian invasion, whereas FvD remained aloof and even came close to accepting Russia's legitimization of the war. Understanding the difference requires insight into each party's attaching ideology.

Regarding its *attaching ideology*, the PVV is a classical populist Radical Right party. It demonstrates a nativist nationalism, arguing that the Netherlands should prioritize native Dutch people over (especially non-Western) immigrants. This dovetails with its law and order orientation and welfare chauvinism. Foreign policy concerns, generally, are less important to the party's identity. Its war narrative is congruent with this: in debates about the war, the PVV emphasizes the protection of the people's material interests. It is neither essential for the PVV's identity nor attractive to its voters to sit outside the mainstream by fully supporting the Russian invasion.

Similarly, the FvD is nativist and favours strict law and order policies. However, it voices a larger critique of the state of Western civilization, arguing that the West is decadent and in decline, endorsing Russia's illiberal democracy as a viable alternative. The FvD's positions regarding immigration and EU membership, for example, are couched in a broader story of the decline of the West, Europe, and the Netherlands. It pleads for a new global world order and sees Vladimir Putin as a pivotal player in this regard. The Forum's steadfast defence of Russian foreign policy concerns is crucial for its identity. Forum, unlike the PVV, steers clear of economic arguments in its opposition to the Dutch government's position regarding the war and Russia.



JA21's more moderate position regarding the war emanates, in part, from its liberal-conservative ideology and the timing of its entry into the Dutch party system. JA21 was created by ex-FvD members who left the party, feeling that its leader Thierry Baudet had become too radical. Being a latecomer (the third populist Radical Right party on the block), JA21 had to find a space within an overcrowded system. As a result, JA21 chose a more moderate line than the PVV and the FvD, fitting its desire to present a more moderate identity and position itself as an eligible partner in a future centre-right governing coalition. JA21 is more moderate regarding its degree of populism, and its opposition to immigration, while its economic positions resemble more those of the governing VVD.

Public opinion research shows that the positions taken by the three parties largely reflect their respective voters' positions. For example, fewer than 10% of the FvD supporters see Russia as a threat to Dutch national security, compared to roughly 50% of the PVV supporters and some 60% of JA21 voters. Similar trends hold regarding the support for Russian gas imports and sanctions on Russia (Houtkamp et al., 2022).

Lastly, the Dutch *party system* is open and fragmented. The system boasts a large number of relevant political parties producing a myriad of possible government coalitions, complicating government formation (Mair, 2008). Given the, albeit slight, possibility of the PVV joining a governing coalition, strategically, the PVV cannot situate itself too far from the mainstream. Consequently, the PVV places itself both inside and outside the party system. It threads the needle between being critical of the Dutch government's policies following the Russian invasion without ostracizing itself from the positions of the mainstream parties. The FvD, on the other hand, has chosen to be an anti-system force. This is apparent in its parliamentary behaviour and its radical stances vis-à-vis, for example, COVID-19 and the war. Its recent efforts to create an alternative social space for its supporters is another expression of its anti-system approach. The FvD's position directly contrasts with JA21, which presents itself as a comparatively moderate force within the party system, and as a potential coalition partner. Therefore, a radical stance regarding the war would harm JA21's future ambitions, both in terms of its attempt to appeal to a broader electorate and its ambition to cooperate with mainstream parties.

Consequences

The Dutch government has been steadfast in its opposition to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. In this regard, the populist Radical Right has not affected the government's position. Although public opinion research (I&O Research/NOS, 2022) demonstrates that there is a (sizeable) market for a more critical position regarding the Russian invasion, support for Ukraine remains high. We observe a rally around the flag effect regarding Ukraine, contributing to the Dutch government having the leeway to support Ukraine. Although this effect generally tends to be transient, support for Ukraine within the Netherlands has remained comparatively strong (Houtkamp et al., 2022).

If the conflict were to continue for a prolonged period of time, this might change. The Netherlands is somewhat insulated from higher gas prices (in comparison with other countries) due to its own supply of natural gas. However, if the war were to continue, high energy costs and inflation might create a situation in which the more critical position of the populist Radical Right could become more influential, especially during an electoral campaign. Nevertheless, we do not expect the influence of the populist parties to dramatically change the government's position. This does not imply, however, that the more critical positions of the PVV and the FvD have not been important for party politics in the Netherlands. On the contrary, their critical positions have served to solidify their position as populist challengers, demonstrated by what appears to be continued support among their constituents (Houtkamp et al., 2022).



References

- Baudet, T. (2022). *Tom-Jan Meeus (NRC): Columnist van de onderbuik*. Forum voor Democratie. <https://fvd.nl/nieuws/tom-jan-meeus-columnist-van-de-onderbuik>
- Coticchia, F. & Verbeek, B. (in press). When populist friends abroad hurt you at home: How populist leaders in Italy and the Netherlands coped with the Russo-Ukrainian war. In C. Lacatus, G. Löffmann, & G. Meibauer (Eds.), *Vox populi: Populism, political communication and performative leadership in international politics*. Palgrave.
- de Jong, P. H. (2018, March 2). Wilders herkent in Putin een 'echte patriot.' *Nederlands Dagblad*. <https://www.nd.nl/nieuws/politiek/580031/wilders-herkent-in-putin-een-echte-patriot->
- de Jonge, L. (2021). Is the (mass) party really over? The case of the Dutch Forum for Democracy. *Politics and Governance*, 9(4), 286–295. <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v9i4.4525>
- Houtkamp, C., van der Laan, T., Sie Dhian Ho, M., & Deen, B. (2022). *Nederlanders kijken meer door een geopolitieke bril*. Clingendael. https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2022-11/Barometer_Ruslandbeeld%20in%20Nederland.pdf
- I&O Research/NOS. (2022). *Oorlog in Oekraïne*. <https://065.wpcdnnode.com/ioresearch.nl/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/rapportage-oorlog-in-oekraïne-maart-22.pdf>
- JA21. (2021). *Het Juiste Antwoord. JA21 Verkiezingsprogramma 2021–2025*. <https://dnpprepo.ub.rug.nl/86186/1/JA21%20verkiezingsprogramma%20TK%202021%20definitief.pdf>
- Lee, J. R. (1977). Rallying around the flag: Foreign policy events and presidential popularity. *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 7(4), 252–256.
- Mair, P. (2008). Electoral volatility and the Dutch party system: A comparative perspective. *Acta Politica*, 43(2), 235–253. <https://doi.org/10.1057/ap.2008.1>
- Meijers, M. J., & Zaslove, A. (2021). Measuring populism in political parties: Appraisal of a new approach. *Comparative Political Studies*, 54(2), 372–407. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414020938081>
- Mudde, C. (2004). The populist zeitgeist. *Government and Opposition*, 39(4), 541–563. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1477-7053.2004.00135.x>
- Partij voor de Vrijheid. (2020). *Het gaat om u. Verkiezingsprogramma 2021–2025*. <https://www.pvv.nl/images/09012020/verkiezingen2020/0acxyuew34z/VerkiezingsProgramma2021-Final.pdf>
- Louwerse, T. (n.d.). *Laatste Peilingwijzer*. Retrieved February 23, 2022 from <https://peilingwijzer.tomlouwerse.nl/>

- Sterling, T. (2022, July 7). Energy minister says Dutch braced for Russian gas cutoff, Groningen is last resort. *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/energy-minister-says-dutch-braced-russian-gas-cutoff-groningen-is-last-resort-2022-07-07/>
- Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal. (2022a, February 28). *Situatie in Oekraïne* [Officiële publicatie]. <https://zoek.officielebekendmakingen.nl/h-tk-20212022-56-3.html>
- Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal. (2022b, April 21). *Opvang van Oekraïense vluchtelingen* [Officiële publicatie]. <https://zoek.officielebekendmakingen.nl/h-tk-20212022-76-4.html>
- Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal. (2022c, June 2). *Motie van het lid Van Haga over het stopzetten van de sancties tegen Rusland* [Text]. <https://www.tweedekamer.nl/kamerstukken/moties/detail?id=2022Z11029&did=2022D22630>
- Verbeek, B., & Zaslove, A. (2017). Populism and foreign policy. In C. R. Kaltwasser, P. Taggart, P. O. Espejo, & P. Ostiguy (Eds.), *Oxford handbook of populism* (Vol. 1, pp. 384–405). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198803560.013.15>
- Verbeek, B. & Zaslove, A. (in press). The rise of populism: A second image reversed perspective. *International Studies Review*.
- Walker, S. (2013, November 5). Dutch king visits Russia after “year of friendship” that turned frosty. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/nov/05/dutch-king-russia-netherlands-friendship>
- Wilders, G. [@geertwilderspvv]. (2022, March 18). *Ik heb sympathie voor de Oekraïners maar ben gekozen door meer dan 1 miljoen Nederlanders voor wie ik iedere dag en in de eerste plaats vecht in Den Haag*. [Tweet]. Twitter. <https://twitter.com/geertwilderspvv/status/1504883658443870222>



TURKEY



A foreign policy litmus test: How the war in Ukraine has fuelled populist rhetoric in Erdoğan's Turkey

Emre Erdoğan Istanbul Bilgi University*

Abstract

The war in Ukraine is a defining historical moment that demonstrates the limitations of contemporary politics. Even the most pessimistic scholars did not conceive of a direct military conflict in the heart of the Eurasian landmass. Moreover, this conflict has exposed the limitations of populism in foreign policy. Despite rare instances of rhetorical cooperation with Russia, the populist politicians of Europe remained committed to Atlanticist foreign policies. Turkey, a textbook example of populist governance, offers a superb illustration of how the international zeitgeist constrains populist politicians' goals. The "balanced" approach of Turkey's foreign policy, which is dictated by its asymmetrical interdependence with Russia, aims to strengthen Turkey's role as a regional force through mediation. In the meantime, the pressure of upcoming presidential elections and the country's economic position are additional obstacles. An examination of Erdoğan's speeches over the past year reveals that he has replicated this balanced approach in his discourse as the leader of Turkey.

Keywords: Turkey; Ukraine–Russia war; foreign policy; populism.

* emre.erdogan@bilgi.edu.tr

Erdoğan, Emre. (2023). "A foreign policy litmus test: How the war in Ukraine has fuelled populist rhetoric in Erdoğan's Turkey." In: *The Impacts of the Russian Invasion of Ukraine on Right-wing Populism in Europe*. (eds). Gilles Ivaldi and Emilia Zankina. European Center for Populism Studies (ECPS). March 8, 2023. Brussels. <https://doi.org/10.55271/rp0033>



Introduction

The war in Ukraine has become a litmus test for European politicians. The unexpected conflict in Europe has prompted a revaluation of the capabilities of nation-states and international organizations. The same war has also served as a stage on which political leaders from several nations can perform for various audiences, domestic and international. Contrary to expectations, the Russians did not conquer Kyiv in a few days, and Ukraine's resistance to unprovoked aggression has become a model for the world. The swift and decisive response of NATO and the European Union (EU) was equally unexpected, transforming the situation into a battle of attrition.

Among the numerous unanswered questions the war has brought to the fore, the responses of populist leaders' have received significant attention. First, the working assumption has been that all populist leaders at least sympathized with Putin's regime, if not directly under Russian influence. Second, the war has been framed and presented as a conflict between autocracy and democracy and between East and West, forcing us to consider which camp populists would favour. Third, the war generated an influx of refugees into parts of Europe that have exhibited fiercely anti-immigrant sentiments for some time. The question has thus been whether populist leaders would take advantage of this opportunity to garner support. Lastly, it is unknown whether the economic challenges caused by rising energy costs and the disruption to global trade will favour populist parties at the polls. A series of crucial elections in 2023 will shed light on these unanswered questions and the effects of the Ukraine conflict as it enters its second year.

Turkey, like Ukraine, a Black Sea country, now enters its second decade with Recep Tayyip Erdoğan at the helm. Erdoğan—a textbook example of a twenty-first-century populist politician—has been characterized as Russia's "Trojan Horse" in NATO. Turkey's leadership has strong authoritarian tendencies, and the country hosts more than 4 million refugees, contributing to social tension. In addition, the Ukraine conflict erupted as Turkey confronts two roiling crises — a war against militants along its long border with Syria and an ongoing economic crisis. As a NATO member, Turkey is central to the Western response to the war.

In this report, I will detail the reaction of Turkey's populist leadership to the crisis, beginning with a brief review of populist foreign policy and concluding with a summary of Turkish foreign policy throughout the war. I will conclude by

discussing Erdoğan's speeches about the war and demonstrating how he has leveraged the conflict to reinforce his position as a strong leader.

Populist foreign policy

The global rise of populist leaders attracted the attention of experts to policy differences. Although there is no consensus on the definition of populism, Mudde's minimalist definition is the most widely accepted. According to Mudde (2004), populism is

an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, “the pure people” versus “the corrupt elite”, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the “*volonté Générale*” (general will) of the people. (p. 543)

Another group of scholars define populism as a style that includes “an appeal to ‘the people’ as both the audience and the subject embodied; a resort to ‘bad manners’ and coarsened political rhetoric; and a representation and performance of crisis, breakdown, and threat” (Moffitt, 2016, p. 46). Populism has also been perceived as a strategy, a set of methods or instruments mobilized by politicians in political competition. Weyland defines this strategy as “direct, unmediated, uninstitutionalized support from large numbers of mostly unorganised followers” (Weyland, 2001, p. 14). A newly developed synthesis presents populism in an ideational form integrating ideological and discursive approaches and excluding strategy or tactics. This approach's essential set of ideas or beliefs is defined as the belief in the sovereignty and the moral superiority of people, presented as a homogenous unit.

All of these definitions share similarities that provide hints about the foreign policy populists pursue when they attain power. Nonetheless, I must emphasize that the influence of populists on foreign policy may be limited. If a nation's foreign policy is institutionalized and based on the consensus of several societal actors, the influence of politicians may be somewhat constrained. Foreign policy provides politicians with less space for flexibility than other policy sectors. Ideology is another aspect that influences the foreign policy practices of populist parties in government. Several studies demonstrated that the standing of populist political parties is determined by whether they are right- or left-wing (Verbeek & Zaslove, 2017). Finally, we must consider the structural aspects of a country that influence the foreign policy practices of populists, such as geography, economic development, and established commitments or alliances (Destradi et al., 2021).



Due to populists' Manichean worldview, which sets the people and elite at opposite ends of the spectrum, their foreign policy preferences are expected, in the first instance, to reflect their anti-elite orientation. This elite may be identified at the national level as capitalists, bankers, and bureaucrats, while foreign elites, such as international organizations and bureaucrats, may serve as useful scapegoats. Consequently, we expect populist leaders to be opposed to international institutions and counter-majoritarian entities (such as courts) at home or abroad.

Second, the notion of the "pure people" may influence populist international policies. A homogenous "us" is always positioned against "them" in populist discourse. Consistent with the nationalist perspective, the nation is the primary component of "us". In the context of foreign policy, however, "the people" may encompass or draw on transnational elements such as religion, race, ethnicity, and social class. Populists thus define "the Other" automatically in contradistinction to the "pure people".

As populist leaders position themselves as the authentic representation of the will of the people, this strategy will contribute to the concentration of governance in the hands of the populist leader. In conjunction with an antipathy to national elites, populist politicians favour de-institutionalizing and politicizing foreign policy. The ontological grounds of populist policies are incompatible with the notion that foreign policy is a technocratic arena ideally administered by a rational bureaucracy. Thus, a desire to displace foreign policy bureaucracies and personalize foreign policy decisions under populist governance is foreseeable (Destradi et al., 2021).

Scholars have posited that the individual characteristics of populist leaders may influence their foreign policy orientations in office. For example, it is often pointed out that populist leaders exhibit a very direct style of communication, eagerly assuming the role of "drunken dinner guest" in global forums and "agent provocateur" when confronting the distant policy prescriptions of international bureaucrats. Certainly, quantitative and qualitative studies have demonstrated that populists have distinct personality traits. However, it remains difficult to connect these traits directly to the foreign policies of countries led by populists (Nai & Martinez i Coma, 2019; Özdamar & Ceydilek, 2020).

In sum, researchers have concluded that the foreign policies of populist leaders are characterized by anti-elitism, the supremacy of the "pure people", and the de-institutionalization and personalization of foreign policy-making. In addition,

the discourse of populist politicians tends to emphasize victimization and nostalgia for an imagined glorious national past (Elçi, 2022).

Turkish foreign policy during the Ukraine war

During the Ukraine–Russia war, Turkey has adopted a “balanced” foreign policy approach to the conflict. In a broader context, this can be interpreted as a turning point in Turkey’s shifting foreign policy priorities. Since the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) assumed office in 2002, Turkey has favoured a “transactional”, “active”, and “assertive” foreign policy, eschewing the more cautious approach of earlier eras (Mankoff, 2022). The country’s urgent need for export markets and energy dependence pushed the government to establish close ties with the Arab and Turkic worlds. Meanwhile, the ruling elite’s ideological orientation fostered a desire to take a leading role in the Muslim world and serve as a bridge between East and West. This “assertive” policy’s short-term success ended with the Arab Spring and the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011.

According to observers, 2016 marks a turning point in the Turkish government’s foreign policy. After the departure of Ahmet Davutoğlu, the architect of the new foreign policy, and the government’s growing security worries, the ruling class embraced more realistic foreign policy objectives. The soft power strategy that aimed to engage Arab societies in the region has been cancelled. Instead, the government envisioned an autonomous foreign policy based on the country’s military capabilities. Prior to the epidemic, Turkey supported the rebels in Syria’s civil war, while relations with Egypt and Israel were nearly frozen due to support for Hamas and the Muslim Brothers. Tensions remained with Greece over disputes in the Aegean Sea.

These shifts split the Arab world nearly in two. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) were unequivocally opposed to Turkey’s aggressive participation in the domestic affairs of Arab countries and its aspirations for leadership. Turkey’s close relations with Qatar were insufficient to compensate for sour relations with the other Arab powers. In the meantime, Turkey and the United States were at odds due to Ankara’s conflict with the Kurdish People’s Defense Units (YPG), the United States’ closest partner in the region (Keating, 2022; Pierini, 2022; Tapia, 2022).

However, after the epidemic, Turkey followed a more “realistic” approach due to the changing international situation. First, the Biden administration was less tolerant of Ankara’s foreign policy adventurism in the Middle East. Second, the



economic and political challenges in Turkey compelled the government to seek international backing and increase financial inflows. Turkey reached out to mend fences with Saudi Arabia and the UAE, initiated discussions with Armenia and restored diplomatic relations with Israel. Third, Ankara's preoccupation was keeping the Kurdish insurgent PKK and ISIS at bay and constructing a secure oil pipeline to offset rising energy expenses. Fourth, the approaching presidential elections have heightened economic and trade policy, not least the significance of Europe as Turkey's principal export market (Tapia, 2022; Pierini, 2022).

The Ukraine–Russia war coincided with this “U-turn” in Turkey's foreign policy, and Turkey sought to execute a “hedging” strategy navigating between Russia and the United States. Throughout history, Turkey's ties with Russia have fluctuated between *frigid antagonism* (as in the Cold War), *rivalry* (mostly in Central Asia and the Caucasus), as well as *indirect confrontation* and *forced cooperation* (as in Syria since 2013). After 2016, Turkey was compelled to keep Moscow on side, as Ankara's role in the conflict in Syria deepened and reliance on Russian energy (and tourism) grew. Despite being on the opposite side to Russia in crises in Libya, Syria, and Nagorno-Karabakh (not to mention being a NATO member for seven decades), the Turkish government has not hesitated in playing the role of back channel to Moscow (Lesage et al., 2022).

On the other hand, relations between Turkey and Ukraine have traditionally been very close. After Russia seized Crimea in 2014, Turkey supported Kyiv and called on Moscow to respect Ukraine's territorial integrity. Turkey and Ukraine inked a strategic partnership agreement in 2020 and established free trade arrangements in 2021. Turkey has also provided Bayraktar TB2 drones (used by Ukraine's armed forces against several high-profile targets since the invasion) and established solid military ties with Ukraine while signalling its support for Ukraine's eventual NATO membership. At the same time, Erdoğan has slow-walked approving the Finnish and Swedish applications to join the alliance in order to extract political concessions in the lead-up to elections in May. Despite Russia's reservations, Turkey continues to send Ukraine military assistance, including the Bayraktar TB2 drones, which have become an emblem of resistance. As these drones are manufactured by the company owned by President Erdoğan's son-in-law, this circumstance has caught the attention of experts and become a highly contentious subject in Turkey.

Ankara's unique positioning “between” NATO and Russia and its middle power foreign policy aspirations have driven the Turkish government's desire to act as a

mediator (Üstün, 2022). At the beginning of the war, Turkey urged both sides to find a peaceful resolution and attempted to act as a regional peace broker by utilizing its links to both sides. Ankara initiated indirect communication between Ukraine and Russia and planned formal talks with relevant parties in Antalya and Istanbul in March 2022. President Erdoğan has also dispatched special envoys to facilitate a peaceful resolution. Notably, Turkey voted in favour of the UN Security Council condemning the invasion while choosing not to join sanctions against Russia, which caused some trepidation among Western allies.

Turkey has also provided humanitarian aid to Ukraine and accepted refugees while accepting thousands of Russian nationals fleeing to Turkey after the Kremlin cracked down on media and dissent after February 2022 and sought to call up reserves to fight in Ukraine. Erdoğan also brokered the deal permitting Ukraine to export grain via the Black Sea under the supervision of the United Nations in July 2020. Ankara pushed several times to prevent Russia from reneging on the agreement. Turkey is one of the arrangement's most significant beneficiaries of the deal. The Montreux Convention of 1936 handed Turkey control of the Bosphorus and Dardanelles Straits, which connect the Mediterranean and Black Seas. This allows Turkey to limit the passage of naval warships and seal the straits to foreign warships during warfare or when threatened. Except for a few instances, Turkey has restricted the passage of all foreign warships since the war broke out.

Erdoğan's rhetoric about the war

The aforementioned survey of Turkey's recent foreign policy should not be read as a rationally planned sequence of actions aimed at leveraging the war's gains and utilizing foreign policy to strengthen Erdoğan's political fortunes. The most pressing challenge for Erdoğan is to win the upcoming elections, and his foreign policy of late reflects this imperative. He is an expert in winning tight elections against significant opposition, but his electoral "Midas touch" may no longer suffice against the backdrop of a deteriorating economy. The government has increasingly turned to populist boondoggles and "cash splashes" to stimulate economic growth, but it is unclear how these programmes will be supported. According to official estimates, inflation is running at 83% annually, and rising prices threaten Erdoğan's chances of being elected because of the government's unwillingness to hike interest rates. This is only exacerbated by rising energy costs during the war (Erlanger, 2022).

These concerns have a substantial international component, and it is impossible



to distinguish clearly between domestic and international drivers when it comes to policy responses. Still, it is possible to analyse Erdoğan's views regarding the war in Ukraine through the lens of his public pronouncements and discursive strategies. In order to do so, I have examined his speeches from January to December 2022, published on the Turkish presidency's website and in various media reports across this period. I have calculated that in 123 of 224 public speeches during this period, Erdoğan discussed the war in Ukraine, although some references were brief and did not elaborate on the conflict in any great detail.

It is crucial to note that Erdoğan has a distinctive outlook on global politics and Turkey's place in the world, which he sees as full of danger and knotty challenges. He has, paradoxically, long subscribed to the Turkish sense of "encirclement", which sees Turkey as surrounded by hostile forces, whether it is Greece, Russia (and the Soviet Union before it), the United States, Kurdish separatists, or neighbouring states in the Middle East and North Africa. As a result, Erdoğan places stock in ensuring the Turkish government is sufficiently strong in military and economic terms to meet these threats (Euronews, 2022).

In Erdoğan's discourse, clear divisions between "us" and "them" are manifest. This can be the "us" of Turkey set against corrupt "global elites" (he often criticizes the "Big Five" countries that control the United Nations and render it ineffectual; "the globe is more than five" is a frequent refrain). At other times, his discourse employs an "us versus them" dichotomy regarding the Muslim ummah versus the Islamophobic rest. And on occasion, Erdoğan foregrounds Turkey as a champion of the world's "forgotten" peoples and the need for solidarity among the "silent majority" of poor and downtrodden nations (Batrawy, 2022).

President Erdoğan's discourse vis-à-vis the war in Ukraine has typically reflected his general outlook. First, in the early days of the war, Erdoğan emphasized the legitimacy of Ukraine and reiterated Turkey's support for the territorial integrity of Ukraine. He framed the Ukrainian struggle as an issue of honour and independence. Over time, Erdoğan stopped repeating the same point in his presentations and adopted a more balanced stance.

Erdoğan has stated numerous times that peace is the final solution. However, the fighting parties were not to blame for the failure. The United Nations and the West hypocritically prevented the reestablishment of peace between the two countries, first due to their inability and secondly because there were actors who did not desire

peace between them. In this speech, Erdoğan criticized the UN Security Council and repeated his slogan. Using this paradigm, Erdoğan pitted the West, the United Nations, and the permanent United Nations Security Council members against the world's populace and legitimized his anti-establishment rhetoric (Batrawy, 2022).

As the West and big countries were hypocritical, Erdoğan argued that Turkey might be a facilitator (he emphasized that he did not prefer the term “mediator” for Turkey’s role). According to him, Turkey had deep historical ties with both nations, and his close relationships with their respective governments might help foster peace. He reiterated multiple times that he had direct conversations with President Zelenskyy or Vladimir Putin, as well as personal contacts. Using this story, Erdoğan portrayed himself as a world leader capable of resolving a significant catastrophe. In addition, he believed that the world’s leaders admired his efforts. Following the historical ties and his personal connections, Erdoğan emphasized Turkey’s diplomatic capacity and projected it as a regional force and the only nation capable of adopting a balanced approach (A-News, 2022).

Erdoğan emphasized his accomplishment in negotiating the grain deal. He argued that the balanced approach and friendly relations with Turkey made this agreement feasible, while Turkey’s presence fostered a climate of trust between the two parties. He represented the underprivileged by stating they had an immediate need for the food produced in Ukraine and Russia. He positioned himself as the ally of the impoverished Africans. Moreover, he emphasized that the General Secretary of the United Nations has praised this action (Batrawy, 2022).

Public opinion polls reflected Erdoğan’s balanced stance. In the early days of the conflict, surveys indicated that the Turkish public strongly supported Ukraine, with two-thirds of respondents deeming Russia’s action unjust and 78% favouring a neutral stance during the conflict. The majority of participants were concerned about the harmful effects of the war (Tahiroğlu, 2022). Some 44% of respondents supported Turkey’s role as a mediator in the war, while only 13% favoured an active engagement in the conflict. The remaining 40% of respondents favoured keeping neutral (Ünlühisarcıklı et al., 2022). Furthermore, 61% of Turkish residents were satisfied with the government’s response to the war in Ukraine, according to a study done in the summer of 2022; however, just 40% of respondents were satisfied with Brussels’ response, compared to the EU average of 57%. (European Commission, 2022). Transatlantic Trends of the German Marshall Fund revealed that just 43% of respondents supported sanctioning Russia, 30% advocated prohibiting gas and



oil imports from Russia, and only 33% supported Ukraine's NATO membership (Weber et al., 2022). In a study performed in the autumn of 2022, respondents expressed opposition to the sanctions against Russia (Henley, 2022).

Given the government's low popularity, these numbers indicate that the Turkish public supported Erdoğan's "balanced approach" to the Ukraine conflict. Of course, there may be cultural reasons for this favourable view of Russia, such as its historical legacy. Nonetheless, it appears that Turkish citizens are more pragmatic and that asymmetrical reliance benefits Russia. However, whether Erdoğan can convert this acceptance into electoral support is questionable, as economic hardships weigh more than foreign policy opinions.

Conclusion

The experience of Turkey during the war in Ukraine provides insight into populist politicians' freedom for manoeuvre. The conflict has coincided with a U-turn after a period of "aggressive" foreign policy positioning and has given Erdoğan a chance to play the role of "bridge" and "mediator" once again. As a country with strong economic, political, and historical ties to both the West and Russia, Turkey nominated itself as a mediator in the conflict, aiming for a speedy restoration of peace in the region. To establish a back channel of communication between the warring parties and NATO, balanced activism of the Turkish government was needed. These efforts have been rewarded by praise from Western friends who have been increasingly dissatisfied with its democratic track record. Thus, Turkey strengthened its status as a bridge between East and West.

In the meantime, as presidential elections draw near, Erdoğan has not hesitated to utilize this changing role in the region. A seasoned politician, he has characterized the war as a result of the current global order. He has also preferred to place himself and Turkey in opposition to the West as the advocate and champion of impoverished non-Western countries. He has also used the opportunity to emphasize Turkey's military, diplomatic, economic, and political strengths. For Erdoğan, Turkey's success in maintaining a balance between the conflicting sides has been a distinguishing trait closely tied to his vision of the country's role in the world.

Turkey's experience demonstrated that populists in power have some leeway for flexibility in foreign policy but not enough to act as they like. However, these limits do not inhibit their determination to maximize the war's opportunities.

References

- A-News (2022, December 31). *Turkish leader Erdoğan pursues global peace with busy diplomatic agenda*. <https://www.anews.com.tr/diplomacy/2022/12/31/Turkish-leader-erdogan-pursues-global-peace-with-busy-diplomatic-agenda>
- Batrawy, A. (2022, September 20). WATCH: Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan addresses the 2022 United Nations General Assembly. *PBS News*. <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/watch-turkish-president-recep-tayyip-erdogan-addresses-the-2022-united-nations-general-assembly>
- Destradi, S., Cadier, D., & Plagemann, J. (2021). Populism and foreign policy: A research agenda (Introduction). *Comparative European Politics*, 19(6), 663–682. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41295-021-00255-4>
- Elçi, E. (2022). Politics of nostalgia and populism: Evidence from Turkey. *British Journal of Political Science*, 52(2), 697–714. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123420000666>
- Erlanger, S. (2022, October 16). Elections approaching, Erdogan raises the heat again with Greece. *New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/10/16/world/europe/turkey-elections-erdogan-greece.html?auth=login-google1tap&login=google1tap>
- European Commission. (2022). *Standard Eurobarometer STD97–Summer 2022*. https://data.europa.eu/data/datasets/s2693_97_5_std97_eng?locale=en
- Euronews. (2022, December 12). *Turkish President Erdoğan signals he will seek office for last time in 2023*. <https://www.euronews.com/2022/12/10/turkish-president-erdogan-signals-he-will-seek-office-for-last-time-in-2023>
- Henley, J., (2022, October 14). Westerners in no mood for concessions to Russia in Ukraine, poll finds. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/oct/14/westerners-in-no-mood-for-concessions-to-russia-in-ukraine-poll-finds>
- Keating, J. (2022, June 8). How Turkey is turning the war in Ukraine to its own advantage. *Grid News*. <https://www.grid.news/story/global/2022/06/08/how-turkey-is-turning-the-war-in-ukraine-to-its-own-advantage/>
- Lesage, D., Daskin, E., & Yar, H. (2022). The war in Ukraine and Turkey's hedging strategy between the West and Russia. *GIES Occasional Paper*, 1, 55–62.
- Mankoff, J. (2022, March 10). Turkey's balancing act on Ukraine is becoming more precarious. *Foreign Policy*. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/03/10/turkey-ukraine-russia-war-nato-erdogan/>
- Moffitt, B. (2016). *The global rise of populism: Performance, political style, and representation*. Stanford University Press.
- Mudde, C. (2004). The populist zeitgeist. *Government and Opposition*, 39(4), 542–563. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1477-7053.2004.00135.x>



- Nai, A., & Martínez i Coma, F. (2019). The personality of populists: Provocateurs, charismatic leaders, or drunken dinner guests? *West European Politics*, 42(7), 1337–1367. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2019.1599570>
- Özdamar, Ö., & Ceydilek, E. (2020). European populist radical right leaders' foreign policy beliefs: An operational code analysis. *European Journal of International Relations*, 26(1), 137–162. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066119850254>
- Pierini, M. (2022, November 17). *Understanding Turkey's Geostrategic Posture*. Carnegie Europe. <https://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/88433>
- Tahiroğlu, M. (2022, December 1). *Why Turkish citizens blame the United States for Ukraine War*. POMED. <https://pomed.org/publication/why-turkish-citizens-blame-the-united-states-for-ukraine-war/>
- Tapia, F. S. (2022, May 14). *The balancing act of Turkish foreign policy and the war in Ukraine*. Atalayar. <https://atalayar.com/en/content/balancing-act-turkish-foreign-policy-and-war-ukraine>
- Ünlühisarcıklı, Ö., Tastan, K., & Canbilek, C.A. (2022, April 14). Turkish Perceptions of the European Union 2022. *German Marshall Fund*. <https://www.gmfus.org/news/turkish-perceptions-european-union-2022>
- Üstün, Ç., (2022) Impact of Russia-Ukraine war on Turkish foreign policy—Panorama. Retrieved January 20 2023, from <https://www.uikpanorama.com/blog/2022/12/17/cu-4/>
- Verbeek, B., & Zaslove, A. (2017). Populism and foreign policy. In C. R. Kaltwasser, P. Taggart, P. O. Espejo, & P. Ostiguy (Eds.), *Oxford Handbook of Populism*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198803560.013.15>
- Weber, G., Quencez, M., & Bohrn, N. (2022). *Transatlantic Trends 2022: Public Opinion in Times of Geopolitical Turmoil*. German Marshall Fund/Bertelsmann Foundation.
- Weyland, K. (2001). Clarifying a contested concept: Populism in the study of Latin American politics. *Comparative Politics*, 34(1), 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.2307/422412>



Conclusion

*Gilles Ivaldi** CNRS-CEVIPOF-Sciences Po Paris

*Emilia Zankina*** Temple University Rome

The war in Ukraine has been a catastrophe for Ukraine and a crisis for Europe and the world. The war has cost tens of thousands of lives of Ukrainian civilians and caused tremendous devastation to the country's infrastructure, housing and industrial sector, causing interruptions in the water and electricity supply across many Ukrainian cities, with dire consequences for the population. In addition, millions of Ukrainians have been internally displaced, and nearly eight million have fled the country to find shelter in the rest of Europe.

Beyond the borders of Ukraine, the global economy has been destabilized due to the war, and economic insecurity has become widespread. The effects of the war have hit the world as a second major shock following the COVID-19 pandemic, threatening economic recovery. In addition, the war and the sanctions imposed on Russia have caused a significant increase in prices for many raw materials, energy, intermediate goods, and transportation services, particularly affecting fuel and gas costs throughout Europe.

The many economic and international repercussions of the Ukraine war have dramatically changed European politics, both among the

1. The editors would like to thank Azize Sargin, Ivan Escobar Fernández and Martin Galland at the ECPS for their support and assistance in preparing this report.

* gilles.ivaldi@sciencespo.fr

** emilia.zankina@temple.edu

Ivaldi, Giles & Zankina, Emilia. (2023). "Conclusion for the report on the impact of the Russia–Ukraine War on right-wing populism in Europe." In: *The Impacts of the Russian Invasion of Ukraine on Right-wing Populism in Europe*. (eds). Gilles Ivaldi and Emilia Zankina. European Center for Populism Studies (ECPS). March 8, 2023. Brussels. <https://doi.org/10.55271/rp0035>

individual states and at the supranational level. It has changed public opinion and created new constraints and opportunities for political actors across the spectrum, both within and outside the mainstream.

This report has examined the impact of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on the state of the pan-European populist Radical Right. Such parties are generally considered admirers of Russia and Vladimir Putin's regime and ties between the Kremlin and the European populist Radical Right parties have grown stronger over the last decade. Because of such ties, the Russian invasion of Ukraine has presented new challenges for radical right-wing populist parties, putting many of them under strain and forcing them to adapt to the new context produced by the war.

In this report, we have asked how such parties have navigated the new context produced by the war and the impact it may have had on them, both nationally and at the EU level. Special attention has been paid to the reactions of right-wing populist parties to this war and the political and electoral consequences of the conflict for such parties. The analysis in this report includes a total of 37 populist Radical Right parties across 12 West European and 10 East European countries, plus Turkey.

By looking first at the “supply” of radical right-wing populist politics in the context of the Ukraine war, this report has provided an in-depth examination of the diversity of such actors' positions vis-à-vis Russia, NATO, and the EU before the war and the different arguments and rhetoric they have used to interpret the war. Many of these parties have had to shift their positions on Russia to avoid being too closely associated with Putin's regime. They have also toned down their nativism to adapt to changes in public opinion concerning asylum seekers from Ukraine. Others, in contrast, have strengthened their pro-Russian rhetoric and criticism of the EU and NATO. We have also examined how populist Radical Right parties have sought to exploit war-related issues for electoral gain, turning to domestic socioeconomic issues or cultural and historical legacies, calling for national sovereignty while adopting anti-elite strategies against their political opponents.

Concerning the voters, the report has examined public opinion on the war in Ukraine, how it has affected the public perception of radical right-wing populist parties and leaders, and the impact the war has had on party support in the electorate. Finally, we have sought to assess the invasion's temporary and potentially permanent effects on right-wing populist politics.

In the remainder of this conclusion to the report, we summarize the key findings of the country reports and present the implications for the future of the populist Radical Right from a comparative perspective.

The security and defence agenda of the Radical Right before February 2022

The findings indicate a tremendous variability in the international agenda of populist Radical Right parties in Europe before the war in Ukraine. Contrary to the conventional view, Radical Right parties and movements adopted a range of positions on foreign policy, security and defence, as well as toward NATO, the EU, and Russia.

While many radical right-wing populist parties have ties with Russia, we see some nuances across Europe, which reflect different foreign policy and international agendas among these parties, particularly concerning NATO, and what is deemed American influence and the cultural and economically liberal agenda emanating from the United States. In the West, the most pro-Russian parties include the Freedom Party (FPÖ) in Austria, the Freedom Party (PVV) and the Forum for Democracy (FvD) in the Netherlands, Matteo Salvini's Lega in Italy, and the Rassemblement National (RN) and Reconquête! in France. These parties illustrate the populist Radical Right's admiration for Putin's authoritarianism and illiberal politics, as well as his forceful defence of Christian values and opposition to Islam, positions that Germany's Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) has enshrined in party manifestos. Moreover, individual populist leaders such as Geert Wilders and Éric Zemmour have professed their admiration for Putin's style of leadership, describing him as "a true patriot".

Despite the long history of Russian imperialism in Central and Eastern Europe, zealous Putin admirers can be found in Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, and Hungary. In Bulgaria, the Far Right ultranationalist party Revival has become explicit in its support for Russia, staging a series of protests over the past year in which prominent displays of the national flag of the Russian Federation have become an indispensable part of the party's performative politics. The Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) has been more moderate but firmly opposes sanctions against Russia. In the Czech Republic, the Freedom and Democracy Party (SPD) has returned to its traditional pro-Russian positioning (for example, the party backed Russia's 2014 annexation of

Crimea as legitimate) after adopting a more neutral tone at the beginning of the war. In Hungary, Orbán and his party Fidesz have consistently argued against Western sanctions (although condemning the invasion at the outset) and continue to parrot the Kremlin's talking points about Moscow's "legitimate" security concerns and Kyiv's "provocations".

On the other hand, despite their ideological affinities with the Putin regime, we see weaker ties to the Kremlin in parties such as VOX in Spain, Fratelli d'Italia (Brothers of Italy, FdI) in Italy, and Chega in Portugal. These parties may share Putin's support for "traditional" family values, opposition to LGBTQ rights and what they call leftist "gender ideology", but they stop well short of backing the Kremlin's foreign policy. Radical Right populists in Romania have also toned down their pro-Kremlin rhetoric and have condemned the Russian invasion in an effort to prevent further declines in support among voters, many of whom remember Moscow's backing of the brutal Ceaușescu regime. The Estonia Conservative People's Party (EKRE), by contrast, has toned down its anti-Russian rhetoric and adopted a more moderate tone towards Russia since the start of the war in an attempt to attract Russian-speaking voters. Parties such as the Sweden Democrats have become increasingly critical of Russia in recent years, primarily as a reaction to the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, advocating sanctions against Putin's regime. These examples illustrate the wide variety of reactions and positions towards the war, illustrating the diversity of Radical Right actors across Europe.

The NATO divide

To some extent, right-wing populists' positions vis-à-vis Russia overlap with their attitudes towards transatlantic relations in general and NATO in particular. As the country chapters in this report suggest, populist Radical Right parties diverge in their positions on security and defence policy. Such variance reflects, for the most part, the regional divide in Europe that reflects the old Cold War blocs, the specificity of Nordic Europe, and the different historical experiences and legacies of the communist regimes of Eastern Europe. In Western Europe, the vision of world order promoted by many Far Right populists stresses multipolarity and strategic autonomy against a model of transatlantic relations that favours the United States through its dominant role in NATO. The RN and Reconquête! in France, the FPÖ, and the Dutch FvD are committed to fundamentally revising transatlantic relations. Both Le Pen and Zemmour have consistently affirmed they would again withdraw France from NATO's integrated military command structure, as was the case between 1966 and 2009. Other parties, such as the



Vlaams Belang (VB) in Belgium, as well as Radical Right actors in Croatia, Romania, and Slovakia, are flexible and pragmatic, essentially deemphasizing foreign policy issues and advocating a neutral approach.

In Northern Europe, the Radical Right has generally embraced a mainstream position concerning transatlantic relations. In Norway, Finland, and Denmark, a consensus has arisen across the political spectrum supporting NATO membership. Norway's Progress Party (Fremskrittspartiet, FrP) is a strong NATO advocate, and the party advocates close relations with the United States. Next door in Finland, the executive council of the Far Right, anti-immigration Finns Party recently voted in favour of the country's NATO application. In Denmark, the Danish People's Party (Danske Folkeparti, DF) has exhibited unwavering loyalty and support for the NATO alliance, which is a historical feature in Denmark. A notable departure from this broad Nordic support for NATO is the Sweden Democrats (SD). The latter has long opposed accession to NATO and has instead called for increased cooperation and coordination with its Nordic neighbours, including developing a joint Nordic defence force. Still, the SD is the exception that proves the Nordic rule: the Far Right in this region backs close ties with Western allies and sees the United States as a critical security guarantor.

In Eastern Europe, support for NATO among populist Radical Right parties varies. In Bulgaria, Revival and Ataka are vehemently opposed to NATO membership, while the BSP is acquiescent while expressing misgivings about the forward deployment of NATO forces on Bulgarian soil and support for military aid to Ukraine. The Czech SDP and Romania's Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR) openly trade in xenophobic, anti-American, anti-EU and anti-NATO rhetoric. While Hungary has played an active role in NATO since joining in 1999 (it contributes, for example, to NATO Air Policing in the Baltics), Orbán has slow-walked approval of Finland and Sweden's accession and is currently demanding the release of EU funds in return for a "yes" vote (Rettman, 2023). Turkey, which has expressed support for Ukraine's NATO membership, has used its veto to press for concessions from Finland and Sweden. Estonia's traditionally pro-NATO ERKE has declared the alliance to be in crisis. By contrast, Serbian and Slovak Radical Right parties blame the United States and NATO expansion for the conflict and argue for neutrality, a position also adopted by Austria's FPÖ. Serbia's position is particularly interesting, given memories of NATO bombings coupled with aspirations for Euro-Atlantic integration.

Diversity in positions is found not only across countries but also within them. This is well exemplified by the Italian case, whose Radical Right populists take a range of positions on NATO. During the Cold War, the Italian Far Right adopted a broadly Atlanticist posture, although this coexisted with an impulse to promote a “third way” between the United States and the Soviet Union. In recent years, Giorgia Meloni, the FdI leader and current prime minister of Italy, has shown more inclination towards Russia and Putin, but her party remains more pro-NATO compared, for instance, with Salvini’s Lega. Similarly, in Croatia, Radical Right parties have taken divergent positions on NATO. While most have stated clear support for NATO in the context of the war, HSP 1861 has declared that “Croatia is in greater danger from its NATO membership than from Russian aggression” (Hrvatsko Pravo, 2022).

Intra-party divisions over Russia

Finally, we find diverging views of Putin and Russia inside populist Radical Right parties themselves. Such divisions are seen, for instance, in the FrP in Norway, with individual party members, including former party leader Carl Hagen and parliamentarian Mika Niikko, taking more pro-Russian views. In Belgium, some VB members, such as Filip Dewinter, have expressed increasing support for the Kremlin over the past decade. Despite the war, voices within Spain’s VOX continue to speak in favour of Russia and Putin. In Denmark, prominent DF MPs Søren Espersen and Marie Krarup have been criticized for supporting the Kremlin, in Krarup’s case, even after the Russian invasion. In the SD, individual politicians have openly expressed pro-Russia views, although the party leadership has repeatedly criticized the Kremlin and condemned Moscow’s aggression. In Portugal, André Ventura’s condemnation of Russia has not been unanimous within his Chega party. Some influential members describe the Russian invasion as a legitimate reaction to “NATO encirclement of Russia” while accusing Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy of “siding with avowed Nazis”. The Bulgarian BSP has similarly been torn by divergent narratives on the causes of the war and the level of support Bulgaria should provide. The war in Ukraine has deepened divisions within the Romanian AUR, with one faction of the party strengthening its pro-Russian stance and another focusing on grassroots support and domestic issues.

Relations with the European Union

The populist Radical Right inclination towards Russia is also informed by the Euroscepticism of these parties who favour Putin’s Russia to symbolize their opposition to the centralized power of the “Brussels bubble”, grabbing power from



the national level of governance (Carlotti, 2023). Many right-wing populist parties have adopted what has been recently described as a common “alt-European policy programme”, which can be defined as “a conservative, xenophobic intergovernmental vision of a European ‘community of sovereign states’, ‘strong nations’ or ‘fatherlands’, that abhors the EU’s ‘centralised’ United States of Europe” (McMahon, 2022, p. 10). While many of those parties have recently toned down their Eurosceptic stances (Taggart, 2019; Brack, 2020), essentially for strategic reasons, they still are the primary opponents to further European integration within the broader European political landscape.

Many parties of the populist Radical Right have instrumentalized anti-EU rhetoric during the war, using anti-elite and sovereigntist arguments. Italian Far Right populists share criticism towards the EU and other supranational bodies, which are said to weaken national sovereignty. In line with its traditional Euroscepticism, Austria’s FPÖ accuses the EU of adopting a Russia policy without consulting voters and blames it for rising prices and the deterioration of living standards. Juist Alternatief 2021 (JA21) in the Netherlands remains opposed to Ukrainian membership of the EU, in line with their general opposition to further EU enlargement. In Finland, we find similar criticism and suspicion of supranational institutions in the Finns Party, which remains committed to a Finnish exit from the EU (“Fixit”) as a long-term goal of the party. In Denmark, the DF and New Right (Nye Borgerlige, NB) vigorously campaign against “more EU”. Such anti-EU rhetoric is less pronounced in countries like Portugal, where EU membership has traditionally been very popular. While Chega echoes the broader Far Right sovereigntist line supporting a “Europe of nations”, the party does not seek a Portuguese exit from the EU or the Eurozone.

Euroscepticism is also a significant feature of the populist Radical Right in Eastern Europe, again with some variation across countries. Estonia’s EKRE is broadly Eurosceptic, with the European Green Deal and the “woke” agenda of “Brussels elites” as major bugbears for the party. In Hungary, Fidesz has long toyed with Eurosceptic rhetoric and played the sovereigntist card in domestic politics, something Orbán has honed to a fine art, blaming Hungary’s government for “selling out” to Western interests before 2010. In the current crisis, Budapest lays the blame for spiking energy prices and economic dislocation squarely at Brussels’ feet. In Bulgaria, Revival is strongly against EU membership, advocating a referendum on leaving the EU and NATO. The Czech SDP has adopted a similar hard-Eurosceptic position calling for “Czexit”. By contrast, in countries like

Lithuania and Serbia, the populist Radical Right does not target EU membership directly. Instead, it vilifies national political elites for prioritizing “foreign forces” over the will and interests of locals and lambasts Brussels for its “leftist” political and cultural dictates. The Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), Serbia’s ruling party, is an exception to the Eurosceptic rule in the European Far Right, advocating (at least in all its public pronouncements) a pro-Brussels position as the government seeks to progress the country’s EU accession.

Russia’s influence

Finally, we must emphasize that Russian influence in Europe’s Radical Right milieu may be observed at different levels and across several domains. Over recent years, the Kremlin has cultivated individual leaders in parties such as the Belgian VB and the German AfD while also nurturing links with organizations gravitating around VOX in Spain, which have received funding from Russian oligarchs close to the Kremlin. In addition, financial ties with Moscow have been suspected or established for parties such as Bulgaria’s Revival and the Italian Lega, which have allegedly received financing from the Kremlin, and the French RN, whose predecessor party secured a loan of €9 million from the Moscow-based First Czech Russian Bank in 2014.

The Finnish case also illustrates Russian influence on the fringes of the social media space through key influencers working in Finland and Russia who support the Russian cause (a phenomenon observed in Bulgaria as well). The ties between the European populist Radical Right and Russia are embedded in a broader media and social media infrastructure, which sees Russia using public diplomacy tools such as the international television channel Russia Today and social media activities to run disinformation campaigns to achieve global political influence, and interference in other countries’ domestic politics (Yablokov, 2022).

Lastly, the analysis in this report suggests that Russian influence may operate through individual ties across economic elites. For example, in Finland, Movement Now (Liike Nyt), which made its first significant breakthrough in the Finnish regional elections of 2021, has had connections to Russian oligarchs. In Italy, Forza Italia’s position on Russia is largely accounted for by the personal links and friendship that Silvio Berlusconi established with Vladimir Putin during the early 2000s. Similarly, the relationship between Salvini’s Lega and Russia is not only a matter of ideological proximity, but it has also materialized in a confidential cooperation agreement signed with Putin’s United Russia Party in 2017. In



Hungary, Orbán prides himself in negotiating a favourable agreement with Putin for gas supplies when other countries, such as Bulgaria and Poland, were cut off from Russian supplies in April 2022.

The heterogeneity of Radical Right responses to the war

After the outbreak of the war, Far Right populists came under fire for their pro-Russia positions and previous sympathy for Vladimir Putin. As a result, their responses and interpretations of the war varied. The cross-national analysis shows that radical right-wing populist parties have varied in the set of arguments and rhetoric that they have used since the beginning of the Russian invasion in an attempt to sustain their electoral appeal and maintain credibility with voters by evading accusations of sympathy for Russia. Some parties, on the contrary, have showcased their support for Russia and Putin, chasing fringe opinions and voters. Such variability is observed across countries, but also within them and, in some cases, within the populist Radical Right parties themselves, which suggests that they should not necessarily be considered unitary actors despite their assumed highly centralized organization and strong leadership.

This can explain how parties that previously supported Putin adapted quickly to the situation by condemning the invasion and welcoming refugees while simultaneously using peace and national economic interests as discursive reasons for opposing measures against Russia. By contrast, we see more than one Radical Right party strengthening its pro-Russian rhetoric, a phenomenon witnessed in several East European countries.

Condemnation of Putin and Russia's invasion of Ukraine

Following the invasion, many European populist parties rapidly shifted their positions on Putin's regime. At the outset, many, if not most, have condemned Russia's invasion calling for solidarity while toning down their Euroscepticism further, although we see variation in terms of responses to the war and, in particular, the degree of distancing from the Kremlin. As recently suggested by Carlotti (2023), in the Italian case, the "position toward Russia is used in a strategic and opportunistic way" (p. 15), with populist Radical Right parties changing their communication styles and their political positions.

In France, Le Pen sought to distance herself from the Russian president, condemning the invasion and accusing Putin of “breaking the equilibrium of peace in Europe” (Le Pen, 2022). Italy’s first female prime minister, Giorgia Meloni, used the war to gain credibility at the international level and to moderate her image with voters in the run-up to the 2022 elections. Meloni managed to distance the FdI from the positions of its electoral partners, Salvini and Berlusconi, who are known for their close ties with Putin. More importantly, she has thus far managed to maintain support for Ukraine without breaking the governing coalition. Portugal’s Chega, Germany’s AfD, the Danish People’s Party, the Dutch PVV and Belgium’s VB have similarly distanced themselves from Putin and openly criticized his actions.

To the East, Romania’s AUR, most Croatian Radical Right parties, as well as Lithuanian outfits, have taken critical positions toward Putin and the invasion. On the other hand, the Finns Party and the SD have not only condemned Putin’s aggression but have heartily cheered on NATO membership. Such reactions are not surprising given the phenomenon of “normalization” and the attempts by many Radical Right parties in Europe to appeal to an ever greater segment of voters.

However, other Radical Right parties across the continent have taken different stances. Unlike Le Pen, Zemmour took an ambiguous stance vis-à-vis Russia, calling for a new “treaty to put an end to the expansion of NATO” in response to “Russian demands” (Johannès, 2022). Berlusconi instead has tried to avoid the topic altogether. The Dutch FvD remained highly supportive of Putin compared to other Dutch Radical Right parties. Croatia’s HSP 1861 has similarly stood in opposition to other Radical Right parties, maintaining strong pro-Russian rhetoric. Slovakia’s Radical Right parties have claimed that Slovakia’s support for Ukraine in the current effort to face Russia’s aggression is against the national interest of and a threat to the well-being of its people. Yet others, such as Bulgaria’s Revival and the Czech SDP, have become even more avid defenders of Putin, maintaining or even growing their electoral support. Such varied responses illustrate that several parties have not opted for a strategy of normalization and mainstreaming but, quite the opposite, have chosen to differentiate themselves from the prevailing opinion, remaining true to the Radical Right’s anti-establishment traditions.

Toning down nativism

Given the 7.6 million people who have fled Ukraine to escape the war, right-wing populist parties across Europe have been challenged to adapt their traditionally



xenophobic and highly restrictive migration policies. In line with public sentiment, these populist parties have shied away from the typical demonization of asylum seekers. Instead, Ukrainians are framed as “real refugees” rather than “economic migrants”, as those fleeing the civil war in Syria are often branded. This distinction between asylum seekers crossing the Mediterranean and those fleeing war in Europe reflects a projection of local nativist ideology to the European level (Albertazzi et al., 2022; Farrell, 2022; Hadj-Abdou & Pettrachin, 2022). According to Albertazzi and colleagues (2022), this demonstrates populist parties’ fundamental skill in reading the room and quickly adapting according to the shifts in public opinion.

In line with the phenomenon of Far Right “normalization” (Mudde, 2022) and given an outpouring of public support for Ukraine across Europe, many populist Radical Right parties have been welcoming Ukrainian refugees. In so doing, they have deployed a rich repertoire of arguments in an attempt to justify the shift from established stances against migration and demonizing asylum seekers. Norway’s FrP has advocated a fast track for Ukrainian refugees and a pause to the resettlement of other migrants so that the former, whose Christian values the party argues, are likely to promote integration. The SD have been similarly welcoming, pointing to the religious and cultural similarities between Swedes and Ukrainians and the policy of favouring migrants from neighbouring countries. Spain’s VOX has supported taking refugees from and sending materiel to Ukraine while lambasting the slow EU response and pointing to the ruling Socialist Workers’ Party’s (PSOE) historical ties to Moscow. Meloni has been particularly supportive of Ukrainian refugees, and even Le Pen has managed to keep a lid on her reflexive demonization of asylum seekers. The Far Right in Lithuania has been very vocal about its support for Ukrainian refugees, volunteering to organize the settlement process and distinguishing between the “real” Ukrainian refugees and other “illegal” economic migrants, a distinction also emphasized by Salvini and the PVV and JA21 in the Netherlands.

While many parties have selectively adjourned their nativism and welfare chauvinism in the face of Ukrainian refugee arrivals, others have cautioned against generous support and pointed to potential threats. Zemmour sparked controversy in France when he dubbed support for those fleeing the conflict as an “emotional response” to the war. Chega has argued that the large influx of Ukrainians might allow “criminals to blend with people who are actually running from a war” (Assembleia da República, 2022b). The Czech SPD has pointed to the substantial financial support for Ukrainian refugees against the backdrop of a worsening

macroeconomic situation, and the destabilizing effect refugees would have on the Czech social, healthcare, and education systems, job market and public safety. Bulgaria's Revival has argued that the well-being of Bulgarians is being put at risk in order to help Ukrainians who drive expensive cars and enjoy a much higher standard of living than many Bulgarians. Trying to appeal to both the Estonian and Russian-speaking audiences, EKRE has used a double-faced strategy. When communicating with their Russian-speaking audience, they play on their anti-Ukrainian sentiment, claiming that Ukrainian refugees are jeopardizing local Russians' jobs. Such sceptical views are likely to become more popular with the growing number of Ukrainian refugees and decreasing prospects for an end to the war.

Support for sanctions

Support for sanctions against Russia correlates with each party's position on the war and attitudes towards Putin. Consequently, we observe variation in positions ranging from decisive support for sanctions and military aid to strong opposition to sanctions and arguments about the high domestic cost and ultimate inefficiency of sanctions. However, we notice that populist Radical Right parties are more hesitant to support sanctions than to condemn the invasion.

Several populist Radical Right parties, mainly in Western Europe, have expressed strong support for sanctions against Russia. Ventura from Portugal's Chega called for harsher sanctions and demanded their imposition on the whole economy rather than only on individuals. Jussi Halla-aho from the Finns Party argued that "intervention of the West will be inevitable", and thus it should take action against Russia sooner rather than later. Meloni's FdI firmly supported government initiatives in favour of Ukraine, including sanctions and the supply of weapons, even when FdI was in opposition. Although they expressed scepticism about these measures, Salvini and Berlusconi voted in favour of sanctions and the sending of weapons as part of both the Draghi and Meloni governments. The Croatian Pure Party of Rights (HČSP) has expressed frustrations at the EU for "responding to Russia's aggression only with economic sanctions and not with more drastic and urgently required measures" (Hrvatske Čiste Stranke Prava, n.d.), while the NB in Denmark lambasts Brussels for allowing Russia to "develop into a dictatorship with expansionist ambitions that threatens the Baltic and the Arctic region, and ultimately Denmark".

Hesitancy and scepticism, if not outright criticism, towards the sanctions against Russia, seem to be the more common response by populist Radical Right parties.



Belgium's VB is sceptical of the "poorly thought out" and harsh sanctions against Russia. Le Pen also criticized some of the sanctions imposed on Russia because such measures would primarily hurt French businesses and workers. The Austrian FPÖ has directed its ire not at Moscow but at the EU's sanctions against Russia, claiming these have harmed the Austrian population and are the cause of high inflation and possible shortages in energy and consumer goods. Orbán has similarly put the blame for all economic difficulties on the EU, claiming that the sanctions against Russia are responsible for high inflation, volatile markets, and weak output. The Czech SPD rejected the economic sanctions imposed on Russia by the EU, the United States, and other countries as "ineffective" and criticized the military supplies for Ukraine as potentially escalating the conflict and threatening Czech security. SMER and the Slovak Radical Right have rejected the sanctions and linked them to higher energy prices, as shown, for example, by Republika's billboard campaign slogan, "We will cancel the sanctions and make energy cheaper". Serbia has resisted pressures to impose sanctions, although it voted for the UN resolution that demanded the end of the Russian offensive in Ukraine on March 2, 2022. Turkey similarly did not join the sanctions against Russia, claiming that would allow it to act as a mediator and peace broker. Bulgaria's BSP and Revival have both vehemently opposed sanctions against Russia, even if the BSP was part of the governing coalition that recommended and pushed through parliament the approval of sanctions and humanitarian aid to Ukraine.

Turning to domestic socioeconomic issues

The widespread economic insecurity caused by supply chain issues will likely increase dissatisfaction with national governments and motivate citizens to look for an alternative. In addition, the worrying increases in inflation, affecting food and energy costs, have caused parts of society to become more susceptible to radical political solutions. This context has been conducive for populist parties in the past (for example, the 2008 financial crisis, the war in Syria and the 2015 refugee crisis) as they have used these sources of frustration to gain popular support (Docquier & Morelli, 2022). Similarly, in the current situation, many populist Radical Right parties have exploited domestic socioeconomic issues, linking them to the war and the sanctions and emphasizing the cost of the war to domestic constituencies. On the other hand, parties that have explicitly condemned Putin still do not miss the opportunity to highlight domestic concerns and prioritize the national interest. Moreover, as the war drags on, popular support and enthusiasm give way to domestic discontent, making voters more susceptible to populist Far Right rhetoric.

In Germany, AfD's co-chair, Alice Weidel, claimed that the "main loser" of the conflict was "neither Russia nor Ukraine but Germany", which she called the victim of an "economic war", urging the government to reinstate the supply of Russian natural gas to safeguard Germany's economy. In Portugal, Ventura questioned Portuguese financial support to Ukraine, saying the money should be spent on pensioners and demanded government intervention to control gas prices. The FrP in Norway has been largely silent in debates regarding handling the war in terms of international politics but has taken the opportunity to exploit war-related issues such as energy prices, fossil fuel production and farming. The DF, the NB and the Denmark Democrats have also stirred fears of economic insecurity, arguing the situation is much worse than the 2008 financial crisis. In debates about the war, the Dutch PVV has repeatedly emphasized protecting people's material interests. The Czech SDP has used overarching socioeconomic framing of the war combined with nativism and welfare chauvinism. Romania's AUR has similarly focused more on economic protectionism, particularly regarding exploding energy prices. The Croatian populist Radical Right has also placed a disproportionately higher emphasis on domestic politics than on the developments in Ukraine. Bulgaria's BSP and Revival have emphasized the domestic cost of the war and the sanctions next to pro-Russian rhetoric. Le Pen, in turn, has focused her campaign on socioeconomic issues in an attempt to steer attention away from her Russian links (Ivaldi, 2022). Le Pen's social populist agenda resonated with the French population's many economic fears, particularly amongst the lower social strata most severely hit by the economic repercussions of the war, and faced with the rising cost of living, especially in rural areas (Perrineau, 2022).

By shifting the debate to domestic socioeconomic issues, populist Radical Right parties have managed to maintain their anti-elite and anti-establishment stances, appealing to frustrated voters while also avoiding uncomfortable questions about past relations with the Kremlin. Thus, the war has proved another fruitful arena for forwarding populist Far Right arguments and playing on voters' fears and frustrations.

The return of national sovereignty

The attack on Ukrainian sovereignty has legitimized populist parties' long-standing nationalist rhetoric. The invasion of Ukraine has put the defence of the nation-state back at the top of the political agenda (Farrell, 2022). Right-wing populist parties have long prioritized nationalism and sovereignty. Claims to preserve or regain national sovereignty are central to radical right-wing populism in Europe (Basile & Mazzoleni, 2020; Heinisch et al., 2020). The idea of "taking back



control” is at the core of the concept of sovereignism, which is often associated with populist rhetoric in which claims to regain control are made on behalf of the community of the “people” against the political establishment and supranational institutions (Mazzoleni & Ivaldi, 2022).

The invasion of Ukraine has returned the idea of defending the nation-state to political discourse in more than one country (Fiott, 2022). The FPÖ has been particularly vocal about the need for Austria to maintain neutrality, as this would safeguard the country’s wealth and guarantee security in the current crisis and in an uncertain world – an argument also forwarded by the Finns Party and the Danish People’s Party. The Bulgarian and Slovak Far Right have also called for neutrality and defined the war as a conflict between Russia and the US, in which small countries have nothing to gain. On the other hand, Chega has used the opportunity to display militarism, repeatedly calling for increased spending on armed forces, equating the “love for country” of the Portuguese people with the “positive nationalism leading Ukrainians to defend themselves fearlessly from Russian aggression” (Assembleia da República, 2022b).

. The Croatian Far Right has taken this rhetoric a step further, equating the war in Ukraine to the Homeland war of the 1990s and seeking to draw a tentative linkage between the ongoing developments in Ukraine and the identity and memory politics of the Homeland War. Such a parallel is then used to call for the need to defend the nation and criticize the government for ceding sovereignty to supranational bodies.

Mainstream party counter strategies

The war in Ukraine has affected not only populist Radical Right parties but the way mainstream parties relate to and react to the Radical Right. On the one hand, the war has provided the opportunity to criticize the Radical Right for its veneration of Putin and the ever-stronger connections with Russia, including Russian financing for several Radical Right parties across Europe. In the presidential run-off, Macron accused Le Pen of being “dependent on Russian power”, telling her: “You cannot properly defend the interests of France on this subject because your interests are linked to people close to Russian power [...]. When you speak to Russia, you are speaking to your banker” (Débat présidentiel, 2022).

In Sweden, the SD’s links to Russia became an important issue in the debate on foreign and security policy during the 2022 electoral campaign. In Romania,

mainstream parties adopted a strategy of isolation towards AUR, which pushed the party to tone down its rhetoric and present itself as a mainstream conservative party. In Latvia, where about one-quarter of voters are Russian speakers, mainstream parties have long drawn a “red line” around parties representing the Russian minority, arguing that they pose a threat to Latvia’s Western-oriented political trajectory. The war reinforced this trend. At the EU level, the European People’s Party finally expelled Fidesz, a move long called for by numerous MPs. Orbán’s position on the war has helped illustrate the growing ideological schism between Fidesz and other EPP members.

Some reactions give room for pause and caution. For example, in Lithuania, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has seen Latvia’s political centre move to the right and the mainstreaming of many of the core policy positions of the dominant National Alliance (NA), such as squeezing the Russian language from the public sphere, dismantling the publicly-funded Russian-language school system, and demolishing Soviet-era monuments. This example illustrates the threat of becoming what one fights against and the danger that any war poses in radicalizing and militarizing the political discourse.

The factors accounting for different populist Radical Right responses to the war

Both external and internal factors account for the different responses by populist Radical Right parties to the Ukraine war.

External factors

Externally, we first find country-specific factors related to different histories and foreign policy traditions, as well as economic factors, among which each particular country’s level of dependence on Russia’s oil and gas. Before the war, over half of the EU’s gas supplies came from Russia. One of the significant results of the war has been the diversification of gas imports in the EU, with Russia accounting for just 12.9% as of September 2022, a decrease from 51.3% in January 2019 (General Secretariat, 2023). Austria, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Finland, Hungary and Serbia were all highly dependent on Russian gas before the war. Hungary has preserved such dependence, and Orbán prides himself in negotiating relatively cheap Russian oil and gas before and after the war with Putin. Austria, which continues to depend greatly on Russian energy supplies, especially natural gas,



views Moscow as an important economic partner. Despite diversification efforts in the past year, Bulgaria still heavily depends on Russian gas supplies, receives a lot of Russian tourists, and many Russian firms operate there. There is also a strong cultural affinity—both are Orthodox countries and speak Slavic languages—with strong historical ties given Russia’s liberation of Bulgaria from Ottoman rule in the late nineteenth century.

In the Baltic countries such as Estonia and Lithuania, the party politics of Russia has traditionally been strongly influenced by the history of annexation by the Soviet Union. In Norway, the fact that Russia is a neighbouring country has complicated the political disapproval of all things Russian.

In Italy, one of the main reasons why right-wing populists support Putin’s Russia is a matter of economic self-interest and the fact that Italy imports large quantities of Russian oil. Back in 2005, Berlusconi’s right-wing populist government had prepared, for instance, an agreement that would have allowed the Russian company Gazprom to resell Russian gas directly to Italian consumers. In the Northern part of the country, which has traditionally been the electoral stronghold of the Lega, Salvini’s admiration for Putin is also linked with commercial interests, especially those of industrial firms in the region with significant Russian business. In Hungary, the ties with Russia are also explained by the relatively cheap Russian oil and gas and the multi-billion-euro extension of the Paks nuclear power station, which Orbán traded with Putin, which he has been able to use both economically and politically.

In the Netherlands, we find a country-specific feature: the downing of Malaysia Airlines flight MH17 over eastern Ukraine, almost certainly shot down by Russian-controlled forces in the area, killing over 190 Dutch citizens. This dramatic event prompted the government to call for tough sanctions against Russia, making it more difficult for Dutch populists to exhibit public support for Putin.

Together with country-level contextual factors, we also see some factors relating to party system dynamics and party competition in our countries of interest, most notably concerning the strategy of “normalization” that some populist Radical Right parties have pursued over time to become more acceptable to voters, and to broaden their electoral appeal. The literature on the Far Right has emphasized the importance of agency and the ability of Far Right parties to build a “reputational shield” to fend off accusations of racism and extremism (de Lange & Art, 2011; Art, 2011). Many of these parties in Western Europe have used their agency and

changed their platforms, personnel, and appearance to distance themselves from the legacy of Far Right extremist ideology and to be tolerated by a larger share of the public (Akkerman et al., 2016; Bjånesøy, 2021). On the other hand, new Far Right actors may take a more radical course to differentiate themselves from their “moderating” counterparts. This trend has been observed in Bulgaria, Croatia, Latvia, and Slovakia.

We can discern a relationship between such strategies of normalization and the populist Radical Right’s response to the war in Ukraine across a number of the countries studied in this report. Italy is the most obvious example, where FdI has a much broader appeal than its coalition partner, Lega. In the Netherlands, for instance, this is reflected in the competition between the PVV and the FvD, with the former strategically situating itself closer to the mainstream, while the latter would continue on a more radical anti-system course, as revealed in its recent efforts to create an alternative social space for its supporters.

We see a similar split of the populist Radical Right in the French case, whereby Le Pen has striven to detoxify her party to take it into the political mainstream in recent years. In contrast, Zemmour has adopted a hardline strategy, endorsing themes and rhetoric of the Extreme Right while continuing to implicitly lend support to Russia and Putin even after the outbreak of the war. In Portugal, Chega and André Ventura’s discourses on Ukraine were deployed instrumentally, allowing Chega to continue to trail a path towards normalization as a regular player in the political system.

Since shortly before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Finland has seen a surge of new marginal Far Right parties advocating a Finnish exit from the European Union and going against Finland joining NATO, which contrasted with the more moderate positions taken by the more established Finns Party. In Croatia, we have seen HSP 1861 take a radically different stance on Putin, sanctions, and the war than other Radical Right parties closer to the mainstream. Similarly, in Latvia, S! maintained a pro-Russian stance to differentiate itself from the SSD. In Bulgaria, the two pro-Russian parties, BSP and Revival, have adopted different strategies, with the former maintaining a moderate position, despite opposing sanctions, whereas the latter radicalizing its pro-Russian rhetoric even more and managing to steal votes from the BSP.

Finally, different strategic responses to the Ukraine war may reflect the different



geometry of pan-European alliances of populist Radical Right parties in the European Parliament, as some of these parties may need to seek support from other like-minded parties across the continent. Populist Radical Right parties currently distribute themselves across the Identity and Democracy (ID) and European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) groups in the European Parliament, which show different policy orientations and strategic positioning in the broader European political landscape. The ECR group traditionally shows moderate Euroscepticism compared with the more radical stances in the ID cluster of populist Radical Right parties around Marine Le Pen and Matteo Salvini. The positions on Russia by parties such as the Italian FdI and the SD may thus reflect their membership in the ECR group.

In the Swedish case, support for the Russian regime among some of the other Radical Right parties has been seen as one reason why the Sweden Democrats chose not to join the ID party group together with the RN and Lega in the European Parliament (McDonnell & Werner, 2019). Similarly, the DF has navigated the war by trying to distance itself from its allies in the ID group and the potentially damaging effect of pro-Putin stances of parties such as the RN and Lega on the DF in domestic politics. The ECR group also has members from Bulgarian, Croatian, Czech, Latvian, Romanian and Slovak parties, where we notice a mix of Far Right to conservative parties. Although the ECR appears more moderate than the ID group, some MEPs have demonstrated extremist behaviour, such as Bulgarian MEP from IMRO, Angel Dzambaski, have been accused more than once of scandalous remarks and behaviour, including giving a Nazi salute in a session of the EU Parliament.

In the ID group, Salvini's connections to Marine Le Pen reflect a distinct network of populist Radical Right shared hostility to the EU and ties to Putin's regime inside the European Parliament, including other relevant radical right-wing populist parties such as the FPÖ in Austria, the German AfD, the Flemish VB, the Estonian EKRE, and the SPD in the Czech Republic. Moreover, the ID cluster of parties has established links with parties currently outside the formal EP group, such as Viktor Orbán's Fidesz in Hungary. Such transnational cooperation was revealed in the two-day summit organized by VOX in Madrid in January 2022, which was attended by Orbán, Mateusz Morawiecki from Poland's PiS, and Le Pen, together with representatives of the populist Radical Right from Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Estonia, Lithuania, Romania and the Netherlands.

Internal factors

Internally, the different responses to the war by the Far Right populist parties in Europe may be accounted for by those parties' ideology and policy positions across the socioeconomic and cultural dimensions of competition.

Our findings suggest a possible line of division between the more welfare chauvinist of those parties, which have essentially focused on the domestic and socioeconomic impact of the war, emphasizing the interests of “their” people, and those which, on the other hand, have adopted a broader cultural and civilizational approach in their performance and interpretation of the current Ukraine crisis. Such divides may also overlap with the primary socioeconomic orientation of those parties. The literature has found heterogeneity in the socioeconomic policies of populist Radical Right parties across countries and over time (Michel, 2020). While some parties have embraced neoliberalism, others have turned to neo-Keynesian policies, emphasizing social protection and redistribution (Otjes et al., 2018).

In the European context, the current inflation crisis is making socioeconomic issues much more salient, and this may provide incentives for Far Right parties to change and adjust their socioeconomic salience and positions concerning such matters, not only to respond to growing voter demand for redistribution but also to shift attention from their pro-Russian positions to their economic demands in favour of “the people”.

Such a response was visible across several populist Radical Right parties in Europe. In Norway, the energy crisis has opened a window of opportunity for the FrP to reclaim its populist roots, try and mobilize on petro-friendly politics, and campaign against the high prices and VAT on fossil fuels, electricity, and food. In the Netherlands, the PVV has emphasized the cost of the war for the Dutch people, linking high inflation and gas prices to sanctions on Russia, consistent with its welfare chauvinist economic positions. In Portugal, Chega quickly moved from emphasizing the need to support the Ukrainian people to claiming that the war money should be spent on Portuguese pensioners. Marine Le Pen in France well illustrated a welfare chauvinist orientation. Her 2022 campaign used social populist arguments combined with a generous redistributive package, resonating with the French's many economic fears. Radical Right parties in the Czech Republic, Romania, Slovakia, and Serbia have similarly honed in on the consequences of the war for domestic constituencies and the worsening economic conditions.



In contrast, other populist radical parties have adopted a more cultural approach, basing their support to Russia on civilizational arguments and somewhat ignoring the socioeconomic anxieties of the war. This is illustrated by the Bulgarian Revival and the Dutch FvD, which have continued emphasizing the cultural dimension and the larger global narrative to justify their support of Putin. In France, Zemmour's focus on immigration and Islam, and his market liberal economic agenda, may have come at odds with the interests and increasingly pro-redistribution preferences of middle-class and working-class voters in 2022.

Voters in the Ukraine war

Turning to the “demand” side of populism, the country chapters have looked at how the invasion may have affected the public perception of radical right-wing populist parties and leaders, the impact the war may have had on the popularity or electoral support for those parties, and how that support fits with the public opinion at large on the war. The association with Russia was used to delegitimize the democratic viability of these Far Right populist parties, but only for a relatively short while, as none of the parties achieved worse results in the elections which took place in 2022. Instead of “ending populism”, the war and the resulting populist discourse have coincided with populist electoral successes in many countries.

We have observed this all year with victories for populists in Bulgaria, Hungary, Serbia, Sweden, France, and Italy (Lika, 2022). In Austria, public opinion support for Ukraine among Austrians has remained tenuous and lower than elsewhere in the EU, and the FPÖ is currently topping voting intention polls at about 28%. In Belgium, domestic issues have taken the forefront of the political agenda, and the war does not seem to have harmed the VB, which, according to the latest opinion poll, would be the largest Flemish party gaining up to 25.5% of the popular vote. We also see an increase in support for the Czech SDP since the war, which is correlated with decreasing public support for Ukraine and growing discontent with the Czech government's handling of the war. In Hungary, the Russian invasion of Ukraine also played a role in reinforcing Fidesz's dominant political position in the electoral campaign. Fidesz's strategy successfully portrayed the united democratic opposition as a pro-Ukraine camp that would drag Hungary into war with Russia. We see something similar, albeit of a much smaller magnitude, in Serbia, where many commentators have argued that the invasion may have helped populist Radical Right parties to surpass the 3% threshold, whereas none of those parties

had entered government in 2020. In Bulgaria, Revival doubled its support in the early elections of 2022 compared to the early elections in 2021.

Elsewhere in Europe, we find no clear evidence that the war in Ukraine may have significantly depressed support for radical right-wing populism. In Slovakia, the outbreak of the war did not bring any substantial shifts in popular support for the populist Radical Right. In Portugal, Chega's strategy was moderately successful, showing minor gains in public opinion polls. In Germany, the AfD has not benefited from the dramatic developments as much as one could have assumed. There has been only a four percentage points increase in support for the party in polls, and the AfD so far remains below its peak of 17–18% public support recorded in 2018. In Bulgaria, by default, at least a third of Bulgarians are very pro-Russian, and the increase in support for Revival can be explained by shifting votes from the other pro-Russian party, the BSP. Support for Ukraine and Ukrainian refugees was strong initially, but it steadily declined by November 2022. Currently, most voters do not take a side in the war and do not defend Ukraine or Russia. Only in Lithuania do we see a potentially adverse effect of the war on right-wing populist politics, first and foremost reflecting a very high level of support for Ukraine and traditionally deep anti-Russian sentiments in the mass public.

Other populists and the war

While the focus of the report was primarily on right-wing populism, national experts were also invited to look at other populist parties in their country, where deemed relevant. This was the case in countries such as Italy and France, where populists of both the Left and Right have competed with one another in recent elections, as well as countries such as Bulgaria and Slovakia, where mainstream parties traditionally have strong pro-Russian views and positions.

A brief overview of the positions and strategies of non-Radical Right populist parties suggests that parties such as the French France Insoumise (LFI) and the Italian Movimento Cinque Stelle (M5S) have taken pro-Russian stances in the past, essentially based on anti-Americanism, pacifism, and the opposition to NATO. But, like with the populist Radical Right, we see some differences in those parties' responses to the Ukraine war.

In Portugal, parties on the Left, especially the Portuguese Communist Party (PCP), have traditionally used sovereigntist anti-EU and anti-NATO rhetoric. The



PCP has adopted an ambiguous position regarding the invasion of Ukraine, calling for “a stop to escalating political, economic, and military confrontation by NATO, the USA, and the EU towards Russia, and relying on its contribution towards a negotiated political, peaceful, resolution” (Assembleia da República, 2022a, p. 10). In Germany, The Left (die Linke), which is considered a populist party, is a self-professed pacifist party, and it has long campaigned for the dissolution of NATO, frequently taken a pro-Russian stance and is highly suspicious of the United States, the EU, and Germany’s security apparatus. However, the party has unambiguously condemned Russia’s attack as a violation of international law, portraying Ukraine as the victim of a power struggle between the West and Russia and calling for Western countries to spearhead de-escalation.

In France, Jean-Luc Mélenchon’s LFI has taken pro-Russian stances predicated on Eurosceptic and anti-NATO views and based on the concept of a “non-aligned” France. LFI’s sympathy for Russia essentially reflects the traditional Radical Left’s hostility toward the United States, neoliberalism and American imperialism, and the party has advocated that France should leave NATO’s integrated military command. Nevertheless, Mélenchon continued to show an ambiguous stance during the few weeks before the invasion, calling for “de-escalation” while simultaneously pointing to the threat of NATO moving closer to Russia’s borders. However, he dramatically shifted his position immediately after the beginning of the war to avoid too severe damage to his party’s credibility in the context of the April 2022 presidential election. In the first round, Mélenchon came in third place with 22% of the vote.

In Italy, the positions of the M5S have changed over time, with the party moving towards a more pro-Russian position and showing ambiguous stances after the invasion. Like other populist parties, Russia exemplifies a robust opposition to the United States and the EU, both described by the M5S as harmful to Italy’s national interests. While Beppe Grillo, the founder of the M5S, made no public statement after the February 2022 invasion, Giuseppe Conte, leader of the party, condemned it. As part of the Draghi government, the M5S also voted in favour of sanctions and sending weapons to Ukraine, however, expressing doubts about the efficacy and effect on Italy. In the summer of 2022, a split occurred in the party after an internal campaign to push for an end to Italian weapons supplies to Ukraine, which was supported by Conte, who opposed Luigi Di Maio, the more Atlanticist minister of foreign affairs at the time, who left the party. Such internal struggle over the war may have weakened the M5S in the September 2022 elections, where its vote share declined from 32.7 to 15.4% compared with 2018.

Discussion and perspectives

A critical takeaway from this report is the diversity of populist politics across regions, countries and parties. Even limiting our inquiry to the populist Radical Right, we have seen a great diversity of positions and reactions. If our expectations at the outset were to find patterns that distinguish the East from the West, we have found significant variance within regions and countries. Such heterogeneity has already been observed in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. In their recent analysis of the fourth wave of Far Right parties in Europe, Wondreys and Mudde (2022) emphasize substantial internal heterogeneity, showing different responses to current socioeconomic and cultural issues and different effects of such issues on the electoral support for those parties.

Our findings reinforce the thesis that populism should by no means be considered a uniform phenomenon as it can take many different forms across contexts and actors while also showing change over time. Previous research has emphasized such diversity of contemporary populism (Ivaldi et al., 2017). In this respect, Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2016) argue that

populism can take very different shapes, which are contingent on the ways in which the core concepts of populism appear to be related with other concepts, forming interpretative frames that might be more or less appealing to different societies. (p. 9)

With regards to the Far Right, more specifically, Pirro (2022) similarly underlines the complexity of contemporary Far Right politics and argues that its current developments “reflect various forms of ideological and/or organisational osmosis” (p. 2).

Looking more broadly at anti-establishment politics in Europe, Pytlas (2022) notes that we need more studies to “assess the diversity of ‘thin’ anti-establishment supply and explore how these messages play into electoral strategies of different parties” (p. 2). Yet another approach views populism as a strategy to gain voter support (Weyland, 1999). Jones (2007), for example, views populist leaders as “political entrepreneurs” competing for voters. Such an approach portrays populists as strategic actors who adapt to changing environments. It further accounts for a dynamics-based component which helps understand the rise and evolution of populist parties and changes in their positions, behaviour and voter support,



further linking them to changes in the political and economic context (Zankina, 2016). Indeed, the case studies in this report confirm prevailing heterogeneity and varied strategic responses to a fast-changing political environment.

Honing in on strategy, many parties across the continent have attempted to move towards more moderate positions in terms of foreign policy in response to the initial overwhelming public support for Ukraine by citizens across Europe. In some cases, such a move was part of an already existing strategy of mainstreaming and normalization aiming to appeal to a broader segment of voters. In other cases, the move was triggered by the war and criticisms these parties faced regarding their attitudes and links with Russia. However, we witnessed that this change in position was also dynamic. As the war has dragged on and economic costs have started affecting more voters across the continent, some parties have returned to more extreme rhetoric, albeit with a greater focus on domestic issues than on foreign policy and geostrategic alignment.

Framing the war in terms of domestic socioeconomic issues was another strategy adopted by many of the parties examined. In fact, many parties muted their positions on the war and instead emphasized domestic concerns and the economic costs of sanctions, refugees, and military and financial support to Ukraine. Hence, the war was used as an arena to criticize supranational institutions or current governments for their neglect of domestic issues and ineffective policies, allowing populist Radical Right parties to forward their traditional populist Radical Right discourse that appeals to voter frustrations and emotions. Moreover, the populist politics of the war in Ukraine illustrates how populists may ‘perform’ a crisis. As Moffit (2015) argues,

populist actors actively participate in the “spectacularization of failure” that underlies crisis, allowing them to pit “the people” against a dangerous other, radically simplify the terms and terrain of political debate and advocate strong leadership and quick political action to stave off or solve the impending crisis. (p. 190)

This report illustrates the populist performance of the Ukrainian crisis and how Radical Right populists across Europe may have seized the opportunity of the war to instrumentalize war-related economic anxieties and propagate anti-elite and anti-establishment rhetoric.

Emphasizing domestic socioeconomic issues did not preclude populist Radical

Right parties from using the war as an opportunity to reinforce nationalist sentiment and national pride. Many parties drew parallels between the heroism and sacrifice of the Ukrainian people in defending their nation and nationalist attitudes and devotion to the nation at home. Many parties further portrayed the war as an existential threat to the nation, calling for a strong and immediate response, including strengthening military capability. At least in one case, this renewed nationalist discourse drew mainstream parties to the right and into support for nationalist policies.

The repertoire of strategies and responses to war has demonstrated the ability of the populist Radical Right to adapt quickly, adopt new issues and discourses and put them through a populist Radical Right prism. Changes that we observe in attitudes of radical right-wing populist parties towards Russia illustrate the malleability of populism and its “chameleon-like” characteristic (Taggart, 2000), suggesting a good deal of adaptability and those parties’ capacity to “read the room” and quickly adapt to shifts in public opinion (Albertazzi et al., 2022). Most Radical Right populist parties have adapted their discourse due to the war in Ukraine, with more remarkable successes than ever in Europe. The circumstances surrounding the Ukraine war serve to once again demonstrate the ability of populism to adapt quickly to different contexts and to make use of “calculated ambivalence” (Wodak, 2015). If anything, cases of some of the oldest European populist parties such as the Austrian FPÖ, the French RN and the Italian Lega attest not only to the ability of these parties to successfully navigate the recent period of the war in Ukraine but also demonstrate the political longevity and resilience of populism since the mid-1980s.

In policy terms, the malleability of these parties poses one of the main challenges to countering the success of such parties. One may argue that we can counter populism by addressing the issues that populists raise. However, populists are very quick to move on and radicalize another issue, making policy solutions short-lived in electoral terms. This is possible because populist Radical Right parties are, in essence, not programmatic and ideological but rather strategic in being quick to adapt to public sentiments, forward emotional appeals, and establish a direct link with voters (Jones, 2007; Weyland, 1999; Zankina, 2016). This aligns with the scholarship that more generally emphasizes how populist parties may deliberately blur their positions (Rovny, 2013) or adopt ambiguous stances to sustain or increase their electoral support (Jordan, 2022; Lefevere, 2023; Lorimer, 2021). Such use of strategic ambiguity by populists makes it even more difficult for parties in the mainstream to confront and counter their populist challengers programmatically.



Such challenges notwithstanding, the war and the various responses and strategies adopted by Radical Right parties have not led to a boost in their support. While there has been an increase in voter support for some populist Radical Right parties in the past year, it is not uniform. In many cases, the war has not led to a significant change in voter support for Radical Right parties. Despite the continued success of populist Radical Right parties across Europe, we must acknowledge that one of the main consequences of the war has been to unite Europeans in their support for Ukraine and strengthen overall support for democracy and democratic institutions. Except for countries such as Hungary, Serbia, and Turkey (none characterized as functioning democracies), the populist Far Right does not have a dominant position in politics.

References

- Akkerman T., de Lange, S., & Rooduijn, M. (Eds.) (2016). *Radical right-wing populist parties in Western Europe*. Routledge.
- Albertazzi, D., Favero, A., Hatakka, N., & Sijstermans, J. (2022). Siding with the underdog: Explaining the populist Radical Right's response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. *LSE European Politics and Policy (EUROPP) Blog*. http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/114727/1/euoppblog_2022_03_15_siding_with_the_underdog_explaining_the.pdf
- Art, D. (2011). *Inside the Radical Right*. Cambridge University Press
- Assembleia da República. (2022a, February 24). *Diário da Assembleia da República I Série –Número 34* (XIV Legislatura 3rd Sessão Legislativa (2021–2022)). <https://app.parlamento.pt/webutils/docs/DAR-I-034.pdf>
- Assembleia da República. (2022b, April 21). *Diário da Assembleia da República I Série –Número 6* (XV Legislatura 1st Sessão Legislativa (2022–2023)). <https://app.parlamento.pt/webutils/docs/DAR-I-006.pdf>
- Basile, L. & Mazzoleni, O. (2020). Sovereignist wine in populist bottles: An introduction. *European Politics and Society*, 21(2), 151–162. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23745118.2019.1632576>
- Bjånesøy, L. (2021). *Political (in)tolerance of the Far-Right: The importance of agency*. *Frontiers in Political Science*, 3, 655204. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpos.2021.655204>

- Brack, N. (2020). Towards a unified anti-Europe narrative on the Right and Left? The challenge of Euroscepticism in the 2019 European elections. *Research & Politics*, 7(2). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2053168020952236>
- Carlotti, B. (2023). A divorce of convenience: exploring Radical Right populist parties' position on Putin's Russia within the context of the Ukrainian war: A social media perspective. *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, Advance online publication, 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14782804.2023.2171969>
- Débat présidentiel: Macron attaque Le Pen sur son "banquier" Poutine (2022, April 20). *Le Point*. https://www.lepoint.fr/politique/macron-attaque-le-pen-sur-ses-rapports-avec-la-russie-et-son-banquier-poutine-20-04-2022-2472821_20.php#11
- de Lange S.L., & Art, D. (2011). Fortuyn versus Wilders: An agency-based approach to Radical Right party building. *West European Politics*, 34(6), 1229–124. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2011.616662>
- Docquier, F., Peluso, E., & Morelli, M. (2022, May 23). Democracies in Danger: How Can We break the Vicious Circle of Populism? *LISER*. https://liser.elsevierpure.com/files/34953802/policy_brief_05.03.pdf
- General Secretariat. (2023, February 7). Infographic-Where does the EU's gas come from? *European Council and Council of the European Union*. <https://europa.eu/!R-y4j3d>
- Farrell, N. (2022, March 19). The war in Ukraine may benefit the populist right. *The Spectator*. <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/the-war-in-ukraine-may-benefit-the-populist-right/>
- Fiott, D. (2022). The fog of war: Russia's war on Ukraine, European defence spending and military capabilities. *Intereconomics: Review of European Economic Policy*, 57(3), 152–156.
- Hadj-Abdou, L., & Pettrachin, A. (2022). Attitudes towards Ukrainian refugees. *LSE European Politics and Policy (EUROPP) Blog*. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/euoppblog/2022/03/09/explaining-the-remarkable-shift-in-european-responses-to-refugees-following-russias-invasion-of-ukraine/>
- Heinisch, R., Werner, A., & Habersack, K. (2020). Reclaiming national sovereignty: The case of the conservatives and the Far Right in Austria. *European Politics and Society*, 21(2), 163–181. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23745118.2019.1632577>
- Hrvatske Čiste Stranke Prava (n.d. a). *Hrvatska i Hrvati prošli su tu kalvariju devedesetih godina prošlog stoljeća od sličnog agresora!* Retrieved February 25, 2023 from <http://hcsp.hr/hrvatska-i-hrvati-prošli-su-tu-kalvariju-devedesetih-godina-prošlog-stoljeća-od-sličnog-agresora/>
- Hrvatsko Pravo (2022, March 5). *Hrvatska ugrožena članstvom u NATO više nego Ruskom prijetnjom*. <http://www.hsp1861.hr/vijesti2022-3/05032022-1.html>



- Ivaldi, G., Lanzone, M. E., & Woods, D. (2017). Varieties of populism across a Left–Right spectrum: The case of the Front National, the Northern League, Podemos and Five Star Movement. *Swiss Political Science Review*, 23(4), 354–376. <https://doi.org/10.1111/spsr.12278>
- Ivaldi, G. (2022a, March). Marine Le Pen, Éric Zemmour: social-populisme contre capitalisme Populaire. *Sciences Po CEVIPOF*. https://www.sciencespo.fr/cevipof/sites/sciencespo.fr/cevipof/files/NoteBaroV13_GI_socialpopulisme_mars2022_V4.pdf
- Johannès, F. (2022, February 26). Guerre en Ukraine: à Chambéry, Eric Zemmour tente de défendre sa volte-face sur la Russie. *Le Monde*. https://www.lemonde.fr/election-presidentielle-2022/article/2022/02/26/guerre-en-ukraine-a-chamber-y-zemmour-tente-de-defendre-sa-volte-face-sur-la-russie_6115348_6059010.html
- Jones, E. (2007). Populism in Europe. *SAIS Review*, 27(1), 37–47.
- Jordan, J. (2022). The strategic ambiguity of the Radical Right: A study of the Danish People's part. *Party Politics*, Advanced online publication, <https://doi.org/10.1177/13540688221136819>
- Lika, I. (2022, April 11). Analysis: Ukraine war and right-wing populism in Europe. *Anadolu Agency*. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/analysis/analysis-ukraine-war-and-right-wing-populism-in-europe/2560689>
- Lefevère, J. (2023). Is there clarity in ambiguity? A literature review of party's positional ambiguity. *Party Politics*, Advance online publication, <https://doi.org/10.1177/13540688231151906>
- Le Pen, M. (2022, February 24). *Guerre en Ukraine, Marine Le Pen en appelle à l'arrêt des opérations militaires* [Press release]. <https://mlafrance.fr/communiqués/guerre-en-ukraine-marine-le-pen-en-appelle-a-larret-des-operations-militaires>
- Lorimer, M. (2021) What do they talk about when they talk about Europe? Euro-ambivalence in Far Right ideology. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 44(11), 2016–2033. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2020.1807035>
- Mazzoleni, O., & Ivaldi, G. (2022). Economic populist sovereignism and electoral support for radical right-wing populism. *Political Studies*, 70(2), 304–326. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0032321720958567>
- McDonnell, D., & Werner, A. (2019). Differently Eurosceptic: radical right populist parties and their supporters. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 26(12), 1761–1778. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2018.1561743>
- McMahon, R. (2022). Is Alt-Europe possible? Populist Radical Right counternarratives of European integration. *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 30(1), 10–25. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14782804.2021.1919865>
- Michel, E. (2020). The strategic adaptation of the populist Radical Right in Western Europe: Shifting the party message. In E. Suhay, B. Grofman, and A. Trechsel (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of electoral persuasion* (pp. 838–862). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190860806.013.56>

- Mudde, C., & Rovira Kaltwasser, C. (2016). *Populism: A very short introduction*. Oxford University Press.
- Mudde, C. (2022). The Far-Right threat in the United States: A European perspective. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 699(1), 101–115. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00027162211070060>
- Otjes, S., Ivaldi, G., Jupskås, A. R., & Mazzoleni, O. (2018). It's not economic interventionism, stupid! Reassessing the political economy of radical right-wing populist parties. *Swiss Political Science Review*, 24(3), 270–290. <https://doi.org/10.1111/spsr.12302>
- Perrineau, P. (2022). *Le Vote clivé. Les élections présidentielle et législatives d'avril et mai 2022*. Presses Universitaires de Grenoble/UGA éditions.
- Pirro, A.L.P. (2022). Far Right: The significance of an umbrella concept. *Nations and Nationalism*, 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1111/nana.12860>
- Pytlas, B. (2022). Beyond populism: The diversity of thin anti-establishment contestation in turbulent times. *Party Politics*, Advance online publication, <https://doi.org/10.1177/13540688221080536>
- Rettman, A. (2023, February 28). Hungary links Nato vote and EU money in quid pro quo. *EUobserver*. https://euobserver.com/nordics/156770?utm_source=euobs&utm_medium=email
- Rovny, J. (2013). Where do Radical Right parties stand? Position blurring in multidimensional competition. *European Political Science Review*, 5(1), 1–26
- Taggart, P. (2000). *Populism*. Open University Press.
- Taggart, P. (2019). Party-based hard Euroscepticism in the 2019 European Parliament elections. In N. Bolin, K. Falasca, M. Grusel, & L. Nord (Eds.), *Euroflections: Leading academics on the European elections 2019 (Demicom Report No. 40)* (pp. 26–27). Mittuniversitetet.
- Weyland, K. (1999). Neoliberal populism in Latin America and Eastern Europe. *Comparative Politics*, 31(4), 379–401. <https://doi.org/10.2307/422236>
- Wodak, R. (2015). *The politics of fear: What right-wing populist discourses mean*. SAGE.
- Wondreys, J., & Mudde, C. (2022). Victims of the pandemic? European Far-Right parties and COVID-19. *Nationalities Papers*, 50(1), 86–103. <https://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2020.93>
- Yablokov, I. (2022). Russian disinformation finds fertile ground in the West. *Nature Human Behaviour*, 6(6), 766–767. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-022-01399-3>
- Zankina, E. (2016). Theorizing the new populism in Eastern Europe: A look at Bulgaria. *Czech Journal of Political Science*, 18(2), 182–199.



THE EUROPEAN CENTER FOR POPULISM STUDIES (ECPS)

is an independent, non-partisan, non-profit organization based in Brussels for research on and analysis of challenges posed by increasing political populism. ECPS promotes open society by adhering to the principles of liberal democracy, including the rule of law, human rights, pluralism, freedom of speech, gender equality, social and environmental justice, transparency, and accountability. It facilitates collaboration among networks of academic experts, practitioners, policymakers, media, and other stakeholders. ECPS offers a platform for the exchange of policy solutions on issues relating to rising populism and provides insights for policy-making and critical analysis to raise broader awareness.

Address: 155 Wetstraat / Rue de la Loi 1040
Brussels, Belgium

Email: ecps@populismstudies.org

Phone: +32 24658318
www.populismstudies.org

Twitter: @populismstudies

LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/company/populism-studies/>

Facebook: Populism Studies

YouTube: ECPS Brussels







populismstudies.org