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FRANCE



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

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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*

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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

Euro-scepticism 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 Euro-sceptic 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 Euro-sceptic 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 forswearing 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-Russian 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 (Laireche, 2022).

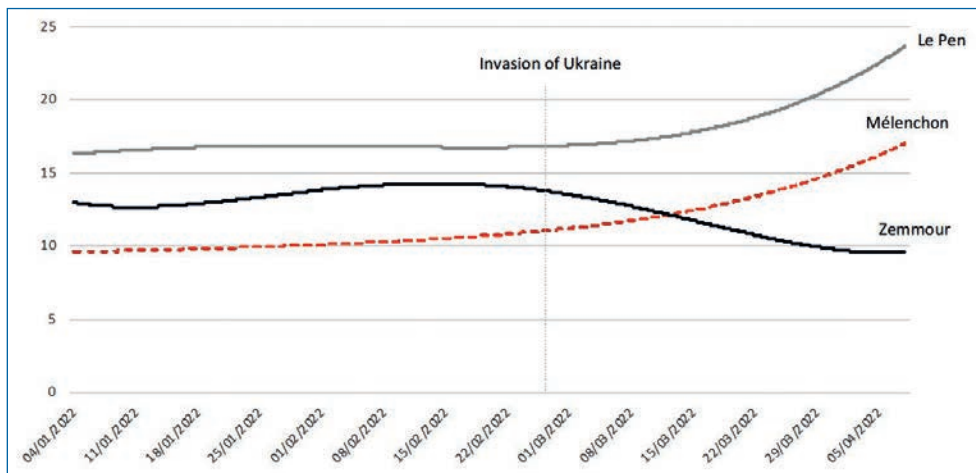
Voters and the Ukraine war

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.

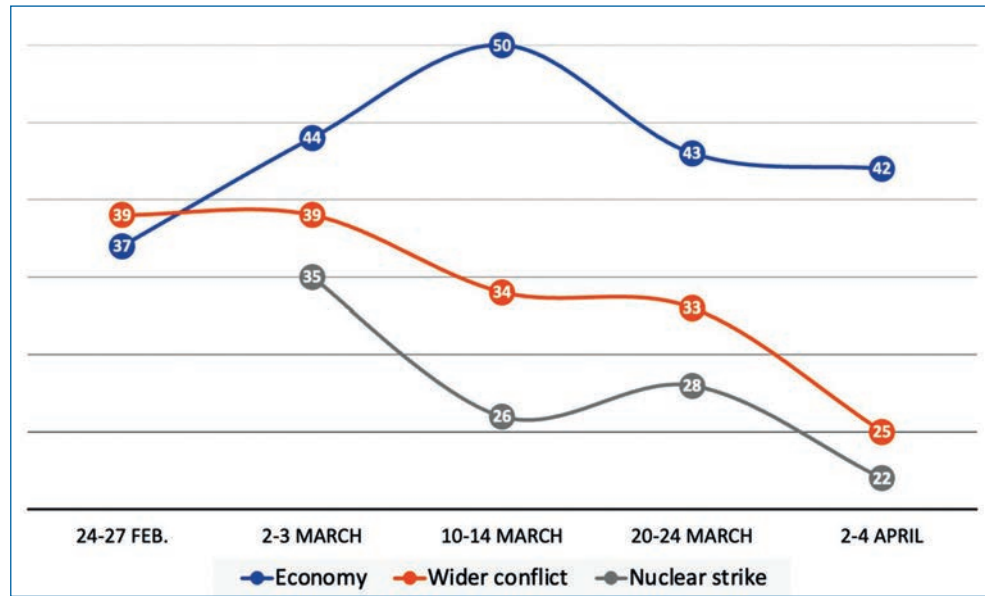
Figure 1. Voting intentions for populist candidates in the first round of the 2022 French presidential election (% support)



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.



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