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- CRISIS OF GOVERNANCE
- TOOLS OF AUTOCRATIZATION
- DEMOCRATIC RESPONSE

REGIMES

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

PLEBISCITE ENGINEERING AND AUTOCRATISATION IN THE POST-SOVIET REGION	3
<i>Svitlana Kononchuk</i>	
REBUILDING THE RULES-BASED ORDER: HOW DEMOCRACIES SHOULD RESPOND	12
<i>Dmytro Deineko</i>	
SECURITY VERSUS PROSPERITY: THE FALSE DILEMMA ERODING GEORGIA'S DEMOCRATIC RESILIENCE	23
<i>Ana Mikautadze</i>	
THE TRAITS, PITFALLS AND LIMITS OF AUTOCRACY IN MYANMAR.....	33
<i>Olga Rusova</i>	
WHY DEMOCRACIES MUST LEARN FROM AUTOCRACIES TO WIN.....	44
<i>Maryna Karlevits</i>	
RIGHT-WING POLITICIANS AND THE RUSSIA-UKRAINE WAR: BETWEEN POPULISM AND NATIONAL INTERESTS	51
<i>Hanna Shelest</i>	

RIGHT-WING POLITICIANS AND THE RUSSIA-UKRAINE WAR: BETWEEN POPULISM AND NATIONAL INTERESTS

*Dr Hanna Shelest
UA: Ukraine Analytica*

The response towards Russian aggression against Ukraine and further European involvement has presented the whole spectrum of reactions from right-wing politicians. In this article, we will try to answer what determines the choices of right-wing parties in their foreign policy agenda, and, in particular, regarding the Russian-Ukrainian war and when populism prevails over national interests, or what drives their increased cooperation with Moscow.

The last decade, characterised by the rise of the right-wing and far-right politicians in Europe, has witnessed several serious crises that could define the future of the European continent. The crisis of Atlanticism, Brexit, the migration crisis, and the Russian-Ukrainian war, have all cried out for a unified position and necessitated hard political choices for European political parties on the entire spectrum of opinion.

There can be numerous reasons for the rise of right-wing ideology in Europe, which is likely to remain a trend for a number of years. The crisis of democracy. No major changes in politics for a long time. A conservative flashback. The latest economic and migrant crises. An increase in nationalistic sentiments as a response to EU regulations. Or simply an internal, domestic political rivalry that makes the parties search for their niche position, and a response to the populist ideas.

If the migration crisis or their position regarding the EU as an institution have followed the general ideological line of such

parties, the response towards the Russian aggression against Ukraine and further European involvement in the war have presented the whole spectrum of reactions from right-wing politicians. The Hungarian accommodation for the Moscow position contrasts with the Italian full support for Ukraine. Marine Le Pen's breaking ties with the Kremlin contrasts with Alice Weidel's embrace of Russian politicians. So, what determines the choices of right-wing parties in their foreign policy agenda, and, in particular, regarding the Russian-Ukrainian war? When does populism prevail over national interests, or what drives their increased cooperation with Moscow?

The right-wing political map of Europe is diverse both geographically and ideologically, as well as in terms of their level of influence over decision-making or discourse-shaping in their respective countries, and at the European Parliament level. Conservative-right, radical right political parties, Nazis, and extreme-right groups – all of these create a patchy picture that also has a significant local context in each case. This paper does

not aim to analyse the full spectrum of right-wing ideology in Europe, but to concentrate on those who have had the highest political influence or the ability to influence a decision-making process regarding the Russian-Ukrainian war.


European Right-wing Political Mapping

In June 2024, 720 members of the European Parliament were elected. Far-right political parties secured a significant number of seats, improving their positions; however, this was not as much as some had anticipated. While Italy, France and Germany saw significant gains for the far right, the picture across the rest of the EU was more nuanced. Far-right parties only came first in five countries, and second or third in another five, predominantly at the expense of liberal and green parties.¹ As a result, they received a total of 156 seats, held by Patriots, European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) and Identity and Democracy (ID) Groups. Still, the competition for political leadership in Europe and disagreements regarding approaches on different issues, including over Russia's policy, did not allow the right wing to create a single group in the European Parliament.

If we speak about the national level, by 2024 the far right has been part of governing coalitions in Finland, Sweden, the Netherlands, Italy, Hungary, and Croatia, and actually won the elections in Austria². In Portugal and Slovakia, the far right increased their vote share significantly in recent

national elections.³ Poland, Belgium, France, and Germany have right-wing parties among their main parliamentary forces.

Such a rise in right-wing sentiment among voters cannot be considered a coincidence or a temporary phenomenon, as we can observe both the normalisation of the far-right, the adoption of some of their rhetoric by centrist parties, and the rejuvenation of their voters. According to 2024 research, 32% of the French National Front voters, 25% of the Portuguese Chega, 14.5% of the German AfD, and 32% of the Belgium Vlaams voters belong to the youth category.⁴



Such a rise in right-wing sentiment among voters cannot be considered a coincidence or a temporary phenomenon, as we can observe both the normalisation of the far-right, the adoption of some of their rhetoric by centrist parties, and the rejuvenation of their voters

The radical right has raised its game, by disrupting EU unity and blocking EU-level initiatives in the past. To a considerable extent, this trend is due to countries led by radical-right parties, in particular Hungary, which is responsible for the largest number of blockages in EU foreign policy-making. Vetoes by radical-right governments can articulate strong disagreement over policy,

- 1 Armida van Rij, Tim Benton, Creon Butler, *How will gains by the far right affect the European Parliament and EU?* Chatham House, 11.06.2024, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2024/06/how-will-gains-far-right-affect-european-parliament-and-eu>
- 2 *Austria's Freedom Party secures first far-right national election win since World War II*, CNN, 30.09.2024, <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/09/29/europe/austria-election-results-freedom-party-intl-hnk/index.html>
- 3 Armida van Rij, Tim Benton, Creon Butler, *How will gains by the far right affect the European Parliament and EU?* Chatham House, 11.06.2024, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2024/06/how-will-gains-far-right-affect-european-parliament-and-eu>
- 4 Yasmeen Serhan, *How Europe's Far-Right Parties Are Winning Over Young Voters*, Time, 18.06.2024, <https://time.com/6989622/france-eu-europe-far-right-elections/>

but they can also be employed as leverage to promote other, unrelated objectives — as Hungary showed through its veto of EU financial support for Ukraine.⁵



Before 2022, many of the right-wing parties found similarities in their agendas, and with the one Moscow promoted – strong leadership, light authoritarianism, anti-gender, anti-LGBT, anti-migrant, anti-vaccination, anti-EU

However, focusing on a far-right surge wrongly implies that the European far-right parties are a unified front when, in fact, the far-right has so far shown very low levels of cohesion, and a limited capacity for cooperation.⁶ Considering the patchy picture of the right-wing parties' policies towards Ukraine, the question that arises is – what drives their perceptions and attitudes towards Ukraine, which factors influence their choice – ideology, money, national historical experience, or does it simply depend on the leader's choice?

Inconsistency of Ideology or Coincidence with the Russian agenda?

In theory, right-wing political parties should have supported Ukraine because it is fighting for its sovereignty and nationhood; exactly the motives that the right's ideology

supports. However, in reality, within the last ten years, and especially since 2022, the right-wing parties have been divided into three main categories: those which strongly supported Ukraine and condemned Russia, those which allied themselves with Moscow or at least looked for excuses for their actions, and those which pretended to be neutral under the pretext that the most important matter for the national interests of their states was not to be dragged into war. Parties such as the FPÖ (in Austria), FN (in France), and Ataka (in Bulgaria) enjoy close links with Moscow; they believe that European countries should give more credence to Russia's concerns; and the FN's foreign policy programme in particular contains a proposal for the creation of a trilateral alliance between Paris, Berlin, and Moscow⁷.

Similarities of Agenda

Before 2022, many of the right-wing parties found similarities in their agendas, and with the one Moscow promoted – strong leadership, light authoritarianism, anti-gender, anti-LGBT, anti-migrant, anti-vaccination, anti-EU. Most of the far-right parties are also anti-Western and anti-liberal, while Russia is associated with the so-called 'traditional values' that resonate with their voters as well. Still, the closer to Russia (geographically) the countries were, the less eager they were to support Russian foreign policy aspirations and vision, as their past experience (both of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union) influenced them and allowed for clearer recognition of Moscow's intentions.

5 Rosa Balfour and Stefan Lehne, ed. *Charting the Radical Right's Influence on EU Foreign Policy*, Carnegie Endowment, 18.04.2024, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/04/charting-the-radical-rights-influence-on-eu-foreign-policy?lang=en>

6 Ivan Krastev, Mark Leonard, *A new political map: Getting the European Parliament election right*, ECFR, 21.03.2024, <https://ecfr.eu/publication/getting-the-european-parliament-election-right/>

7 *Russophile Populism*, The European Center for Populism Studies, <https://www.populismstudies.org/Vocabulary/russophile-populism/>

According to Yehuda Ben-Hur Levy,⁸ the right-wing populist parties disagree on many foreign policy issues. They range from anti-American to pro-American, from Russophile to Russosceptic, and from isolationist to internationalist. But they are united on some points, notably Euroscepticism. Under such conditions, the researchers often raise the question of whether it is primarily pro-Russian or anti-American sentiments that actually drive the far-right when Russia is chosen just to be the opposite of the US.

One of the important aspects to consider in the far-right political parties' reaction towards the Russian-Ukrainian war is the indirect effect of their policies. Their positions towards the European Union or NATO themselves, or their anti-American stance, are those factors that should be taken into account. It is not always a choice between Russia or Ukraine that drives their decisions. The strong anti-EU position may lead to the ultimate decision not to support EU sanctions or the allocation of money to support for Ukraine, while anti-American sentiments might be what leads to the search for a partnership with Russia as an alternative, a third approach.

Following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia, the online discourse of far-right groups in Eastern European regions has also altered. The analysis conducted by Deina Venckunaite and Connor Rees has revealed that pre-conflict, Nazism was one of the defining themes present in online in-group communications. Post-conflict, these defining themes have shifted towards nationalism.⁹

One of the reasons for this could be a self-reflection process by at least some of the followers, as the Russians' historical image as anti-Nazis strongly contradicted their soldiers' behaviour in the occupied territories, and the statements of their leaders.

Positions regarding the Russian-Ukrainian war

The primary dissonance between the right-wing politicians and the Russian leadership lies within the domestic-foreign policy axis. Despite their having similarities in domestic discourse, where anti-Western sentiments are also present, in terms of foreign policy, they face a dilemma, as defending a nation's sovereignty and fatherland is also among their core ideological baselines – so this principle naturally leads them to support Ukraine versus Russia.

According to Carnegie research,¹⁰ the main right-wing parties in Europe can be divided into three groups, with pro-Russian, anti-Russian, and inconsistent positions towards Russia:


- Anti-Russian:
 - Spain, Party Name: Vox. Opposed to Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine and supportive of military aid to Kyiv.
 - Italy, Party Name: Brothers of Italy (FdI). Sympathetic towards Russia until its 2022 invasion of Ukraine; it then distanced itself from Moscow and adopted a strong stance in support of Ukraine, backing sanctions against Moscow and military support to Kyiv.

8 Yehuda Ben-Hur Levy, *The Undiplomats: Right-wing populists and their foreign policies*, Centre for European Reform, August 2015, https://www.cer.eu/sites/default/files/publications/attachments/pdf/2015/pb_ybl_undiplo_21aug15-11804.pdf

9 Deina Venckunaite, Connor Rees and Dr. Lella Nouri, *A Move from Nazism to Nationalism: Changes in Far-Right Online Discourse Post-Ukraine Conflict*, Global Network of Extremism and Technology, 14.08.2023, <https://gnet-research.org/2023/08/14/a-move-from-nazism-to-nationalism-changes-in-far-right-online-discourse-post-ukraine-conflict/>

10 Rosa Balfour and Stefan Lehne, ed. *Charting the Radical Right's Influence on EU Foreign Policy*, Carnegie Endowment, 18.04.2024, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/04/charting-the-radical-rights-influence-on-eu-foreign-policy?lang=en>

- Poland, Party Name: Law and Justice (PiS). Supportive of Ukraine after Russia's 2022 invasion and provided military supplies; critical of Poland's Western partners for allowing Russia to invade Ukraine.
- Estonia, Party Name: Conservative People's Party of Estonia (EKRE). Opposed to Russia; strongly critical of Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine and supportive of aid for Ukraine.
- Finland, Party Name: Finns Party. Vocal against Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine; supportive of sanctions against Moscow and in favour of aiding Ukraine.
- Sweden, Party Name: Sweden Democrats (SD). Hostile towards Russia.
- Inconsistent:
 - France, Party Name: National Rally (RN). Supportive of close ties with Russia but moderated its outlook after Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine; opposed to sanctions and in favour of dialogue with Moscow.
 - Netherlands, Party Name: Party for Freedom (PVV). Initially critical of Russia but later praised Putin as an ally against Muslim immigration; after Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, condemned Russia, and supported Ukraine.
- Pro-Russian:
 - Germany, Party Name: Alternative for Germany (AfD). Opposed to EU sanctions on Russia and in favour of dialogue with Moscow.
 - Austria, Party Name: Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ). Sympathetic to Russia's policies and opposed to EU sanctions against Moscow; supportive of a

 ***Russia has cultivated equally active relations with far-left and far-right political groups in Europe, using each of them, respectively, depending on the messages Moscow needs to promote***

diplomatic approach to Russia's war in Ukraine. In addition to the regular rhetoric, the Austrian Freedom Party is also highly critical of Western military aid to Ukraine and wants to bow out of the European Sky Shield Initiative, a missile defence project launched by Germany¹¹.

- Slovakia, Party Name: Slovak National Party (SNS). Supportive of Russia; refrained from labelling the country the aggressor in the war in Ukraine; critical of EU sanctions on Russia and campaigned to stop weapons supplies to Ukraine.
- Hungary, Party Name: Fidesz. Sympathetic towards Russia and opposed to EU sanctions against Moscow; have regular contacts with Moscow.
- Bulgaria. Party Name: Revival. Sympathetic towards Russia; calls for Bulgaria's neutrality in Russia's war against Ukraine.

What is interesting is that at a certain point in the war, left-wing political parties became more challenging than the right-wing ones. As the left predominantly does not believe in war, so the prevailing mood was in favour of Ukrainian surrender. For years, Russia has cultivated equally active relations with far-left and far-right political groups in Europe,

¹¹ *Austria's Freedom Party secures first far-right national election win since World War II*, CNN, 30.09.2024, <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/09/29/europe/austria-election-results-freedom-party-intl-hnk/index.html>

using each of them, respectively, depending on the messages Moscow needs to promote at that particular time.

The danger arose when right- and left-wing political leaders became united in their positions towards their respective governments, which could be strongly pro-Ukrainian, as in the French case. The left and right insisted that it was beneficial to cooperate with Russia, as it could result in a stable security architecture in Europe, and who really cares about Ukraine? Such rhetoric, in addition to the necessity of stopping the military support and spending for Ukraine, was explained as the need to concentrate on domestic issues, and it also led to extreme positions. Another argument in this basket is that Ukraine cannot win the war, so we need to search for a compromise. To reach a compromise, the government should stop supplying weapons to Ukraine.

At the same time, one can notice discrepancies regarding the Russian-Ukrainian war among right-wing politicians within one country (an example is the opposite positions taken up by Meloni's Brothers of Italy and Salvini's Lega) and even inside one political party.

The Alternative for Germany (AfD) has been struggling to adopt a single position. While the party's national leaders, such as chairman Tino Chrupalla, joined in with the condemnation of the Russian invasion when it began, influential regional figures have been much more equivocal.¹² One of

the reasons for this is that they saw this war as falling within Putin's narrative of a war between NATO and Russia, where Ukraine is only a victim or a puppet.

In Portugal, when Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, Chega backed Kyiv. In early 2021, the leader of the Chega party, Andre Ventura, called for harsher sanctions against Russia in light of the ongoing Russian provocation in the Donbas and the annexation of Crimea, demanding that they be applied to the entire economy rather than only to individual Russians¹³. 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]"¹⁴. The Chega leader's position was not initially supported unanimously within his party, and some members characterised the invasion as a legitimate reaction to "NATO encirclement of Russia", and accused Ukraine's president of "siding with avowed Nazis", which was a Russian narrative promoted to justify a war.¹⁵

The Positions of Extremist Groups

The most challenging situation to deal with arose among the radical far-right or extremist groups. Most of them are not represented in mainstream politics, but they may influence societal discourse and be very active online. Moreover, their members are usually more ideologically coherent and less opportunistic.

12 Ben Knight, *Germany's far-right split by Russia-Ukraine war*, DW, 28.03.2022, <https://www.dw.com/en/germanys-far-right-split-by-russia-ukraine-war/a-61283065>

13 Assembleia da República. *Diário da Assembleia da República I Série –Número 48 (XIV Legislatura 2rd Sessão Legislativa (2020-2021))*. 3.03.2021, <https://app.parlamento.pt/webutils/docs/DAR-I-048.pdf>


14 Afonso, Biscaia & Salgado, Susana. *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). Brussels. 4.03.2023, <https://doi.org/10.55271/rp0026> <https://www.populismstudies.org/the-ukraine-russia-war-and-the-far-right-in-portugal-minimal-impacts-on-the-rising-populist-chega-party/>

15 Malhado, A. *Os defensores de Putin no Chega*. Sábado. 22.06.2022, <https://www.sabado.pt/portugal/detalhe/os-defensores-de-putin-no-chega>

According to research on the online activities of the far-right groups at the beginning of the war (March 2022)¹⁶, these actors looked at the conflict in Ukraine from the perspective of how the crisis could serve and reinforce their own localised interests and aspirations for political violence at home. Many far-right extremist actors support Russia, while some support Ukraine, and others are entirely agnostic to the outcome of the conflict. Those who supported Russia in the first days also shared the so-called anti-globalist discourse, which they considered was present in Russia's professed reasons to start the war. Russian leadership statements that they were standing up against the unipolar world (read the world where the US dominates) mirror far-right groups' ideas, including those conspiracy theories of world shadow governance, etc., which have been popular among average supporters of those groups.

Researchers who have tracked Germany's neo-Nazi scene have noted that Germany's far-right organisations were struggling to agree on a position on Russia's invasion of Ukraine at the beginning of the war. While some groups sided with Russia's anti-NATO authoritarian leader, others showed solidarity with what they considered the far-right 'Azov Battalion' in Ukraine.¹⁷ Partially, what made some of these groups more pro-Ukrainian was their consideration of Ukraine as European and Ukrainians as

'white', versus their negative sentiments towards ongoing waves of migration into Europe from other continents. So, they saw Ukraine as a nation of white people with the right to self-determination. On top of that, Germany's extreme right has often envied the strength of Ukraine's far-right movement with its paramilitary organisations.¹⁸



Many far-right extremist actors support Russia, while some support Ukraine, and others are entirely agnostic to the outcome of the conflict

Moscow has long cultivated links with different parts of Europe's right-wing, from mainstream politicians to proscribed terrorists¹⁹. For example, the Russian Imperial Movement (RIM), an international far-right group which was listed as a specially designated terrorist organisation by the United States in April 2020, provided training centres in St. Petersburg for Swedish, German, Slovakian, Finnish, and Danish right-wing radicals, some of whom later joined the fighting in Ukraine on the Russian side²⁰.

Austria is a unique case when it comes to relations between the political far-right and Russia. These contacts go far back in time

16 Stephanie Foggett, Mollie Saltskog, Colin Clarke, *How Are Putin's Far-Right Fans in The West Reacting to His War?* 18.03.2022, <https://warontherocks.com/2022/03/how-are-putins-far-right-fans-in-the-west-reacting-to-his-war/>

17 Ben Knight, *Germany's far-right split by Russia-Ukraine war*, DW, 28.03.2022, <https://www.dw.com/en/germanys-far-right-split-by-russia-ukraine-war/a-61283065>

18 Ben Knight, *Germany's far-right split by Russia-Ukraine war*, DW, 28.03.2022, <https://www.dw.com/en/germanys-far-right-split-by-russia-ukraine-war/a-61283065>

19 Robyn Dixon, *Inside white-supremacist Russian Imperial Movement, designated foreign terrorist organization by U.S. State Department*, Washington Post, 13.04.2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/russia-white-supremacist-terrorism-us/2020/04/11/255a9762-7a75-11ea-a311-adb1344719a9_story.html

20 Raffaello Pantucci, *Russia's Far-Right Campaign in Europe*, Lawfare, 9.04.2023, <https://www.lawfaremedia.org/article/russias-far-right-campaign-europe>

and have been developed over the years, not only by far-right parties but also by the centrists. Still, the Austrian Freedom Party is the first party to have an official bond and agreement on future cooperation on a vast array of topics with the United Russia Party. The FPÖ's pact with the United Russia Party was the result of a deliberate pro-Russian trend in the party's leadership dating back to 2007.²¹ Russia often aims to support rising parties or marginal opposition groups with the hope (and often financial support) of bringing them to power one day.

Financial Support Helps with Ideology

The far-right political parties' connections with Russia have been known about for quite a long time, with more and more investigations opening up, either regarding individual politicians or the entire political parties. Some tried to break off this relationship after 2022, while others continued with it. For many, this connection has not been purely ideological but rather a 'friendship with benefits' – financial benefits.

Russia has long been accused of funding populist radical right parties in Europe, from the French Front National and Italian Lega to Austria's FPÖ and Hungary's Jobbik. Russia has also created some open ties with anti-EU parties, inviting their leaders to various conferences and symposia organised by the Kremlin's close associates.²² Such ties

between the Kremlin and the European populist radical right have grown stronger over the last decade, reflecting what has been deemed by Andrey Makaruychev as a 'marriage of convenience'. As Shekhovtsov suggests, Moscow has begun to support particular populist radical right political forces to gain leverage in European politics and undermine the liberal democratic consensus in the West.²³



Russia has long been accused of funding populist radical right parties in Europe, from the French Front National and Italian Lega to Austria's FPÖ and Hungary's Jobbik

In 2014, the most famous and closely investigated case of the Russian financing of European political parties was instigated. If most of the other investigated cases were concerned with bribery and shadow financing, the contract by First Czech-Russian Bank in Moscow that lent the National Front of Marine Le Pen 9.4 million euros at an interest rate of 6 per cent per year in 2014 was 'official' but not publicly announced²⁴. It was acknowledged only after a media investigation, while Marine Le Pen was justifying the Russian illegal annexation of Crimea, and calling for France to leave the EU.

21 Fabian Schmid, Bernhard Weidinger, Peter Kreko, *Russian Connections of the Austrian Far-Right*. Political Capital, 2017, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/382076631_Russian_Connections_of_the_Austrian_Far-Right

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

23 Quoted from: 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, <https://shs.hal.science/halshs-04024156>

24 Paul Sonne, *A Russian bank gave Marine Le Pen's party a loan. Then weird things began happening*. The Washington Post. 27.12.2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/a-russian-bank-gave-marine-le-pens-party-a-loan-then-weird-things-began-happening/2018/12/27/960c7906-d320-11e8-a275-81c671a50422_story.html

Another example is the Italian political party Lega, whose representatives, according to the Insider investigation, travelled to Moscow in search of financing from Kremlin-connected sources in 2018, along with details of a proposal to launder \$65 million in support for the Italian party through an oil trading scheme, in which an officer from the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB)'s Fifth Service, which has the mandate to disrupt democracies abroad participated.²⁵ And if Le Pen needed to search for legitimate excuses for her 'loan', perceiving the negative consequences for her political career, Italian politicians on the other hand continued this practice.

Is the Right-Wing Ideology the Problem, or is it the Populism of the Far Right?

In the last few decades, right-wing ideology has seen more and more intersection with populist rhetoric. While the definition of populism presents two optics – anti-establishment or opportunistic – it still presents its main idea as the desire to represent the point of view of the 'street'. In the case of the right-wing parties in Europe and their reactions to the Russia-Ukraine war, it resulted in a cognitive imbalance, as their voters' sentiments were often in conflict with their parties' general ideology.

In Europe, the term 'right-wing' populism is used to describe groups, politicians and political parties that are generally known for their opposition to immigration, especially of people from the Islamic world, and for

Euroscepticism. It is also associated with ideologies such as anti-environmentalism, neo-nationalism, anti-globalisation, nativism, and economic protectionism.²⁶

Despite the rise in right-wing parties' ratings, their voters are more opportunistic and can potentially change the party in case their leaders do not respond to their concerns. According to an Insa survey conducted at the request of Bild, 40% of the AfD voters can imagine themselves voting for the leftist Die Linke party. This is not surprising, considering that their position regarding migration or relations with Moscow is similar.²⁷ Such a background has made a lot of right-wing politicians more acceptable to the general position of their voters.

For example, in the Netherlands, there is a societal consensus regarding the Russian aggression in Ukraine, which has been hugely determined by the MH17 incident in 2014, when Russia shot down an aeroplane with hundreds of Dutch passengers aboard. So, Ukrainians in the Netherlands are perceived solely as victims of the Russian aggression. Thus, despite anti-immigrant rhetoric or other similar sentiments, the far-right Party for Freedom (PVV) signed a governmental coalition agreement that included a continuation of political, military, and financial support to Ukraine.²⁸

In 2014, most populist radical right-wing European parties justified Russia's annexation of Crimea by adopting the Kremlin's rhetoric and strong criticism of the Ukrainian state. In so doing, they parroted Kremlin talking

25 Michael Weiss, Christo Grozev, Roman Dobrokhotov, *How the FSB tried to buy an Italian political party*, The Insider, 6.02.2024, <https://theins.ru/en/politics/268921>

26 *Right-Wing Populism*, European Centre for Populism Studies, <https://www.populismstudies.org/Vocabulary/right-wing-populism/>

27 *Wagenknecht-Wumms!* Bild, 21.10.2023, <https://www.bild.de/bild-plus/politik/inland/politik-inland/exklusive-umfrage-so-viele-wuerden-sie-waehlen-wagenknecht-wumms-85822232.bild.html>

28 *Дар'я Мещерякова, З ультраправими, але не проти України: чому "уряд Вільдерса" не зробить Нідерланди проросійськими, Європейська правда, 20.05.2024, <https://www.euointegration.com.ua/articles/2024/05/20/7186348/>*


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 16th, 2014.²⁹ This can be partially explained by the low intensity of the conflict, low interest among the voters, and a weak response from the European governments, so that the right-wing leaders have followed their general line of relations with Moscow and mutual support.

After the outbreak of the war in 2022, far-right populists came under fire for their pro-Russia positions and their previous sympathy for Vladimir Putin. As a result, their responses, and interpretations of the reasons for the war varied. Cross-national analysis revealed that radical right-wing populist parties have varied in the set of arguments and rhetoric that they have employed since the Russian invasion, in an attempt to sustain their electoral appeal and maintain credibility with voters, by evading accusations of sympathy for Russia.³⁰

Also, for many right-wing politicians, with the war’s continuation, it has been more difficult to support Russia politically, as the discourse has been shifting to the idea that it is not a Ukrainian but a European war, hence threats to the national security of many European countries are real, not hypothetical. As national security and protection have always been among the priorities of the right-wing parties, it is difficult to be seen to encourage the source of the main threat or to discourage

NATO as a defensive alliance. Under such circumstances, even the most pro-Russian politicians, if not actually moving to Russia (as in the case of Austrian ex-minister Kneissl),³¹ shifted their opposition to the centre, rejecting openly anti-NATO and pro-Russian rhetoric, but encouraging so-called appeals for peace, or doubting the necessity to prolong providing military support to Ukraine.

Both Giorgia Meloni of Brothers of Italy and Marine Le Pen of France’s National Rally have moderated their parties’ most extreme policies in recent years, in an attempt to increase their acceptability among voters. For example, in its programme for the 2024 European election, France’s National Rally said that “Russia [was] violating international law and provoking a revision of the international order.”³²



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However, some experts consider that much of this ‘moderating’ and detoxification is down to communication strategies.³³ Liana Fix of the Council on Foreign Relations said that the National Rally is “not so pro-Russian

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

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

31 Steve Rosenberg, *Karin Kneissl, the Austrian ex-minister who moved to Russia*, BBC, 7.12.2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-67624834>

32 Giorgio Leali and Laura Kayali, *French far right pulls manifesto that included controversial Russia, NATO plans*, Politico, 17.06.2024, <https://www.politico.eu/article/france-far-right-manifesto-russia-nato-national-rally/>

33 Anchal Vohra, *How the European Parliament helps normalize the far right*, 24.08.2024, <https://www.dw.com/en/how-the-european-parliament-helps-normalize-the-far-right/a-69923698>

as they were in the past,” but the shift could be partly about appealing to voters rather than a real change in policy.³⁴

This may be true for the French, but not as conclusive for the Italians. Meloni, prior to the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, was in favour of better relations with Russia, and supported lifting sanctions on the Russian Federation in 2014³⁵. In 2021, she even wrote that Russia under Putin defended European values and a Christian identity.³⁶ This statement is a clear reflection of the similarities in domestic agendas that have united Russia and right-wing politicians for years. However, in 2022, Meloni strongly condemned the invasion and pledged to keep sending arms to Ukraine³⁷, becoming the biggest proponent of military aid and diplomatic support for Ukraine. In September 2022, she said that Russia’s annexation of four partially occupied provinces in south-eastern Ukraine has “no legal and political value”.

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 criticised his actions. To the East, Romania’s AUR, most Croatian Radical Right parties, as well as Lithuanian outfits, have taken critical positions towards Putin and the invasion.³⁸

Moreover, none of the political parties have openly allied with Russia. Those whom we consider pro-Russian have chosen the path

of blaming the West’s actions that ‘provoked’ the war or called on their supporters and opponents to understand Russian ambitions and actions, but all have condemned the fact of the illegal invasion, accepting Russia as an aggressor. The reason was that even if the ‘liberal order’ is something many right-wingers may oppose, the concept of a ‘rules-based order’ is one that is clearly ingrained in the right’s ideology. Thus, by violating dozens of international conventions and breaching the sovereignty of the independent state, Russia could not guarantee that right-wing voters would be in favour of their political leaders continuing the dialogue with Moscow as before.

Conclusions

While analysing right-wing political parties and their representatives, we usually concentrate mainly on their ability to win elections and their chances of becoming part of the government. Nevertheless, no less important should be an understanding of their ability to be a disruptive force that does not need to be in a government (so as not to take responsibility) but that can impact public and political discourse, thus influencing the decision-making process and making liberal or centrist parties change their positions regarding the most pressing issues for society.

The ‘Russian-Ukrainian’ test presented a challenge for most right-wing politicians, as it resulted not only in difficult choices

34 Brad Dress, *Far-right victories in EU elections imperil Ukraine support*, The Hill, 06.11.24, <https://thehill.com/policy/international/4716927-far-right-eu-elections-ukraine/>

35 Ludovica Meacci, *Italy’s Right Is Torn on Ukraine but United on China*. Foreign Policy, 27.09.2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/09/27/italy-china-russia-right/>

36 Roberto Saviano, *Giorgia Meloni is a danger to Italy and the rest of Europe*. The Guardian, 24.09.2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/commentisfree/2022/sep/24/giorgia-meloni-is-a-danger-to-italy-and-the-rest-of-europe-far-right>

37 Ashleigh Furlong, *Italy’s Meloni: Right-wing government is ‘nothing to fear’*. Politico Europe, 23.07.2022, <https://www.politico.eu/article/italys-meloni-right-wing-government-is-nothing-to-fear/>

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

caused by the necessity of responding to voters' views, but also required the questioning of the ideological bases versus established political partnerships. As analysis demonstrates, the similarities in the domestic agendas that united different political parties with Russia before 2022 were overshadowed by the inability to back Russian foreign policy and its security stance. Conservative and populist views appeared alongside adherence to the rule-based order and the national security agenda, where NATO (as opposed to the EU) is seen as an important element.



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If Ukraine's original idea of full European integration, its preferred choice, expressed extensively during the Revolution of Dignity in 2014, could not attract the support of the right-wing politicians, as most of them in fact propagate an anti-Brussels agenda, so the defence of the state from the external aggressor and the call to restore Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity found a resonance both in the minds and on the political agenda of the right-wing parties. Still, the question remains about the diversity of responses to the Russian aggression and the European responses to it. The inconsistent positions of those who

rejected aggression but called for the lifting of sanctions or for starting negotiations instead of military support, could be partially explained by their domestic priorities. But their open support for Russia and its agenda, blaming the West exclusively, cannot be explained away by ideological beliefs only. The geographical approach is also not helpful as an explanation, seeing as the pro-Russian position of some Bulgarian, Slovakian, and Hungarian politicians, who had prior experience of Moscow's dominance, did not serve as a safeguard from their supporting the current Kremlin policy.

The patchy picture of the right-wing politicians' approaches towards the Russian-Ukrainian war, together with their increased presence in both the European Parliament and the national parliaments of various European states, demand a better understanding of their motivations, the logic of their decision-making, and their possibilities for opportunistic approaches towards the Russian-Ukrainian war in particular.

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