



**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

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## 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).



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