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Article

European Populism and the War in Ukraine: Populist Narratives in Support of Vladimir Putin

Abstract: *European illiberal populists have not been very shy about their association with the Russian Federation's Vladimir Putin. Many of them have even hailed the Russian President as a stalwart example against the liberal democratic institutions that define the European Union. However, it's been almost two years since Russia invaded Ukraine and some of Putin's previous supporters in Europe have dialled back their stance on Putin. This article seeks to create an overview of populist narratives in European*

Union member states regarding Russia's war in Ukraine, in order to assess whether European illiberal discourses fluctuate according to external events. The analysis covers 8 European Union member states: France, Germany, Italy, Poland, Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria. The period of analysis covers the full year since the Russian invasion in Ukraine in February 2022, up until February 2023, and is contrasted to statements and

positions held prior to February 2022. The analysis will be based on public statements made by key populist actors and parties from the 8 member states. The working hypothesis is that the populists' support and admiration for Vladimir Putin varies across the 8 countries. In some, support has been diluted after the start of the invasion due to pre-existing anti-communist sentiment, while in others it hasn't seen a significant drop.

Keywords: *European Union; Populism; Russia; Vladimir Putin; Ukraine*

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1. Introduction

In the ever-evolving landscape of European politics, the rise of populism has been a defining feature, shaping narratives, influencing policies, and redefining alliances. Central to this discourse has been the figure of Vladimir Putin, the Russian President, who, prior to the events of February 2022, stood as a symbol of resistance against the liberal democratic institutions that characterize the European Union. For many European illiberal populists, Putin represented a beacon of hope, a stalwart defender of European Christian values, and an embod-

iment of strong leadership. However, the dynamics shifted post the Russian invasion of Ukraine, leading to a re-evaluation of stances.

This article delves deep into the intricate relationship between European populism and the war in Ukraine, focusing on the populist narratives that either support or oppose Putin's actions. Drawing from a comprehensive analysis spanning eight European Union member states, including France, Germany, Italy, and others, the study contrasts the positions held prior to February 2022 with the evolving stances post the invasion. The objective is to discern whether European illiberal discourses are malleable, changing in response to external events, or if they remain steadfast in their convictions.

By examining the public statements made by key populist actors and parties, the research seeks to uncover the underlying motivations, ideological leanings, and political strategies that drive the narratives. The overarching hypothesis suggests populist parties are less likely to support Putin's war in Ukraine if they are in power, which results in more ideological mobility on controversial topics. As the European political landscape grapples with the repercussions of the war in Ukraine, understanding these populist narratives becomes crucial, offering insights into the future trajectory of European politics and its relationship with Russia. The goal of this research is to understand the dynamic nature of populist ideologies and the external factors that influence support for non-democratic actions in the face of regional and global events.

2. Background

Prior to the events of February 2022, Vladimir Putin's leadership style and political ideology had consistently served as a beacon for populist party leaders within the European Union. His anti-EU stance, which emphasizes national sovereignty, resonated with many populist actors who shared similar sentiments. Furthermore, Putin's financial backing of various populist entities within the EU further solidified his influence and reach. This support was not merely ideological; it was strategic, especially in the context of NATO's eastward expansion. The expansion was seen by many as a direct challenge to Russia's sphere of influence, and populist parties, in turn, capitalized on this narrative.

Populist narratives that championed Putin's leadership were prevalent before February 2022. He was often portrayed as a stalwart defender of European Christian values, standing against the perceived moral decay of the West (Searle, 2022; Tsygankov, 2016). Other populist leaders frequently depicted Putin as a robust and decisive leader, one who genuinely represented the interests of the people (Chryssogelos, 2014; March, 2023). This portrayal aligned with the broader themes of right-wing populism in Europe. As defined by Pirro in 2022, the far right encompasses „all those ultranationalist collective actors sharing a common exclusionary and authoritarian worldview – predominantly determined on sociocultural criteria – yet varying allegiances to democracy“. This definition is further complemented by Mudde's 2022 assertion that far-right populist parties view immigration as a dual threat: both to the economic welfare of European nations and to their cultural norms.

The essence of populism, as conceptualized by scholars, underscores the dichotomy between the masses and the elite. Carter, in 2018, delved into the intricacies of populism, but it was Mudde's definition that encapsulated its core: „an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite,' and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté*

générale (general will) of the people“ (Mudde, 2004). This perspective has been the bedrock of many right-wing populist parties in Europe. However, in recent years, there has been a noticeable shift. Many of these parties have distanced themselves from extremist views, undergoing significant reforms in their platforms, personnel, and public profiles. This strategic re-branding aims to present a more palatable image, one that appeals to a wider demographic, while still retaining the core tenets of their populist ideology. Many right-wing populist parties in Europe have backed down from previously held extremist views, and through reforming their platform, personnel and public profiles sought to create a public image that is more appealing to a broader audience (Akkerman, *et al.* 2016; Bjanesoy, 2021).

3. Methodology

The methodology of this study is anchored in a multifaceted approach that combines discourse analysis of statements and rhetoric from party leaders and key figureheads with a thorough examination of official party statements and policy proposals. This dual approach ensures a comprehensive understanding of both the overt and covert stances of the populist parties. Additionally, the research incorporates an analysis of secondary resources to provide contextual depth and historical perspective. The eight European Union member states selected for case studies have been chosen to encapsulate the diverse regional contexts within the EU. Through this methodological mix, the study aims to present a holistic view of the populist discourse in relation to Putin and the Russia-Ukraine conflict, ensuring findings that are both nuanced and reflective of the broader European sentiment.

4. Country-wise Analysis

4.1. France – *Rassemblement National*

Marine Le Pen, with her *Rassemblement National* (RN) is arguably the most relevant right-wing populist actor in France that has declared sympathies or support for Vladimir Putin's regime at some point in time, prior to the escalation of the conflict in Ukraine into full blown war. Although during the 2022 elections in France, Le Pen and RN have had significant competition from their right-wing rivals “*Reconquête!*”, led by Éric Zemmour. However, during their direct confrontation in the French presidential elections of 2022, during the first round, Le Pen was backed by 23.2% of the votes, while Zemmour only managed to bring 7% to his side (Ivaldi, 2023a). This is the main reason for why RN is the primary focus of analysis in this study.

Before 2014, Marine Le Pen, who may be seen as the *de facto* representative of the European extreme right, had not gained recognition in Russia, despite her praise of Russia's president as a genuine patriot and protector of European principles. However, following Marine Le Pen's expression of support for Russia's actions in Ukraine, in contrast to the condemnation by Angela Merkel and other centrist European leaders, Vladimir Putin extended an invitation to Le Pen, as well as other representatives from the National Front (FN) and other far-right European parties, to visit Moscow and observe the March referendum regarding Crimea's annexation to Russia. Subsequent to her endorsement of the legitimacy of the Crimean referendum, other political entities situated on the European far right, such as Austria's FPÖ and Britain's

UKIP, also expressed their support for the aforementioned vote. Russian media and bloggers, on the other hand, had a favourable response towards Le Pen's endorsement. One blogger even initiated a Twitter campaign titled „Merci Marine!“ (Polyakova, 2014). Following the European legislative elections held on May 25th, when Le Pen's political party garnered the highest proportion of votes in France, the President of Russia reciprocated by publicly commending the achievements of the right-wing leader.

Consistent with the actions of other radical right-wing populists in Europe (Albertazzi *et al.*, 2022), Le Pen tactically embraced a more inclusive position towards the acceptance of Ukrainian migrants in France, so showcasing her adeptness in promptly adjusting to changes in popular sentiment. According to Ivaldi, “despite her controversial links with the Kremlin, Le Pen managed to distance herself from Putin and evade accusations of sympathy for him during the campaign by focusing on the domestic economic impact of the war” (Ivaldi, 2023b).

This also indicated a brief departure from the FN/RN's customary practice of stigmatizing those seeking refuge. Le Pen also expressed disapproval towards some sanctions imposed on Russia, as she believed that these actions would have a disproportionate negative impact on French firms and employees. This stance allowed her to address the concerns of her primary support base, which consists of working-class individuals and the petty-bourgeoisie. In the meanwhile, the RN discarded campaign pamphlets with an image depicting Le Pen engaging in a handshake with Vladimir Putin, the leader of Russia, in the year 2017.

Significantly, Le Pen effectively diverted attention from her connections to Russia by prioritizing domestic socioeconomic problems in her campaign (Ivaldi, 2022). The candidate's campaign emphasized social-populist rhetoric, prioritizing equitable social welfare, economic nationalism, and the protection of marginalized individuals. Additionally, she effectively capitalized on war-related concerns like as oil and escalating costs. At the policy level, the presidential platform she presented included a comprehensive redistributive package consisting of a reduction in value-added tax (VAT), an increase in salaries and pensions, tax exemptions, and the provision of free transit for young people. Le Pen's social-populist programme garnered significant support from the French population, notably among those in the lowest socioeconomic classes who were disproportionately affected by the economic consequences of the war and confronted with the escalating cost of living, particularly in rural regions (Perrineau, 2022).

4.2. Germany – *Alternative für Deutschland*

The Alternative for Germany (AfD) is a right-wing populist party that emerged in Germany in 2013. Initially founded as a Eurosceptic party in response to the European debt crisis, the AfD has since shifted its focus to issues of national identity, immigration, and Islam. Over the years, the party has been observed to have a pro-Russian stance, which has been a topic of discussion and scrutiny in German politics and media. This affinity towards Russia can be attributed to several factors. Firstly, some of the AfD's leadership and members have expressed admiration for Putin's style of governance, viewing him as a strong leader who prioritizes national interests. Secondly, the AfD opposes NATO's eastward expansion and criticizes the EU's sanctions on Russia, aligning with Moscow's foreign policy objectives. There have also been reports of AfD members visiting Crimea and Eastern Ukraine, regions that are central to the conflict between Russia and Ukraine.

Germany is being compelled to reassess its predominantly unsuccessful approach towards party politics in the Eastern region. Similar to several aspects of political discourse, the AfD

is fundamentally advocating for an extreme iteration of what was previously seen as conventional. Nevertheless, the notion that Germany might entirely extricate itself from the conflict, disregard the Western sanctions regime, and resume the importation of inexpensive natural gas from Russia may seem implausible even to a significant number of the party's adherents. Hence, the leaders of the AfD strategically employ occasionally exaggerated comments with a somewhat comical undertone in order to capture the public's interest and intensify the enthusiasm of their very restricted support group. These actions are not intended to exert influence on public policy or redefine the image of the AfD.

Hence, it is probable that the AfD will persist in prioritizing the economic crisis, while emphasizing the significance of diplomacy and a peaceful, negotiated resolution. These notions are generally well-received and may even appeal to certain dissatisfied followers of the German left-wing party Die Linke, which currently faces internal disorganization. Nevertheless, there is a conspicuous absence of any indication of a change in either economic or budgetary policy. The AfD, presently under the leadership of an individual with a background in business consulting and ownership of a small construction firm, continues to uphold its stance on policies that advocate for reduced taxation, support for small businesses, and welfare chauvinism (Arzheimer, 2023).

4.3. Italy – Fratelli d'Italia

Italian populists have a tradition of strong ties to Russia. Biancalana cites Tarchi when describing Italy as a "Petri dish for the study of populism" (Biancalana, 2023; Tarchi, 2015). Naturally, these populist movements often look to Putin's regime for inspiration. As Biancalana argues, "populists see in Putin the figure of a powerful and authoritarian leader, able to decide and act quickly without the constraints of the checks and balances of liberal democracy" (Biancalana, 2023).

The *Fratelli d'Italia* (FdI) has come into being some 10 years ago, back in 2012, but it mostly mirrored the ideology of *Movimento Sociale Italiano*, the post-WW2 fascist party founded by Mussolini's supporters. Its official motto is a reflection of this: "Dio, Patria, Famiglia" (God, Country, Family). It gained relevance during the 2022 elections, when it managed to gather 26% of the popular vote, and was able to nominate the current Prime Minister, Giorgia Meloni.

One year before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Giorgia Meloni was offering high praise to Russia, in her 2021 biography, noting that Putin is a defender of European values and Christian identity (Meloni, 2021). Another example of her support for Vladimir Putin comes in the form of the congratulations she offered on the occasion of Putin's fourth re-election in 2018, when she wrote on her Facebook page that he represents the will of the Russian people (Meloni, 2018). This perspective follows along the general trend of populist actors across the EU that have a profound admiration for Putin's role as a strongman, contesting liberal socio-cultural diversity policies.

After the start of the invasion, she has pivoted fundamentally. The shift was felt during the 2022 electoral campaign, when she tried to steer her party, *Fratelli d'Italia*, away from the controversial positions of her coalition partners, *Lega* and *Forza Italia*. Since coming into power, Meloni has pledged to send arms to Ukraine.

4.4 Czech Republic – Svoboda a přímá demokracie

The Freedom and Democracy (SPD) party in the Czech Republic is a right-wing populist party, headed by Tomio Okamura, a Czech entrepreneur of Korean-Japanese descent. Just like any right-wing populist party, it is known for its anti-migrant and Islamophobic discourse, capitalizing on xenophobic and anti-refugee sentiment among the people during the Ukrainian refugee crisis. Economically, SPD is a mix of low-tax and welfare chauvinism, seeking to push immigrants and Roma people from accessing basic social services. It is also frequently advocating for a Czexit from the EU, while boasting for a more authoritarian perspective of Czech leadership (Havlik & Kluknavska, 2023).

When it comes to the relationship between the Czech Republic and Russia, Okamura is often leaning on the pro-Russian side. Just like the Czech President, Milos Zeman, Okamura hasn't been too shy about his inclination to foster closer relations with Moscow (Hutt, 2022). However, if Zeman pivoted on his position once the invasion of Ukraine started, Okamura and his party have been more consistent. According to research done by the European Values Center for Security Policy the SPD ranks highest in terms of promoting Russian influence among Czech politics and society (Janda *et al.*, 2021).

Currently, the Czech Republic is facing rallies to demand the government's resignation because of spiking energy prices and the support given to Ukraine. The building social pressure to withdraw support from Ukraine could lead the SPD to capitalize on the shifting sentiment. The populist radical right SPD party has effectively adjusted its rhetoric to the current circumstances, employing a somewhat veiled pro-Russian narrative. By capitalising on the economic difficulties seen by the Czech Republic, the party aims to attract dissatisfied voters. As the general public increasingly becomes inclined towards the Russian stance, there emerges an opportunity for the populist Radical Right, which is already seeing a minor surge in popularity according to surveys, to effectively engage and rally supporters. However, the potential enhancement of Czechia's financial prospects or the implementation of government aid programmes aimed at the most economically disadvantaged segments of society might potentially mitigate the ongoing surge of the SPD. It may also signify a bolstering of confidence in the democratic framework, as the SPD garners greater support from individuals with lower levels of education and lower socioeconomic status. These segments of the electorate, who harbour disillusionment towards political affairs, exhibit a higher affinity for the SPD.

4.5. Hungary – Fidesz

Out of all the countries selected as case studies for this paper, Hungary has perhaps the closest and most transparent affiliation to Vladimir Putin's regime in Russia. Zoltan Adam attributes this to three factors: "(1) the traditional animosity Hungarian governments have shown toward Kyiv in the past three decades; (2) blaming the European Union and the pro-Ukraine Western alliance for economic hardship in Hungary; (3) endorsing Putin's totalitarian turn in Russia to suggest that a similar course of political developments in Hungary is not excluded either" (Ádám, 2023).

Within Hungary, conservative intellectuals have chosen to back the government in its clashes with the EU, aiding in framing these confrontations as deep-seated disparities with the EU that stem from distinct value systems. While the dispute surrounding the 2015 refugee quotas has drawn the most attention, intellectuals on the right in both countries have articulated

scepticism not only regarding this particular policy but also concerning fundamental facets of the European project. These concerns extend beyond the specific policy and encompass more overarching components of the European initiative, including what they perceive as an „ideology“ linked to human rights and the European Constitution (Varga & Buzogany, 2020).

The parliamentary elections that took place in Hungary in April 2022 were seen as a good moment for the opposition to contest the long running regime of Viktor Orban.

Orban’s interests in Russia also spread beyond simple ideological similitudes. Hungary and Russia struck a new deal on the supply of gas during the summer of 2022 (Jack, 2022), half a year after the invasion in Ukraine had started.

Hungary is perhaps the odd one out, where a ruling party condemns the Ukrainian side for not doing enough to come to a peaceful resolution while also advocating for closer diplomatic relations with the Russian Federation. Since the war started, Hungary’s position has been to side unequivocally with Russia. They did this, despite knowing that the decision could carry with it heavy political repercussions, especially with the other EU member states. However, Orban is been aware that he has been isolated from the rest of the EU members which led him to seek economic support from Russia. The restrictions imposed by the EU on Hungary’s access to the Resilience and Recovery Plan funds if they do not implement swift constitutional reforms (Simon & Bodoni, 2023).

4.6. Poland – Prawo i Sprawiedliwość

It’s no secret that, ever since the fall of the communist bloc, Poland has constantly viewed Russia as a consistent threat to its own independence. The fact that in 2013 it was actively supporting the “Orange Revolution” in Ukraine, only served to worsen the relations between Poland and Russia.

On this brief historical background, ever since coming into power in 2015, the Law and Justice Party (PiS) in Poland has been constantly preoccupied with restructuring its foreign policy relations. Zieba describes these efforts as four main points of interest: “(a) the bi-lateralization and militarization of security policy based on the strategic partnership with the US; (b) Euroscepticism: anti-Brussels posturing and disputes with Germany and France; (c) Poland’s nationalistic and great-power approach to Russia; and (d) Three Seas Initiative as a dream of Poland’s greatness” (Zieba, 2021).

As opposed to Hungary, Poland still sees Russia as a threat (Arridu & Molis, 2019).

Despite these outward reactions and tendencies, in terms of domestic policy, PiS is very much in alignment with Russian politics on several policies and issues, such as LGBTQ+ rights, gender roles, the opposition to sex education for children, and the role of NGOs in Polish civil society (Cadier, 2021). Radziwinowicz even cites the, now former, Director general of Russian International Affairs Council, Andrei Kortunov who argues that PiS is seen by Russians as a “party that seeks to sow in Europe that which is in the Kremlin’s interest” (Radziwinowicz, 2019).

Considering all of this, PiS has been perhaps one of the most active and consistent supporters of the Ukrainian side, taking in the largest portion of Ukrainian refugees, 1.5 million, and consistently pleading for the sending of funds and equipment to the Ukrainian side. Ever since the beginning of the war, Poland has supplied Ukraine with \$3.3 bn in weapons and equipment, among which it counts 320 Soviet-era tanks and 14 MiG-29 fighter jets (Radford & Easton, 2023).

However, earlier in 2023 the EU banned grain imports from Ukraine into five countries, Poland among them, in order to protect local farmers that were worried that Ukrainian grain imports would drive the price down locally. This ban expired in September 2023, and the EU Commission chose not to extend it, prompting Poland, Hungary and Slovakia to enforce their own bans. Since trade policy is not a matter of national decision for EU member states, Ukraine went ahead and filed lawsuits with the World Trade Organization against the three states. This, in turn, led to a deterioration in the relations between Poland and Ukraine.

As a reaction to the whole situation, the Prime Minister of Poland, Mateusz Morawiecki, has declared that Poland will stop supplying modern equipment to Ukraine, since Poland would focus instead on modernizing its own military capacity (Vinocur & Barigazzi, 2023). This was the first and, so far, only sign of wavering support from Poland towards Ukraine.

In conclusion, the Polish populist party PiS has been consistent in its denunciation of Russia and its support for Ukraine after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in the beginning of 2022.

4.7. Romania – Alianța pentru Unirea Românilor

The Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR) is perhaps the first clear cut example of right-wing populism to emerge in post '89 Romania. Having managed to dodge the populist wave that swept across Europe by integrating populism in the mainstream Social Democratic Party discourse, during the era of Liviu Dragnea (Bujdei-Tebeica, 2017), Romania finally had its populist breakout moment during the 2020 parliamentary elections, which were held under the auspices of the COVID-19 global pandemic. This is an important factor to note, since it was one of the key electoral points on which AUR managed to mobilize its base.

Prior to the start of the war, AUR regularly aligned with common Putinist rhetoric that routinely accuses EU institutions of interfering with national sovereignties. More specifically, Simion frequently addresses economic, cultural and political positions of the European Union that come into conflict with the nationalist-conservative narrative of his own party. One such common criticism is the “anti-Christian” attitude of Brussels (Filip, 2022), which keeps pressing Romania to create the legislative framework that permits civil partnerships. This, Simion argues, is a direct attack on the traditional family, coming from LGBTQ+ elites in Brussels.

At the same time, the collective trauma experience of the communist period still haunts the political space in Romania. In light of this, political actors frequently describe modern day Russia as a communist country. This explains why a political party such as AUR, which has a fundamentally identical ideological perspective to that of the Russian ruling elites, is so eager to criticize Russia (Soare, 2023).

This is also one of the main reasons why AUR and Simion were quick to condemn the Russian invasion of Ukraine, with seemingly no hesitation. However, when it comes to offering support to the victims of the war, AUR focuses on historical and contemporary grievances in its relation with Ukraine. Supposed digging operations on the riverbed of the Bystre canal of the Danube made by Ukrainian authorities have been used in order to rally the electoral base of the party (Păvălașc, 2023). Another key talking point for AUR is the treatment of the Romanian minority in the Bukovina region, namely the removal of the Romanian language from being taught in predominantly Romanian ethnic schools. Ethnic Romanians in Ukraine have previously accused Romanian authorities for not intervening in the matter, or pressuring Ukrainian authorities to reinstate the Romanian language in their schools (Europa Liberă, 2020). Consequently, last year AUR pressured the Romanian Foreign Affairs Ministry to push

Ukrainian authorities into signing an accord which would guarantee the protection of the Romanian language in Ukraine (Sirbu, 2022).

4.8. Bulgaria – Graždani za evropejsko razvitie na Bulgarija (GERB)

Bulgaria is faced with the particular context of having 58% of the population reported to have positive views towards Russia and Putin, prior to the war (Zankina, 2023).

At the beginning of the conflict, Bulgaria was under the administration of a coalition government consisting of four political parties with various ideological orientations. In spite of the aforementioned variety and the inclusion of the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) in the ruling coalition, the administration led by Kiril Petkov exhibited a distinct anti-Russian position and effectively advocated for the implementation of various pro-Ukraine measures inside the Parliament.

In March 2021, Bulgaria demonstrated its support for EU sanctions on Russia, while encountering strong resistance from the BSP and Revival parties. Following this, in the month of April, Prime Minister Petkov assumed the role of leading a delegation from Bulgaria to Ukraine. In the month of May, the Parliament made a decision to support the extension of humanitarian, financial, and military-technical aid to Ukraine. This aid includes the provision of resources for the maintenance of military equipment. However, the Parliament chose not to officially endorse the provision of weaponry. The aforementioned limited endorsement demonstrated the BSP's unwavering opposition to provide military assistance and its significant sway inside the alliance.

During this period, Petkov undertook the resolution to dismiss the defence minister, Stefan Yanev, who had formerly occupied the position of prime minister in an interim governmental administration. Yanev's termination occurred in reaction to his endorsement of the Kremlin's claim that the invasion was just a „special operation.“ According to Alpha Research's findings in 2022, the aforementioned action garnered a significant level of support from the Bulgarian populace (Alpha Research, 2022).

In June, the administration led by Petkov took the decision to remove a total of 70 Russian diplomats from Bulgaria, citing concerns over their alleged involvement in espionage activities. In contrast to the firing of Yanev, this particular decision encountered significant public condemnation. However, pro-Russian discourse has taken over by far-right party Revival, which is presently in opposition (Zankina, 2023).

According to Ivan Bedrov, the head of the Bulgarian station of Radio Free Europe, it is crucial to highlight the three main consequences that have emerged inside the nation one year after the commencement of the war. The conflict has served to highlight the involvement and impact of Russia in Bulgaria, along with the political personalities that align themselves with these interests. Furthermore, the ongoing confrontation has transformed into a prominent division within Bulgarian society, serving as one of the primary fault lines. This division effectively segregates political leaders and the general population into two distinct factions: those who support Russia and those who oppose it. It is worth noting that another significant rift exists around attitudes towards corruption and mainstream political parties. Finally, the war has illustrated that Bulgaria does not intrinsically depend on Russia, even for its energy provision (Bedrov, 2023).

5. Comparative analysis: Support & Denouncement variables

We have looked at each of the 8 study cases individually thus far, in order to assess whether they shift from their previously held positions prior to the start of the war. Further, it is also important to compare each country by the way in which it relates to both Russia and Ukraine. The following matrix represents such an endeavour in order to create a clearer picture to understand who supports and/or denounces who. However, one aspect that is worth mentioning is that whether a state supports either Russia or Ukraine, does not automatically mean that they denounce the actions of the other. As the table below shows, there are those states that denounce both parties involved in the war.

Table 1. Populist parties according to their support or denouncement for/of Russia or Ukraine

	Support for Ukraine	Denouncement of Ukraine
Support for Russia	N/a	Germany (AfD) – opposition Hungary (Fidesz) – in power Czech Republic (SPD) – opposition
Denouncement of Russia	Italy (FdI) – in power Poland (PiS) – in power Bulgaria (GERB) – in power	France (RN) – opposition Romania (AUR) – opposition

Source: compiled by the author

As we can see, the populist parties that are currently in power and that have been in power at the moment of the beginning of the war have ostensibly taken a pro-Ukraine stance, while also condemning the Russian aggression. On the other hand, populist parties that are in opposition have been shown to be more inclined to denounce Ukraine. The only three actors that have expressed support for Russia have been Fidesz, SPD and the AfD, the first party in power, the second only implicitly and the last in opposition.

6. Comparative analysis. Stance on involvement of the EU in the conflict

Another important issue that is worth comparing is the stance of the respective study cases on the issue of EU involvement in the conflict. Should the European Union lend its resources to Ukraine while imposing sanctions on Russia?

Table 2. Populist parties according to their support of EU involvement in the conflict

„EU must support Ukraine directly” (financially and logistically)	„EU support of Ukraine prolongs war, which is against the will of the people” (not our war)
Poland (PiS) Italy (FdI) Bulgaria (GERB)	Germany (AfD) Hungary (Fidesz) France (RN) Czech Republic (SPD) Romania (AUR)

Source: compiled by the author

Once again, we see the same propensity of ‘in power’ populist parties to support active involvement from the EU. On the other hand, recurring theme opposition populists is the belief that the European Union should prioritize its internal challenges over external engagements. In the context of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, these populists argue that the EU should refrain from diverting valuable resources to aid Ukraine. Their rationale hinges on the premise that many EU member states are grappling with their own financial difficulties, with citizens facing economic hardships and uncertainties. By emphasizing the need to prioritize domestic challenges over international commitments, these opposition populists not only tap into the economic anxieties of their electorate but also frame their stance as one of pragmatic nationalism, advocating for the well-being of their citizens first and foremost. Yet again, Hungary stands out as the only party in power that goes against the main line in Brussels.

7. Conclusion

Throughout the European political landscape, a discernible pattern emerges regarding the stances of populist parties towards Putin and the broader Russia-Ukraine conflict. Populist parties that have ascended to power exhibit a tendency to align their positions more closely with their EU counterparts. This alignment, characterized by support for Ukraine and criticism of Russia, underscores the pressures and responsibilities that come with governance, compelling these parties to adopt more mainstream stances in line with broader EU sentiments. However, Hungary stands as a notable outlier in this trend, maintaining a more transparent affiliation with Putin’s regime, driven by historical animosities and a distinct set of national interests.

In contrast, populist parties in opposition display greater consistency in their attitudes towards Russia and Ukraine, uninfluenced by the diplomatic and political constraints that governing parties face. Their narratives often oscillate between criticism of Ukraine and varying degrees of support or criticism for Russia. This divergence between populist parties in power and those in opposition highlights the complexities of populist ideologies, which, while rooted in common themes of anti-establishment and national sovereignty, can manifest differently based on their position in the political spectrum and the unique geopolitical contexts they navigate.

The findings offer crucial insights into the dynamic nature of populist politics, highlighting the potential for shifts in ideology and allegiance based on political positioning. These insights are invaluable for policymakers and political analysts in predicting and understanding the evolving political landscape in Europe. Further research could delve into the long-term effects of these shifts on European politics and international relations, particularly in the context of EU-Russia relations.

This study stands out in its comprehensive analysis of a wide array of populist parties across various EU member states, post the Russian invasion of Ukraine. It uniquely combines a detailed examination of public statements with an analysis of the broader political and ideological shifts, offering a nuanced understanding of the complex interplay between domestic politics, populist ideologies, and international events.

Despite its comprehensive scope, the study is limited by its reliance on public statements and secondary sources, which may not fully capture the internal dynamics and strategic considerations of the populist parties. Additionally, the rapidly evolving nature of the political situation in Europe and Ukraine may lead to further shifts that could alter the conclusions drawn in this study.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

About the author(s)

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