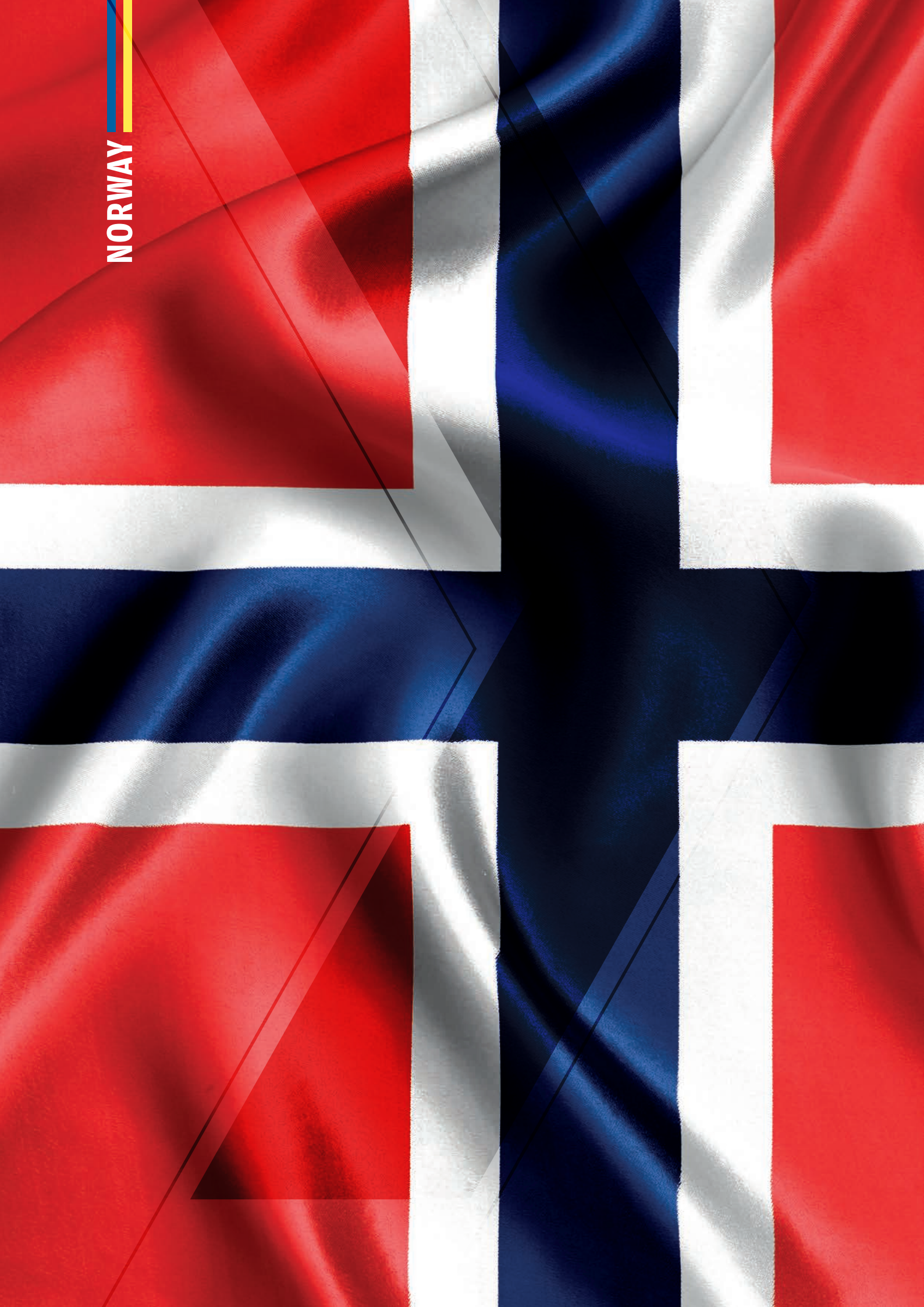
NORWAY



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

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## 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.*

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## 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 ladened 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 disproval 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 inference. 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.

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