

Conclusion

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The war in Ukraine has been a catastrophe for Ukraine and a crisis for Europe and the world. The war has cost tens of thousands of lives of Ukrainian civilians and caused tremendous devastation to the country's infrastructure, housing and industrial sector, causing interruptions in the water and electricity supply across many Ukrainian cities, with dire consequences for the population. In addition, millions of Ukrainians have been internally displaced, and nearly eight million have fled the country to find shelter in the rest of Europe.

Beyond the borders of Ukraine, the global economy has been destabilized due to the war, and economic insecurity has become widespread. The effects of the war have hit the world as a second major shock following the COVID-19 pandemic, threatening economic recovery. In addition, the war and the sanctions imposed on Russia have caused a significant increase in prices for many raw materials, energy, intermediate goods, and transportation services, particularly affecting fuel and gas costs throughout Europe.

The many economic and international repercussions of the Ukraine war have dramatically changed European politics, both among the

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individual states and at the supranational level. It has changed public opinion and created new constraints and opportunities for political actors across the spectrum, both within and outside the mainstream.

This report has examined the impact of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on the state of the pan-European populist Radical Right. Such parties are generally considered admirers of Russia and Vladimir Putin's regime and ties between the Kremlin and the European populist Radical Right parties have grown stronger over the last decade. Because of such ties, the Russian invasion of Ukraine has presented new challenges for radical right-wing populist parties, putting many of them under strain and forcing them to adapt to the new context produced by the war.

In this report, we have asked how such parties have navigated the new context produced by the war and the impact it may have had on them, both nationally and at the EU level. Special attention has been paid to the reactions of right-wing populist parties to this war and the political and electoral consequences of the conflict for such parties. The analysis in this report includes a total of 37 populist Radical Right parties across 12 West European and 10 East European countries, plus Turkey.

By looking first at the “supply” of radical right-wing populist politics in the context of the Ukraine war, this report has provided an in-depth examination of the diversity of such actors' positions vis-à-vis Russia, NATO, and the EU before the war and the different arguments and rhetoric they have used to interpret the war. Many of these parties have had to shift their positions on Russia to avoid being too closely associated with Putin's regime. They have also toned down their nativism to adapt to changes in public opinion concerning asylum seekers from Ukraine. Others, in contrast, have strengthened their pro-Russian rhetoric and criticism of the EU and NATO. We have also examined how populist Radical Right parties have sought to exploit war-related issues for electoral gain, turning to domestic socioeconomic issues or cultural and historical legacies, calling for national sovereignty while adopting anti-elite strategies against their political opponents.

Concerning the voters, the report has examined public opinion on the war in Ukraine, how it has affected the public perception of radical right-wing populist parties and leaders, and the impact the war has had on party support in the electorate. Finally, we have sought to assess the invasion's temporary and potentially permanent effects on right-wing populist politics.



In the remainder of this conclusion to the report, we summarize the key findings of the country reports and present the implications for the future of the populist Radical Right from a comparative perspective.

The security and defence agenda of the Radical Right before February 2022

The findings indicate a tremendous variability in the international agenda of populist Radical Right parties in Europe before the war in Ukraine. Contrary to the conventional view, Radical Right parties and movements adopted a range of positions on foreign policy, security and defence, as well as toward NATO, the EU, and Russia.

While many radical right-wing populist parties have ties with Russia, we see some nuances across Europe, which reflect different foreign policy and international agendas among these parties, particularly concerning NATO, and what is deemed American influence and the cultural and economically liberal agenda emanating from the United States. In the West, the most pro-Russian parties include the Freedom Party (FPÖ) in Austria, the Freedom Party (PVV) and the Forum for Democracy (FvD) in the Netherlands, Matteo Salvini's Lega in Italy, and the Rassemblement National (RN) and Reconquête! in France. These parties illustrate the populist Radical Right's admiration for Putin's authoritarianism and illiberal politics, as well as his forceful defence of Christian values and opposition to Islam, positions that Germany's Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) has enshrined in party manifestos. Moreover, individual populist leaders such as Geert Wilders and Éric Zemmour have professed their admiration for Putin's style of leadership, describing him as "a true patriot".

Despite the long history of Russian imperialism in Central and Eastern Europe, zealous Putin admirers can be found in Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, and Hungary. In Bulgaria, the Far Right ultranationalist party Revival has become explicit in its support for Russia, staging a series of protests over the past year in which prominent displays of the national flag of the Russian Federation have become an indispensable part of the party's performative politics. The Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) has been more moderate but firmly opposes sanctions against Russia. In the Czech Republic, the Freedom and Democracy Party (SPD) has returned to its traditional pro-Russian positioning (for example, the party backed Russia's 2014 annexation of

Crimea as legitimate) after adopting a more neutral tone at the beginning of the war. In Hungary, Orbán and his party Fidesz have consistently argued against Western sanctions (although condemning the invasion at the outset) and continue to parrot the Kremlin's talking points about Moscow's "legitimate" security concerns and Kyiv's "provocations".

On the other hand, despite their ideological affinities with the Putin regime, we see weaker ties to the Kremlin in parties such as VOX in Spain, Fratelli d'Italia (Brothers of Italy, FdI) in Italy, and Chega in Portugal. These parties may share Putin's support for "traditional" family values, opposition to LGBTQ rights and what they call leftist "gender ideology", but they stop well short of backing the Kremlin's foreign policy. Radical Right populists in Romania have also toned down their pro-Kremlin rhetoric and have condemned the Russian invasion in an effort to prevent further declines in support among voters, many of whom remember Moscow's backing of the brutal Ceaușescu regime. The Estonia Conservative People's Party (EKRE), by contrast, has toned down its anti-Russian rhetoric and adopted a more moderate tone towards Russia since the start of the war in an attempt to attract Russian-speaking voters. Parties such as the Sweden Democrats have become increasingly critical of Russia in recent years, primarily as a reaction to the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, advocating sanctions against Putin's regime. These examples illustrate the wide variety of reactions and positions towards the war, illustrating the diversity of Radical Right actors across Europe.

The NATO divide

To some extent, right-wing populists' positions vis-à-vis Russia overlap with their attitudes towards transatlantic relations in general and NATO in particular. As the country chapters in this report suggest, populist Radical Right parties diverge in their positions on security and defence policy. Such variance reflects, for the most part, the regional divide in Europe that reflects the old Cold War blocs, the specificity of Nordic Europe, and the different historical experiences and legacies of the communist regimes of Eastern Europe. In Western Europe, the vision of world order promoted by many Far Right populists stresses multipolarity and strategic autonomy against a model of transatlantic relations that favours the United States through its dominant role in NATO. The RN and Reconquête! in France, the FPÖ, and the Dutch FvD are committed to fundamentally revising transatlantic relations. Both Le Pen and Zemmour have consistently affirmed they would again withdraw France from NATO's integrated military command structure, as was the case between 1966 and 2009. Other parties, such as the



Vlaams Belang (VB) in Belgium, as well as Radical Right actors in Croatia, Romania, and Slovakia, are flexible and pragmatic, essentially deemphasizing foreign policy issues and advocating a neutral approach.

In Northern Europe, the Radical Right has generally embraced a mainstream position concerning transatlantic relations. In Norway, Finland, and Denmark, a consensus has arisen across the political spectrum supporting NATO membership. Norway's Progress Party (Fremskrittspartiet, FrP) is a strong NATO advocate, and the party advocates close relations with the United States. Next door in Finland, the executive council of the Far Right, anti-immigration Finns Party recently voted in favour of the country's NATO application. In Denmark, the Danish People's Party (Danske Folkeparti, DF) has exhibited unwavering loyalty and support for the NATO alliance, which is a historical feature in Denmark. A notable departure from this broad Nordic support for NATO is the Sweden Democrats (SD). The latter has long opposed accession to NATO and has instead called for increased cooperation and coordination with its Nordic neighbours, including developing a joint Nordic defence force. Still, the SD is the exception that proves the Nordic rule: the Far Right in this region backs close ties with Western allies and sees the United States as a critical security guarantor.

In Eastern Europe, support for NATO among populist Radical Right parties varies. In Bulgaria, Revival and Ataka are vehemently opposed to NATO membership, while the BSP is acquiescent while expressing misgivings about the forward deployment of NATO forces on Bulgarian soil and support for military aid to Ukraine. The Czech SDP and Romania's Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR) openly trade in xenophobic, anti-American, anti-EU and anti-NATO rhetoric. While Hungary has played an active role in NATO since joining in 1999 (it contributes, for example, to NATO Air Policing in the Baltics), Orbán has slow-walked approval of Finland and Sweden's accession and is currently demanding the release of EU funds in return for a "yes" vote (Rettman, 2023). Turkey, which has expressed support for Ukraine's NATO membership, has used its veto to press for concessions from Finland and Sweden. Estonia's traditionally pro-NATO ERKE has declared the alliance to be in crisis. By contrast, Serbian and Slovak Radical Right parties blame the United States and NATO expansion for the conflict and argue for neutrality, a position also adopted by Austria's FPÖ. Serbia's position is particularly interesting, given memories of NATO bombings coupled with aspirations for Euro-Atlantic integration.

Diversity in positions is found not only across countries but also within them. This is well exemplified by the Italian case, whose Radical Right populists take a range of positions on NATO. During the Cold War, the Italian Far Right adopted a broadly Atlanticist posture, although this coexisted with an impulse to promote a “third way” between the United States and the Soviet Union. In recent years, Giorgia Meloni, the FdI leader and current prime minister of Italy, has shown more inclination towards Russia and Putin, but her party remains more pro-NATO compared, for instance, with Salvini’s Lega. Similarly, in Croatia, Radical Right parties have taken divergent positions on NATO. While most have stated clear support for NATO in the context of the war, HSP 1861 has declared that “Croatia is in greater danger from its NATO membership than from Russian aggression” (Hrvatsko Pravo, 2022).

Intra-party divisions over Russia

Finally, we find diverging views of Putin and Russia inside populist Radical Right parties themselves. Such divisions are seen, for instance, in the FrP in Norway, with individual party members, including former party leader Carl Hagen and parliamentarian Mika Niikko, taking more pro-Russian views. In Belgium, some VB members, such as Filip Dewinter, have expressed increasing support for the Kremlin over the past decade. Despite the war, voices within Spain’s VOX continue to speak in favour of Russia and Putin. In Denmark, prominent DF MPs Søren Espersen and Marie Krarup have been criticized for supporting the Kremlin, in Krarup’s case, even after the Russian invasion. In the SD, individual politicians have openly expressed pro-Russia views, although the party leadership has repeatedly criticized the Kremlin and condemned Moscow’s aggression. In Portugal, André Ventura’s condemnation of Russia has not been unanimous within his Chega party. Some influential members describe the Russian invasion as a legitimate reaction to “NATO encirclement of Russia” while accusing Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy of “siding with avowed Nazis”. The Bulgarian BSP has similarly been torn by divergent narratives on the causes of the war and the level of support Bulgaria should provide. The war in Ukraine has deepened divisions within the Romanian AUR, with one faction of the party strengthening its pro-Russian stance and another focusing on grassroots support and domestic issues.

Relations with the European Union

The populist Radical Right inclination towards Russia is also informed by the Euroscepticism of these parties who favour Putin’s Russia to symbolize their opposition to the centralized power of the “Brussels bubble”, grabbing power from



the national level of governance (Carlotti, 2023). Many right-wing populist parties have adopted what has been recently described as a common “alt-European policy programme”, which can be defined as “a conservative, xenophobic intergovernmental vision of a European ‘community of sovereign states’, ‘strong nations’ or ‘fatherlands’, that abhors the EU’s ‘centralised’ United States of Europe” (McMahon, 2022, p. 10). While many of those parties have recently toned down their Eurosceptic stances (Taggart, 2019; Brack, 2020), essentially for strategic reasons, they still are the primary opponents to further European integration within the broader European political landscape.

Many parties of the populist Radical Right have instrumentalized anti-EU rhetoric during the war, using anti-elite and sovereigntist arguments. Italian Far Right populists share criticism towards the EU and other supranational bodies, which are said to weaken national sovereignty. In line with its traditional Euroscepticism, Austria’s FPÖ accuses the EU of adopting a Russia policy without consulting voters and blames it for rising prices and the deterioration of living standards. *Juist Alternatief 2021* (JA21) in the Netherlands remains opposed to Ukrainian membership of the EU, in line with their general opposition to further EU enlargement. In Finland, we find similar criticism and suspicion of supranational institutions in the Finns Party, which remains committed to a Finnish exit from the EU (“Fixit”) as a long-term goal of the party. In Denmark, the DF and New Right (Nye Borgerlige, NB) vigorously campaign against “more EU”. Such anti-EU rhetoric is less pronounced in countries like Portugal, where EU membership has traditionally been very popular. While Chega echoes the broader Far Right sovereigntist line supporting a “Europe of nations”, the party does not seek a Portuguese exit from the EU or the Eurozone.

Euroscepticism is also a significant feature of the populist Radical Right in Eastern Europe, again with some variation across countries. Estonia’s EKRE is broadly Eurosceptic, with the European Green Deal and the “woke” agenda of “Brussels elites” as major bugbears for the party. In Hungary, Fidesz has long toyed with Eurosceptic rhetoric and played the sovereigntist card in domestic politics, something Orbán has honed to a fine art, blaming Hungary’s government for “selling out” to Western interests before 2010. In the current crisis, Budapest lays the blame for spiking energy prices and economic dislocation squarely at Brussels’ feet. In Bulgaria, Revival is strongly against EU membership, advocating a referendum on leaving the EU and NATO. The Czech SDP has adopted a similar hard-Eurosceptic position calling for “Czexit”. By contrast, in countries like

Lithuania and Serbia, the populist Radical Right does not target EU membership directly. Instead, it vilifies national political elites for prioritizing “foreign forces” over the will and interests of locals and lambasts Brussels for its “leftist” political and cultural dictates. The Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), Serbia’s ruling party, is an exception to the Eurosceptic rule in the European Far Right, advocating (at least in all its public pronouncements) a pro-Brussels position as the government seeks to progress the country’s EU accession.

Russia’s influence

Finally, we must emphasize that Russian influence in Europe’s Radical Right milieu may be observed at different levels and across several domains. Over recent years, the Kremlin has cultivated individual leaders in parties such as the Belgian VB and the German AfD while also nurturing links with organizations gravitating around VOX in Spain, which have received funding from Russian oligarchs close to the Kremlin. In addition, financial ties with Moscow have been suspected or established for parties such as Bulgaria’s Revival and the Italian Lega, which have allegedly received financing from the Kremlin, and the French RN, whose predecessor party secured a loan of €9 million from the Moscow-based First Czech Russian Bank in 2014.

The Finnish case also illustrates Russian influence on the fringes of the social media space through key influencers working in Finland and Russia who support the Russian cause (a phenomenon observed in Bulgaria as well). The ties between the European populist Radical Right and Russia are embedded in a broader media and social media infrastructure, which sees Russia using public diplomacy tools such as the international television channel Russia Today and social media activities to run disinformation campaigns to achieve global political influence, and interference in other countries’ domestic politics (Yablokov, 2022).

Lastly, the analysis in this report suggests that Russian influence may operate through individual ties across economic elites. For example, in Finland, Movement Now (Liike Nyt), which made its first significant breakthrough in the Finnish regional elections of 2021, has had connections to Russian oligarchs. In Italy, Forza Italia’s position on Russia is largely accounted for by the personal links and friendship that Silvio Berlusconi established with Vladimir Putin during the early 2000s. Similarly, the relationship between Salvini’s Lega and Russia is not only a matter of ideological proximity, but it has also materialized in a confidential cooperation agreement signed with Putin’s United Russia Party in 2017. In



Hungary, Orbán prides himself in negotiating a favourable agreement with Putin for gas supplies when other countries, such as Bulgaria and Poland, were cut off from Russian supplies in April 2022.

The heterogeneity of Radical Right responses to the war

After the outbreak of the war, Far Right populists came under fire for their pro-Russia positions and previous sympathy for Vladimir Putin. As a result, their responses and interpretations of the war varied. The cross-national analysis shows that radical right-wing populist parties have varied in the set of arguments and rhetoric that they have used since the beginning of the Russian invasion in an attempt to sustain their electoral appeal and maintain credibility with voters by evading accusations of sympathy for Russia. Some parties, on the contrary, have showcased their support for Russia and Putin, chasing fringe opinions and voters. Such variability is observed across countries, but also within them and, in some cases, within the populist Radical Right parties themselves, which suggests that they should not necessarily be considered unitary actors despite their assumed highly centralized organization and strong leadership.

This can explain how parties that previously supported Putin adapted quickly to the situation by condemning the invasion and welcoming refugees while simultaneously using peace and national economic interests as discursive reasons for opposing measures against Russia. By contrast, we see more than one Radical Right party strengthening its pro-Russian rhetoric, a phenomenon witnessed in several East European countries.

Condemnation of Putin and Russia's invasion of Ukraine

Following the invasion, many European populist parties rapidly shifted their positions on Putin's regime. At the outset, many, if not most, have condemned Russia's invasion calling for solidarity while toning down their Euroscepticism further, although we see variation in terms of responses to the war and, in particular, the degree of distancing from the Kremlin. As recently suggested by Carlotti (2023), in the Italian case, the "position toward Russia is used in a strategic and opportunistic way" (p. 15), with populist Radical Right parties changing their communication styles and their political positions.

In France, Le Pen sought to distance herself from the Russian president, condemning the invasion and accusing Putin of “breaking the equilibrium of peace in Europe” (Le Pen, 2022). Italy’s first female prime minister, Giorgia Meloni, used the war to gain credibility at the international level and to moderate her image with voters in the run-up to the 2022 elections. Meloni managed to distance the FdI from the positions of its electoral partners, Salvini and Berlusconi, who are known for their close ties with Putin. More importantly, she has thus far managed to maintain support for Ukraine without breaking the governing coalition. Portugal’s Chega, Germany’s AfD, the Danish People’s Party, the Dutch PVV and Belgium’s VB have similarly distanced themselves from Putin and openly criticized his actions.

To the East, Romania’s AUR, most Croatian Radical Right parties, as well as Lithuanian outfits, have taken critical positions toward Putin and the invasion. On the other hand, the Finns Party and the SD have not only condemned Putin’s aggression but have heartily cheered on NATO membership. Such reactions are not surprising given the phenomenon of “normalization” and the attempts by many Radical Right parties in Europe to appeal to an ever greater segment of voters.

However, other Radical Right parties across the continent have taken different stances. Unlike Le Pen, Zemmour took an ambiguous stance vis-à-vis Russia, calling for a new “treaty to put an end to the expansion of NATO” in response to “Russian demands” (Johannès, 2022). Berlusconi instead has tried to avoid the topic altogether. The Dutch FvD remained highly supportive of Putin compared to other Dutch Radical Right parties. Croatia’s HSP 1861 has similarly stood in opposition to other Radical Right parties, maintaining strong pro-Russian rhetoric. Slovakia’s Radical Right parties have claimed that Slovakia’s support for Ukraine in the current effort to face Russia’s aggression is against the national interest of and a threat to the well-being of its people. Yet others, such as Bulgaria’s Revival and the Czech SDP, have become even more avid defenders of Putin, maintaining or even growing their electoral support. Such varied responses illustrate that several parties have not opted for a strategy of normalization and mainstreaming but, quite the opposite, have chosen to differentiate themselves from the prevailing opinion, remaining true to the Radical Right’s anti-establishment traditions.

Toning down nativism

Given the 7.6 million people who have fled Ukraine to escape the war, right-wing populist parties across Europe have been challenged to adapt their traditionally



xenophobic and highly restrictive migration policies. In line with public sentiment, these populist parties have shied away from the typical demonization of asylum seekers. Instead, Ukrainians are framed as “real refugees” rather than “economic migrants”, as those fleeing the civil war in Syria are often branded. This distinction between asylum seekers crossing the Mediterranean and those fleeing war in Europe reflects a projection of local nativist ideology to the European level (Albertazzi et al., 2022; Farrell, 2022; Hadj-Abdou & Pettrachin, 2022). According to Albertazzi and colleagues (2022), this demonstrates populist parties’ fundamental skill in reading the room and quickly adapting according to the shifts in public opinion.

In line with the phenomenon of Far Right “normalization” (Mudde, 2022) and given an outpouring of public support for Ukraine across Europe, many populist Radical Right parties have been welcoming Ukrainian refugees. In so doing, they have deployed a rich repertoire of arguments in an attempt to justify the shift from established stances against migration and demonizing asylum seekers. Norway’s FrP has advocated a fast track for Ukrainian refugees and a pause to the resettlement of other migrants so that the former, whose Christian values the party argues, are likely to promote integration. The SD have been similarly welcoming, pointing to the religious and cultural similarities between Swedes and Ukrainians and the policy of favouring migrants from neighbouring countries. Spain’s VOX has supported taking refugees from and sending materiel to Ukraine while lambasting the slow EU response and pointing to the ruling Socialist Workers’ Party’s (PSOE) historical ties to Moscow. Meloni has been particularly supportive of Ukrainian refugees, and even Le Pen has managed to keep a lid on her reflexive demonization of asylum seekers. The Far Right in Lithuania has been very vocal about its support for Ukrainian refugees, volunteering to organize the settlement process and distinguishing between the “real” Ukrainian refugees and other “illegal” economic migrants, a distinction also emphasized by Salvini and the PVV and JA21 in the Netherlands.

While many parties have selectively adjourned their nativism and welfare chauvinism in the face of Ukrainian refugee arrivals, others have cautioned against generous support and pointed to potential threats. Zemmour sparked controversy in France when he dubbed support for those fleeing the conflict as an “emotional response” to the war. Chega has argued that the large influx of Ukrainians might allow “criminals to blend with people who are actually running from a war” (Assembleia da República, 2022b). The Czech SPD has pointed to the substantial financial support for Ukrainian refugees against the backdrop of a worsening

macroeconomic situation, and the destabilizing effect refugees would have on the Czech social, healthcare, and education systems, job market and public safety. Bulgaria's Revival has argued that the well-being of Bulgarians is being put at risk in order to help Ukrainians who drive expensive cars and enjoy a much higher standard of living than many Bulgarians. Trying to appeal to both the Estonian and Russian-speaking audiences, EKRE has used a double-faced strategy. When communicating with their Russian-speaking audience, they play on their anti-Ukrainian sentiment, claiming that Ukrainian refugees are jeopardizing local Russians' jobs. Such sceptical views are likely to become more popular with the growing number of Ukrainian refugees and decreasing prospects for an end to the war.

Support for sanctions

Support for sanctions against Russia correlates with each party's position on the war and attitudes towards Putin. Consequently, we observe variation in positions ranging from decisive support for sanctions and military aid to strong opposition to sanctions and arguments about the high domestic cost and ultimate inefficiency of sanctions. However, we notice that populist Radical Right parties are more hesitant to support sanctions than to condemn the invasion.

Several populist Radical Right parties, mainly in Western Europe, have expressed strong support for sanctions against Russia. Ventura from Portugal's Chega called for harsher sanctions and demanded their imposition on the whole economy rather than only on individuals. Jussi Halla-aho from the Finns Party argued that "intervention of the West will be inevitable", and thus it should take action against Russia sooner rather than later. Meloni's FdI firmly supported government initiatives in favour of Ukraine, including sanctions and the supply of weapons, even when FdI was in opposition. Although they expressed scepticism about these measures, Salvini and Berlusconi voted in favour of sanctions and the sending of weapons as part of both the Draghi and Meloni governments. The Croatian Pure Party of Rights (HČSP) has expressed frustrations at the EU for "responding to Russia's aggression only with economic sanctions and not with more drastic and urgently required measures" (Hrvatske Čiste Stranke Prava, n.d.), while the NB in Denmark lambasts Brussels for allowing Russia to "develop into a dictatorship with expansionist ambitions that threatens the Baltic and the Arctic region, and ultimately Denmark".

Hesitancy and scepticism, if not outright criticism, towards the sanctions against Russia, seem to be the more common response by populist Radical Right parties.



Belgium's VB is sceptical of the "poorly thought out" and harsh sanctions against Russia. Le Pen also criticized some of the sanctions imposed on Russia because such measures would primarily hurt French businesses and workers. The Austrian FPÖ has directed its ire not at Moscow but at the EU's sanctions against Russia, claiming these have harmed the Austrian population and are the cause of high inflation and possible shortages in energy and consumer goods. Orbán has similarly put the blame for all economic difficulties on the EU, claiming that the sanctions against Russia are responsible for high inflation, volatile markets, and weak output. The Czech SPD rejected the economic sanctions imposed on Russia by the EU, the United States, and other countries as "ineffective" and criticized the military supplies for Ukraine as potentially escalating the conflict and threatening Czech security. SMER and the Slovak Radical Right have rejected the sanctions and linked them to higher energy prices, as shown, for example, by Republika's billboard campaign slogan, "We will cancel the sanctions and make energy cheaper". Serbia has resisted pressures to impose sanctions, although it voted for the UN resolution that demanded the end of the Russian offensive in Ukraine on March 2, 2022. Turkey similarly did not join the sanctions against Russia, claiming that would allow it to act as a mediator and peace broker. Bulgaria's BSP and Revival have both vehemently opposed sanctions against Russia, even if the BSP was part of the governing coalition that recommended and pushed through parliament the approval of sanctions and humanitarian aid to Ukraine.

Turning to domestic socioeconomic issues

The widespread economic insecurity caused by supply chain issues will likely increase dissatisfaction with national governments and motivate citizens to look for an alternative. In addition, the worrying increases in inflation, affecting food and energy costs, have caused parts of society to become more susceptible to radical political solutions. This context has been conducive for populist parties in the past (for example, the 2008 financial crisis, the war in Syria and the 2015 refugee crisis) as they have used these sources of frustration to gain popular support (Docquier & Morelli, 2022). Similarly, in the current situation, many populist Radical Right parties have exploited domestic socioeconomic issues, linking them to the war and the sanctions and emphasizing the cost of the war to domestic constituencies. On the other hand, parties that have explicitly condemned Putin still do not miss the opportunity to highlight domestic concerns and prioritize the national interest. Moreover, as the war drags on, popular support and enthusiasm give way to domestic discontent, making voters more susceptible to populist Far Right rhetoric.

In Germany, AfD's co-chair, Alice Weidel, claimed that the "main loser" of the conflict was "neither Russia nor Ukraine but Germany", which she called the victim of an "economic war", urging the government to reinstate the supply of Russian natural gas to safeguard Germany's economy. In Portugal, Ventura questioned Portuguese financial support to Ukraine, saying the money should be spent on pensioners and demanded government intervention to control gas prices. The FrP in Norway has been largely silent in debates regarding handling the war in terms of international politics but has taken the opportunity to exploit war-related issues such as energy prices, fossil fuel production and farming. The DF, the NB and the Denmark Democrats have also stirred fears of economic insecurity, arguing the situation is much worse than the 2008 financial crisis. In debates about the war, the Dutch PVV has repeatedly emphasized protecting people's material interests. The Czech SDP has used overarching socioeconomic framing of the war combined with nativism and welfare chauvinism. Romania's AUR has similarly focused more on economic protectionism, particularly regarding exploding energy prices. The Croatian populist Radical Right has also placed a disproportionately higher emphasis on domestic politics than on the developments in Ukraine. Bulgaria's BSP and Revival have emphasized the domestic cost of the war and the sanctions next to pro-Russian rhetoric. Le Pen, in turn, has focused her campaign on socioeconomic issues in an attempt to steer attention away from her Russian links (Ivaldi, 2022). Le Pen's social populist agenda resonated with the French population's many economic fears, particularly amongst the lower social strata most severely hit by the economic repercussions of the war, and faced with the rising cost of living, especially in rural areas (Perrineau, 2022).

By shifting the debate to domestic socioeconomic issues, populist Radical Right parties have managed to maintain their anti-elite and anti-establishment stances, appealing to frustrated voters while also avoiding uncomfortable questions about past relations with the Kremlin. Thus, the war has proved another fruitful arena for forwarding populist Far Right arguments and playing on voters' fears and frustrations.

The return of national sovereignty

The attack on Ukrainian sovereignty has legitimized populist parties' long-standing nationalist rhetoric. The invasion of Ukraine has put the defence of the nation-state back at the top of the political agenda (Farrell, 2022). Right-wing populist parties have long prioritized nationalism and sovereignty. Claims to preserve or regain national sovereignty are central to radical right-wing populism in Europe (Basile & Mazzoleni, 2020; Heinisch et al., 2020). The idea of "taking back



control” is at the core of the concept of sovereignty, which is often associated with populist rhetoric in which claims to regain control are made on behalf of the community of the “people” against the political establishment and supranational institutions (Mazzoleni & Ivaldi, 2022).

The invasion of Ukraine has returned the idea of defending the nation-state to political discourse in more than one country (Fiott, 2022). The FPÖ has been particularly vocal about the need for Austria to maintain neutrality, as this would safeguard the country’s wealth and guarantee security in the current crisis and in an uncertain world – an argument also forwarded by the Finns Party and the Danish People’s Party. The Bulgarian and Slovak Far Right have also called for neutrality and defined the war as a conflict between Russia and the US, in which small countries have nothing to gain. On the other hand, Chega has used the opportunity to display militarism, repeatedly calling for increased spending on armed forces, equating the “love for country” of the Portuguese people with the “positive nationalism leading Ukrainians to defend themselves fearlessly from Russian aggression” (Assembleia da República, 2022b).

. The Croatian Far Right has taken this rhetoric a step further, equating the war in Ukraine to the Homeland war of the 1990s and seeking to draw a tentative linkage between the ongoing developments in Ukraine and the identity and memory politics of the Homeland War. Such a parallel is then used to call for the need to defend the nation and criticize the government for ceding sovereignty to supranational bodies.

Mainstream party counter strategies

The war in Ukraine has affected not only populist Radical Right parties but the way mainstream parties relate to and react to the Radical Right. On the one hand, the war has provided the opportunity to criticize the Radical Right for its veneration of Putin and the ever-stronger connections with Russia, including Russian financing for several Radical Right parties across Europe. In the presidential run-off, Macron accused Le Pen of being “dependent on Russian power”, telling her: “You cannot properly defend the interests of France on this subject because your interests are linked to people close to Russian power [...]. When you speak to Russia, you are speaking to your banker” (Débat présidentiel, 2022).

In Sweden, the SD’s links to Russia became an important issue in the debate on foreign and security policy during the 2022 electoral campaign. In Romania,

mainstream parties adopted a strategy of isolation towards AUR, which pushed the party to tone down its rhetoric and present itself as a mainstream conservative party. In Latvia, where about one-quarter of voters are Russian speakers, mainstream parties have long drawn a “red line” around parties representing the Russian minority, arguing that they pose a threat to Latvia’s Western-oriented political trajectory. The war reinforced this trend. At the EU level, the European People’s Party finally expelled Fidesz, a move long called for by numerous MPs. Orbán’s position on the war has helped illustrate the growing ideological schism between Fidesz and other EPP members.

Some reactions give room for pause and caution. For example, in Lithuania, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has seen Latvia’s political centre move to the right and the mainstreaming of many of the core policy positions of the dominant National Alliance (NA), such as squeezing the Russian language from the public sphere, dismantling the publicly-funded Russian-language school system, and demolishing Soviet-era monuments. This example illustrates the threat of becoming what one fights against and the danger that any war poses in radicalizing and militarizing the political discourse.

The factors accounting for different populist Radical Right responses to the war

Both external and internal factors account for the different responses by populist Radical Right parties to the Ukraine war.

External factors

Externally, we first find country-specific factors related to different histories and foreign policy traditions, as well as economic factors, among which each particular country’s level of dependence on Russia’s oil and gas. Before the war, over half of the EU’s gas supplies came from Russia. One of the significant results of the war has been the diversification of gas imports in the EU, with Russia accounting for just 12.9% as of September 2022, a decrease from 51.3% in January 2019 (General Secretariat, 2023). Austria, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Finland, Hungary and Serbia were all highly dependent on Russian gas before the war. Hungary has preserved such dependence, and Orbán prides himself in negotiating relatively cheap Russian oil and gas before and after the war with Putin. Austria, which continues to depend greatly on Russian energy supplies, especially natural gas,



views Moscow as an important economic partner. Despite diversification efforts in the past year, Bulgaria still heavily depends on Russian gas supplies, receives a lot of Russian tourists, and many Russian firms operate there. There is also a strong cultural affinity—both are Orthodox countries and speak Slavic languages—with strong historical ties given Russia’s liberation of Bulgaria from Ottoman rule in the late nineteenth century.

In the Baltic countries such as Estonia and Lithuania, the party politics of Russia has traditionally been strongly influenced by the history of annexation by the Soviet Union. In Norway, the fact that Russia is a neighbouring country has complicated the political disapproval of all things Russian.

In Italy, one of the main reasons why right-wing populists support Putin’s Russia is a matter of economic self-interest and the fact that Italy imports large quantities of Russian oil. Back in 2005, Berlusconi’s right-wing populist government had prepared, for instance, an agreement that would have allowed the Russian company Gazprom to resell Russian gas directly to Italian consumers. In the Northern part of the country, which has traditionally been the electoral stronghold of the Lega, Salvini’s admiration for Putin is also linked with commercial interests, especially those of industrial firms in the region with significant Russian business. In Hungary, the ties with Russia are also explained by the relatively cheap Russian oil and gas and the multi-billion-euro extension of the Paks nuclear power station, which Orbán traded with Putin, which he has been able to use both economically and politically.

In the Netherlands, we find a country-specific feature: the downing of Malaysia Airlines flight MH17 over eastern Ukraine, almost certainly shot down by Russian-controlled forces in the area, killing over 190 Dutch citizens. This dramatic event prompted the government to call for tough sanctions against Russia, making it more difficult for Dutch populists to exhibit public support for Putin.

Together with country-level contextual factors, we also see some factors relating to party system dynamics and party competition in our countries of interest, most notably concerning the strategy of “normalization” that some populist Radical Right parties have pursued over time to become more acceptable to voters, and to broaden their electoral appeal. The literature on the Far Right has emphasized the importance of agency and the ability of Far Right parties to build a “reputational shield” to fend off accusations of racism and extremism (de Lange & Art, 2011; Art, 2011). Many of these parties in Western Europe have used their agency and

changed their platforms, personnel, and appearance to distance themselves from the legacy of Far Right extremist ideology and to be tolerated by a larger share of the public (Akkerman et al., 2016; Bjånesøy, 2021). On the other hand, new Far Right actors may take a more radical course to differentiate themselves from their “moderating” counterparts. This trend has been observed in Bulgaria, Croatia, Latvia, and Slovakia.

We can discern a relationship between such strategies of normalization and the populist Radical Right’s response to the war in Ukraine across a number of the countries studied in this report. Italy is the most obvious example, where FdI has a much broader appeal than its coalition partner, Lega. In the Netherlands, for instance, this is reflected in the competition between the PVV and the FvD, with the former strategically situating itself closer to the mainstream, while the latter would continue on a more radical anti-system course, as revealed in its recent efforts to create an alternative social space for its supporters.

We see a similar split of the populist Radical Right in the French case, whereby Le Pen has striven to detoxify her party to take it into the political mainstream in recent years. In contrast, Zemmour has adopted a hardline strategy, endorsing themes and rhetoric of the Extreme Right while continuing to implicitly lend support to Russia and Putin even after the outbreak of the war. In Portugal, Chega and André Ventura’s discourses on Ukraine were deployed instrumentally, allowing Chega to continue to trail a path towards normalization as a regular player in the political system.

Since shortly before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Finland has seen a surge of new marginal Far Right parties advocating a Finnish exit from the European Union and going against Finland joining NATO, which contrasted with the more moderate positions taken by the more established Finns Party. In Croatia, we have seen HSP 1861 take a radically different stance on Putin, sanctions, and the war than other Radical Right parties closer to the mainstream. Similarly, in Latvia, S! maintained a pro-Russian stance to differentiate itself from the SSD. In Bulgaria, the two pro-Russian parties, BSP and Revival, have adopted different strategies, with the former maintaining a moderate position, despite opposing sanctions, whereas the latter radicalizing its pro-Russian rhetoric even more and managing to steal votes from the BSP.

Finally, different strategic responses to the Ukraine war may reflect the different



geometry of pan-European alliances of populist Radical Right parties in the European Parliament, as some of these parties may need to seek support from other like-minded parties across the continent. Populist Radical Right parties currently distribute themselves across the Identity and Democracy (ID) and European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) groups in the European Parliament, which show different policy orientations and strategic positioning in the broader European political landscape. The ECR group traditionally shows moderate Euroscepticism compared with the more radical stances in the ID cluster of populist Radical Right parties around Marine Le Pen and Matteo Salvini. The positions on Russia by parties such as the Italian FdI and the SD may thus reflect their membership in the ECR group.

In the Swedish case, support for the Russian regime among some of the other Radical Right parties has been seen as one reason why the Sweden Democrats chose not to join the ID party group together with the RN and Lega in the European Parliament (McDonnell & Werner, 2019). Similarly, the DF has navigated the war by trying to distance itself from its allies in the ID group and the potentially damaging effect of pro-Putin stances of parties such as the RN and Lega on the DF in domestic politics. The ECR group also has members from Bulgarian, Croatian, Czech, Latvian, Romanian and Slovak parties, where we notice a mix of Far Right to conservative parties. Although the ECR appears more moderate than the ID group, some MEPs have demonstrated extremist behaviour, such as Bulgarian MEP from IMRO, Angel Dzambaski, have been accused more than once of scandalous remarks and behaviour, including giving a Nazi salute in a session of the EU Parliament.

In the ID group, Salvini's connections to Marine Le Pen reflect a distinct network of populist Radical Right shared hostility to the EU and ties to Putin's regime inside the European Parliament, including other relevant radical right-wing populist parties such as the FPÖ in Austria, the German AfD, the Flemish VB, the Estonian EKRE, and the SPD in the Czech Republic. Moreover, the ID cluster of parties has established links with parties currently outside the formal EP group, such as Viktor Orbán's Fidesz in Hungary. Such transnational cooperation was revealed in the two-day summit organized by VOX in Madrid in January 2022, which was attended by Orbán, Mateusz Morawiecki from Poland's PiS, and Le Pen, together with representatives of the populist Radical Right from Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Estonia, Lithuania, Romania and the Netherlands.

Internal factors

Internally, the different responses to the war by the Far Right populist parties in Europe may be accounted for by those parties' ideology and policy positions across the socioeconomic and cultural dimensions of competition.

Our findings suggest a possible line of division between the more welfare chauvinist of those parties, which have essentially focused on the domestic and socioeconomic impact of the war, emphasizing the interests of “their” people, and those which, on the other hand, have adopted a broader cultural and civilizational approach in their performance and interpretation of the current Ukraine crisis. Such divides may also overlap with the primary socioeconomic orientation of those parties. The literature has found heterogeneity in the socioeconomic policies of populist Radical Right parties across countries and over time (Michel, 2020). While some parties have embraced neoliberalism, others have turned to neo-Keynesian policies, emphasizing social protection and redistribution (Otjes et al., 2018).

In the European context, the current inflation crisis is making socioeconomic issues much more salient, and this may provide incentives for Far Right parties to change and adjust their socioeconomic salience and positions concerning such matters, not only to respond to growing voter demand for redistribution but also to shift attention from their pro-Russian positions to their economic demands in favour of “the people”.

Such a response was visible across several populist Radical Right parties in Europe. In Norway, the energy crisis has opened a window of opportunity for the FrP to reclaim its populist roots, try and mobilize on petro-friendly politics, and campaign against the high prices and VAT on fossil fuels, electricity, and food. In the Netherlands, the PVV has emphasized the cost of the war for the Dutch people, linking high inflation and gas prices to sanctions on Russia, consistent with its welfare chauvinist economic positions. In Portugal, Chega quickly moved from emphasizing the need to support the Ukrainian people to claiming that the war money should be spent on Portuguese pensioners. Marine Le Pen in France well illustrated a welfare chauvinist orientation. Her 2022 campaign used social populist arguments combined with a generous redistributive package, resonating with the French's many economic fears. Radical Right parties in the Czech Republic, Romania, Slovakia, and Serbia have similarly honed in on the consequences of the war for domestic constituencies and the worsening economic conditions.



In contrast, other populist radical parties have adopted a more cultural approach, basing their support to Russia on civilizational arguments and somewhat ignoring the socioeconomic anxieties of the war. This is illustrated by the Bulgarian Revival and the Dutch FvD, which have continued emphasizing the cultural dimension and the larger global narrative to justify their support of Putin. In France, Zemmour's focus on immigration and Islam, and his market liberal economic agenda, may have come at odds with the interests and increasingly pro-redistribution preferences of middle-class and working-class voters in 2022.

Voters in the Ukraine war

Turning to the “demand” side of populism, the country chapters have looked at how the invasion may have affected the public perception of radical right-wing populist parties and leaders, the impact the war may have had on the popularity or electoral support for those parties, and how that support fits with the public opinion at large on the war. The association with Russia was used to delegitimize the democratic viability of these Far Right populist parties, but only for a relatively short while, as none of the parties achieved worse results in the elections which took place in 2022. Instead of “ending populism”, the war and the resulting populist discourse have coincided with populist electoral successes in many countries.

We have observed this all year with victories for populists in Bulgaria, Hungary, Serbia, Sweden, France, and Italy (Lika, 2022). In Austria, public opinion support for Ukraine among Austrians has remained tenuous and lower than elsewhere in the EU, and the FPÖ is currently topping voting intention polls at about 28%. In Belgium, domestic issues have taken the forefront of the political agenda, and the war does not seem to have harmed the VB, which, according to the latest opinion poll, would be the largest Flemish party gaining up to 25.5% of the popular vote. We also see an increase in support for the Czech SDP since the war, which is correlated with decreasing public support for Ukraine and growing discontent with the Czech government's handling of the war. In Hungary, the Russian invasion of Ukraine also played a role in reinforcing Fidesz's dominant political position in the electoral campaign. Fidesz's strategy successfully portrayed the united democratic opposition as a pro-Ukraine camp that would drag Hungary into war with Russia. We see something similar, albeit of a much smaller magnitude, in Serbia, where many commentators have argued that the invasion may have helped populist Radical Right parties to surpass the 3% threshold, whereas none of those parties

had entered government in 2020. In Bulgaria, Revival doubled its support in the early elections of 2022 compared to the early elections in 2021.

Elsewhere in Europe, we find no clear evidence that the war in Ukraine may have significantly depressed support for radical right-wing populism. In Slovakia, the outbreak of the war did not bring any substantial shifts in popular support for the populist Radical Right. In Portugal, Chega's strategy was moderately successful, showing minor gains in public opinion polls. In Germany, the AfD has not benefited from the dramatic developments as much as one could have assumed. There has been only a four percentage points increase in support for the party in polls, and the AfD so far remains below its peak of 17–18% public support recorded in 2018. In Bulgaria, by default, at least a third of Bulgarians are very pro-Russian, and the increase in support for Revival can be explained by shifting votes from the other pro-Russian party, the BSP. Support for Ukraine and Ukrainian refugees was strong initially, but it steadily declined by November 2022. Currently, most voters do not take a side in the war and do not defend Ukraine or Russia. Only in Lithuania do we see a potentially adverse effect of the war on right-wing populist politics, first and foremost reflecting a very high level of support for Ukraine and traditionally deep anti-Russian sentiments in the mass public.

Other populists and the war

While the focus of the report was primarily on right-wing populism, national experts were also invited to look at other populist parties in their country, where deemed relevant. This was the case in countries such as Italy and France, where populists of both the Left and Right have competed with one another in recent elections, as well as countries such as Bulgaria and Slovakia, where mainstream parties traditionally have strong pro-Russian views and positions.

A brief overview of the positions and strategies of non-Radical Right populist parties suggests that parties such as the French France Insoumise (LFI) and the Italian Movimento Cinque Stelle (M5S) have taken pro-Russian stances in the past, essentially based on anti-Americanism, pacifism, and the opposition to NATO. But, like with the populist Radical Right, we see some differences in those parties' responses to the Ukraine war.

In Portugal, parties on the Left, especially the Portuguese Communist Party (PCP), have traditionally used sovereigntist anti-EU and anti-NATO rhetoric. The



PCP has adopted an ambiguous position regarding the invasion of Ukraine, calling for “a stop to escalating political, economic, and military confrontation by NATO, the USA, and the EU towards Russia, and relying on its contribution towards a negotiated political, peaceful, resolution” (Assembleia da República, 2022a, p. 10). In Germany, The Left (die Linke), which is considered a populist party, is a self-professed pacifist party, and it has long campaigned for the dissolution of NATO, frequently taken a pro-Russian stance and is highly suspicious of the United States, the EU, and Germany’s security apparatus. However, the party has unambiguously condemned Russia’s attack as a violation of international law, portraying Ukraine as the victim of a power struggle between the West and Russia and calling for Western countries to spearhead de-escalation.

In France, Jean-Luc Mélenchon’s LFI has taken pro-Russian stances predicated on Eurosceptic and anti-NATO views and based on the concept of a “non-aligned” France. LFI’s sympathy for Russia essentially reflects the traditional Radical Left’s hostility toward the United States, neoliberalism and American imperialism, and the party has advocated that France should leave NATO’s integrated military command. Nevertheless, Mélenchon continued to show an ambiguous stance during the few weeks before the invasion, calling for “de-escalation” while simultaneously pointing to the threat of NATO moving closer to Russia’s borders. However, he dramatically shifted his position immediately after the beginning of the war to avoid too severe damage to his party’s credibility in the context of the April 2022 presidential election. In the first round, Mélenchon came in third place with 22% of the vote.

In Italy, the positions of the M5S have changed over time, with the party moving towards a more pro-Russian position and showing ambiguous stances after the invasion. Like other populist parties, Russia exemplifies a robust opposition to the United States and the EU, both described by the M5S as harmful to Italy’s national interests. While Beppe Grillo, the founder of the M5S, made no public statement after the February 2022 invasion, Giuseppe Conte, leader of the party, condemned it. As part of the Draghi government, the M5S also voted in favour of sanctions and sending weapons to Ukraine, however, expressing doubts about the efficacy and effect on Italy. In the summer of 2022, a split occurred in the party after an internal campaign to push for an end to Italian weapons supplies to Ukraine, which was supported by Conte, who opposed Luigi Di Maio, the more Atlanticist minister of foreign affairs at the time, who left the party. Such internal struggle over the war may have weakened the M5S in the September 2022 elections, where its vote share declined from 32.7 to 15.4% compared with 2018.

Discussion and perspectives

A critical takeaway from this report is the diversity of populist politics across regions, countries and parties. Even limiting our inquiry to the populist Radical Right, we have seen a great diversity of positions and reactions. If our expectations at the outset were to find patterns that distinguish the East from the West, we have found significant variance within regions and countries. Such heterogeneity has already been observed in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. In their recent analysis of the fourth wave of Far Right parties in Europe, Wondreys and Mudde (2022) emphasize substantial internal heterogeneity, showing different responses to current socioeconomic and cultural issues and different effects of such issues on the electoral support for those parties.

Our findings reinforce the thesis that populism should by no means be considered a uniform phenomenon as it can take many different forms across contexts and actors while also showing change over time. Previous research has emphasized such diversity of contemporary populism (Ivaldi et al., 2017). In this respect, Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2016) argue that

populism can take very different shapes, which are contingent on the ways in which the core concepts of populism appear to be related with other concepts, forming interpretative frames that might be more or less appealing to different societies. (p. 9)

With regards to the Far Right, more specifically, Pirro (2022) similarly underlines the complexity of contemporary Far Right politics and argues that its current developments “reflect various forms of ideological and/or organisational osmosis” (p. 2).

Looking more broadly at anti-establishment politics in Europe, Pytlas (2022) notes that we need more studies to “assess the diversity of ‘thin’ anti-establishment supply and explore how these messages play into electoral strategies of different parties” (p. 2). Yet another approach views populism as a strategy to gain voter support (Weyland, 1999). Jones (2007), for example, views populist leaders as “political entrepreneurs” competing for voters. Such an approach portrays populists as strategic actors who adapt to changing environments. It further accounts for a dynamics-based component which helps understand the rise and evolution of populist parties and changes in their positions, behaviour and voter support,



further linking them to changes in the political and economic context (Zankina, 2016). Indeed, the case studies in this report confirm prevailing heterogeneity and varied strategic responses to a fast-changing political environment.

Honing in on strategy, many parties across the continent have attempted to move towards more moderate positions in terms of foreign policy in response to the initial overwhelming public support for Ukraine by citizens across Europe. In some cases, such a move was part of an already existing strategy of mainstreaming and normalization aiming to appeal to a broader segment of voters. In other cases, the move was triggered by the war and criticisms these parties faced regarding their attitudes and links with Russia. However, we witnessed that this change in position was also dynamic. As the war has dragged on and economic costs have started affecting more voters across the continent, some parties have returned to more extreme rhetoric, albeit with a greater focus on domestic issues than on foreign policy and geostrategic alignment.

Framing the war in terms of domestic socioeconomic issues was another strategy adopted by many of the parties examined. In fact, many parties muted their positions on the war and instead emphasized domestic concerns and the economic costs of sanctions, refugees, and military and financial support to Ukraine. Hence, the war was used as an arena to criticize supranational institutions or current governments for their neglect of domestic issues and ineffective policies, allowing populist Radical Right parties to forward their traditional populist Radical Right discourse that appeals to voter frustrations and emotions. Moreover, the populist politics of the war in Ukraine illustrates how populists may ‘perform’ a crisis. As Moffit (2015) argues,

populist actors actively participate in the “spectacularization of failure” that underlies crisis, allowing them to pit “the people” against a dangerous other, radically simplify the terms and terrain of political debate and advocate strong leadership and quick political action to stave off or solve the impending crisis. (p. 190)

This report illustrates the populist performance of the Ukrainian crisis and how Radical Right populists across Europe may have seized the opportunity of the war to instrumentalize war-related economic anxieties and propagate anti-elite and anti-establishment rhetoric.

Emphasizing domestic socioeconomic issues did not preclude populist Radical

Right parties from using the war as an opportunity to reinforce nationalist sentiment and national pride. Many parties drew parallels between the heroism and sacrifice of the Ukrainian people in defending their nation and nationalist attitudes and devotion to the nation at home. Many parties further portrayed the war as an existential threat to the nation, calling for a strong and immediate response, including strengthening military capability. At least in one case, this renewed nationalist discourse drew mainstream parties to the right and into support for nationalist policies.

The repertoire of strategies and responses to war has demonstrated the ability of the populist Radical Right to adapt quickly, adopt new issues and discourses and put them through a populist Radical Right prism. Changes that we observe in attitudes of radical right-wing populist parties towards Russia illustrate the malleability of populism and its “chameleon-like” characteristic (Taggart, 2000), suggesting a good deal of adaptability and those parties’ capacity to “read the room” and quickly adapt to shifts in public opinion (Albertazzi et al., 2022). Most Radical Right populist parties have adapted their discourse due to the war in Ukraine, with more remarkable successes than ever in Europe. The circumstances surrounding the Ukraine war serve to once again demonstrate the ability of populism to adapt quickly to different contexts and to make use of “calculated ambivalence” (Wodak, 2015). If anything, cases of some of the oldest European populist parties such as the Austrian FPÖ, the French RN and the Italian Lega attest not only to the ability of these parties to successfully navigate the recent period of the war in Ukraine but also demonstrate the political longevity and resilience of populism since the mid-1980s.

In policy terms, the malleability of these parties poses one of the main challenges to countering the success of such parties. One may argue that we can counter populism by addressing the issues that populists raise. However, populists are very quick to move on and radicalize another issue, making policy solutions short-lived in electoral terms. This is possible because populist Radical Right parties are, in essence, not programmatic and ideological but rather strategic in being quick to adapt to public sentiments, forward emotional appeals, and establish a direct link with voters (Jones, 2007; Weyland, 1999; Zankina, 2016). This aligns with the scholarship that more generally emphasizes how populist parties may deliberately blur their positions (Rovny, 2013) or adopt ambiguous stances to sustain or increase their electoral support (Jordan, 2022; Lefevre, 2023; Lorimer, 2021). Such use of strategic ambiguity by populists makes it even more difficult for parties in the mainstream to confront and counter their populist challengers programmatically.



Such challenges notwithstanding, the war and the various responses and strategies adopted by Radical Right parties have not led to a boost in their support. While there has been an increase in voter support for some populist Radical Right parties in the past year, it is not uniform. In many cases, the war has not led to a significant change in voter support for Radical Right parties. Despite the continued success of populist Radical Right parties across Europe, we must acknowledge that one of the main consequences of the war has been to unite Europeans in their support for Ukraine and strengthen overall support for democracy and democratic institutions. Except for countries such as Hungary, Serbia, and Turkey (none characterized as functioning democracies), the populist Far Right does not have a dominant position in politics.

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