

Europe’s Russia-Friendly Parties Put to the Test by Putin’s Invasion of Ukraine

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Abstract: Over the last decade, a number of non-mainstream European parties have cultivated friendly and mutually advantageous relations with the Russian political establishment. This phenomenon has been common to both the national conservative right and the radical left. This article critically discusses these parties’ adaptation to the new political context triggered by Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine and assesses their strategies and tactics to adapt to the new reality. The cases analysed include primarily Western European Russia-friendly political forces and the level of analysis focuses both on the domestic and supranational EU-level dynamics.

Keywords: Russia, radical left, far right, illiberalism, trans-ideology

Prologue: Setting the Conceptual Lens

Both at the national and supranational EU level, friendly relations have been cultivated between the Kremlin and non-mainstream European parties. To understand how these parties have adapted to the new reality determined by Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, it is worth looking at the key factors underpinning this long-lasting – sometime symbiotic – relationship. Such vary along ideological lines and have been flexibly used by the Kremlin.

On the right side of the spectrum, the political relationship with the Kremlin has often been formalized via bilateral memoranda of understanding with United Russia.¹ Such connection has provided a useful ideological anchor (i.e., national conservatism and traditionalism, broadly speaking) and access to a broad network of relevant contacts and infrastructural and political know-how as well as – in some cases – direct/indirect access to financial support.

From the Russian side, a close connection with relevant party actors in the EU core meant the possibility to use influence as a vector of counter-hegemonic pressure aimed to strate-

¹ This had been the case for Italy’s The League, France’s National Rally, and Alternative for Germany (AfD).

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gically weaken the liberal-democratic order both at the domestic and European² level and successfully apply Moscow's traditional game of divide and rule to the level of domestic politics. Such a mutually beneficial relationship is not (and has not been) exclusive of the European national conservative front but can be identified also in the context of the communist or post-communist radical left, ranging from Greece's Communist Party to Germany's Left Party.

A characteristic of the Kremlin's strategy is the trans-ideological approach (Braghioli and Makarychev 2015), defined as “an attitude towards boosting political influence by pragmatically and intermittently breaching the boundaries of ideologies and political doctrines” (Levinson 1980), in the form of ‘multi-layered’ and *ad hoc* politically diversified narratives. According to Braghioli and Makarychev (2015), the key aim of such an approach is to maximize external political support, especially among non-mainstream and highly ideological partners, and minimize the potentially contradictions of contrasting ideological stances by these partners (i.e., far-right vs. radical left).

The Kremlin's approach has traditionally embodied a high level of ideological content in the form of *ad hoc* messages, specifically developed for each ‘ideological target.’ Parts of this strategy are references to the Soviet (anti-fascist) past – with Russia as its ‘natural’ continuation – directed towards the European radical left through references to traditional values, bio-nationalism as exclusionary national hygiene (Aktürk 2012, Treisman 1997), and European Christian tradition when it comes to the far-right. The often opposite and irreconcilable ideological connotations of the Kremlin's appeals seem to denote a high level of *trans-ideological* pragmatism.

Ex Ante: Understanding the Relationship Before February 2022

While in a number of national contexts, the parties' preferential relationship with the Kremlin proved controversial and open to criticisms from the mainstream opponents and sectors of the civil society, this did not prevent the relationship from flourishing and to developing *en plain air*. This was possible given the generally positive view of Russia among the parties' electoral base and the parties' attempt to frame their relationship in terms of mutual (national) benefit and ideological coherence.

At the European supranational level, Moscow's support for the far-right and the radical left has increasingly witnessed – over the last years – a convergence of narratives between the two ‘extremes’ in the direction of an illiberal turn and shared opposition of the supranational liberal EU order. The illiberal perspective increasingly shared by Moscow's friendly forces both on the left and on the right, combined with nativist and populist tones, can be synthesized through a series of dichotomic ideological postures: Brussels

2 The term ‘European’ instead of ‘Europe’ is preferred when the reference is to the geo-political context or polity defined and shaped by European integration.

vs. Europe, post-modern values vs. traditional values, multi-culturalism vs. ethno-state, and elites vs. people where the former is embodied by a soul-less Europe and the latter by the supporters of a 'mythical' return to the origins/roots. According to this perspective, Russia represents a pole of illiberal convergence/attraction and the model of 'another possible Europe' (Laruelle 2020, 2016; Bassin 2021). This is confirmed by the findings of Snegovaya's recent study (2022, 415) on pro-Russia parties in Europe: "Pro-Russian positions are embraced by parties that belong to different party families on the left and right of the political spectrum. Furthermore, the supporters of such pro-Russian parties in Western Europe do not uniformly embrace a culturally conservative or anti-immigration agenda, distinguishing them from typical radical right supporters in the region (see e.g., Allen 2017). The main feature the electorates of these parties have in common is that they are significantly more Eurosceptic than supporters of mainstream parties." The more this converging illiberal perspective emerges, the less necessary appears the trans-ideological artefact of parallel narratives. Parallely, in the Russian domestic context the ideological charge of the regime and the totalizing mobilization of the population has very significantly increased on the eve of Putin's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

A tangible example of such a process of re-ideologization of Russia's official narrative (Laruelle 2020) implies the weaponization of labels such as 'anti-fascism' and 'fascism' or 'ultra-nationalism' and their use (Umland 2005). The flexible characterization of such labels might confuse Western observers, with the Kremlin's pundits very flexibly labelling liberal-democratic (even centre-left / progressive) European parties as 'fascists', while comfortably doing business with 'post-fascist' or nationalist parties such as Greece's Golden Dawn or France's National Rally.

According to the Kremlin's logic, today's Russia as the successor of the Soviet Union represents the undisputed and ultimate enemy of contemporary fascism (regardless of its attributed meaning). It follows that any position perceived as unfriendly towards the Kremlin or its interests is/can be labelled as 'fascist' or 'ultra-nationalist', while any position of the Kremlin (and, potentially, its allies) can be framed as an expression of 'anti-fascism' (Prys 2021). According to Gaufman (2015, 30) "given that fascism as a narrative has rather deep embeddedness in Russian collective memory as existential threat discourse, it is fairly easy to manipulate public opinion into the necessity of extraordinary measures that leads effectively to the breakdown of the post-Cold War security system." While this strategy is primarily used towards the Russian audience, it finds a practical application to internationally tag friends and foes.

Such logic has been well internalized also by a number of political forces in Europe, beyond traditional trans-ideology. Among certain post-communist or communist European left a visible tendency has emerged and recently proliferated to contextualize (and often justify) Russia's actions through the lens of anti-fascism, while labelling its opponents as fascists/ultra-nationalists. Such tendency has its underpinning logic in the functional overlap of today's Russia and the Soviet Union, very much in line with Russia's official narrative. The weaponization of 'anti-fascism' of the left can be compared to the functional

and flexible use of ‘realism’ among the national conservatives in relation to Russia, which will have very tangible implications following Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Ex Post: Assessing the Impact of Russia’s War

February 2022 came as a cataclysm for many Russia-friendly parties in the liberal democracies of Europe. What was acceptable before the war was not anymore possible after its start. Additionally, while ostracization grew among the mainstream opponents, also among the traditional electorate, the support for Putin’s regime sharply declined following the public exposure of the crimes perpetrated by the invading army. This study argues that – both at the national and EUropean level – the parties’ reaction to the invasion and the re-definition of their relationship with the Kremlin went through three phases: denial, rationalization, and new equilibrium. Such new equilibrium in some contexts does not differ much from the pre-war one (if not formally, at least substantially). In others, it appears affected by broader factors.

Among many Russia-friendly parties in Europe the weeks preceding the invasion were characterized by an attitude that reflected the Kremlin’s narrative, denying the imminence of the attack and – often – ridiculing their governments for engaging with ‘fear mongering.’ At the same time, Western accusations against Russia and the alleged un-willingness to ‘engage’ with Russia were contrasted to Kremlin’s legitimate interests in the region. Such a phase of denial appears quite generalized among both far right and radical left Russia-friendly parties. In the context of the left (from the Greek to the Italian Communist parties), this was accompanied by strong anti-imperialist tones accusing the West of interference in Russia’s affairs and a revival of the fascist/anti-fascist antithesis through an increasingly anti-Ukrainian discourse (Pellecchia 2022).³

A second phase can be identified as corresponding to the first weeks and months after the start of Russia’s full-scale invasion. In the light of the general condemnation and growing stigmatization of Moscow, with very few exceptions (mostly located among the ranks of the radical left), Russia-friendly parties undertook an abrupt attempt to distance themselves from the toxic connection with the Kremlin⁴ and engaged in more performative than substantial expressions of solidarity towards Ukraine. In a number of cases, this attitude took the shape of a willing state of political amnesia as in the context of Matteo Salvini’s travel to the Polish-Ukrainian border to sustain Kyiv’s struggle and ‘facilitate peace’ and the words condemnation of Russia by AfD Leader Tino Chrupalla (Knight 2022).

3 It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss the nature of Putin’s regime. However, if substance matters more than self-assigned labels, the ongoing debate on whether it is analytically meaningful and conceptually sound to define Russia’s current regime as fascist (Snyder 2022) might contribute to solving apparently inherent contradictions between Moscow’s deeds and narratives, also in the context of this study.

4 No Memorandum of understanding between these parties and United Russia was declared null, following the start of the war.

In the third phase, we witness a progressive shift in these parties' positions towards more openly isolationist stances combined with increasingly empty expressions of solidarity towards Ukraine. Such solidarity is however re-framed, in the name of realism, with an emphasis on 'peace in Ukraine *at all costs*.' Opposing the shipment of weapons to Ukraine in the name of peace corresponds to an increasingly 'equidistant' attitude when it comes to the conflict. Moreover, certain policy preferences that could be labelled as friendly towards Russia's war effort and detrimental towards Ukraine's struggle were conveniently framed in terms of national interest and common sense. The key words of such third phase witness a visible convergence of narratives and practices of the illiberal forces ranging from the far-right of the French National Rally to the radical left of the German Left Party.

The tactical metamorphosis appears more regular in the case of the Russia-friendly far right and less straightforward and bumpier in the case of the radical left which pays the price of being more ideologically in line with the Kremlin's official 'anti-fascist' narrative, including blame on NATO and Ukraine depicted as a Western proxy. In this phase of 'new equilibrium' both the far right and radical left tends to converge also in their (substantial, if not formal) denial of Ukraine's agency, either portraying Kyiv as a Western proxy or subordinated to the *imperium* of the great powers. The logic is well epitomized by the words of Björn Höcke, head of the AfD in the eastern state of Thuringia, who described Ukrainians as "the victims of a global geopolitical confrontation between NATO and Russia" (Knight 2022). Additionally, Ukraine (not Russia) is generally framed as a factor of economic instability, human insecurity, and geo-political uncertainty, rather than the victim of an aggression.

The combination of abrupt declaratory distancing from Moscow and re-framing of the position towards nation-centred isolationism and geo-politics of realism appears particularly relevant in post-February 2022 electoral contexts. Two examples worth mentioning are France and Italy as both countries faced national elections. In the former both the National Rally (and – to a large extent – the radical left of Jean-Luc Mélenchon) advocated for the removal or progressive reduction of sanctions against Russia – defined as 'political suicide' by Marine Le Pen (Caulcutt 2022) – in connection to the growing cost of living and rising inflation which became the focal point of the campaign. A leitmotiv of Le Pen's message was that solidarity towards Ukraine had to be subordinated to the vital national interest of economic recovery. A similar position was adopted by the League of Matteo Salvini who repeatedly stressed – in the name of Italy (and Europe's) national interest – also the need for Russia's active involvement – rather than its isolation to guarantee lasting peace. The different fate of Salvini and Le Pen's governmental bids seems to have affected to a large extent their narrative and behaviour in the phase that we define as 'new equilibrium'.

Most of the domestic cleavages highlighted above can also be identified at the European level. The European Parliament (EP) represents the ideal political laboratory to assess the voting patterns and discursive dynamics at the European (supranational) level, given the

overlapping of national and partisan interests and multiple loyalties. Our conversation focuses on the non-mainstream parliamentary groups that host most of the national forces discussed in this article and – by and large – share the illiberal perspective delineated above.

Identity and Democracy (ID) group – home to Italy's League, France's National Rally, and Alternative for Germany – is generally defined by most scholars and observers as the most Russia-friendly fraction in the EP. Its constituent parties' domestic isolationist position has been generally internalized by the group and declined in terms of limiting the EU's engagement in supporting Kyiv and countering Russia's aggression. Indicative, in this respect, are the conclusion of the recent party's Antwerp declaration that combines vague expressions of 'regret' with an anathema against EU's activism: "ID Party regrets the war on the European continent that was started after the Russian Federation invaded Ukraine, a country fully entitled to its own sovereignty and territorial integrity. However, ID Party fears that this crisis too will be abused by the European Union for the expansion of its power, especially the further strengthening of its existing ideas concerning a European army as part of the centralising European Union." Overall, the group has proven to be – however – less vocal than its constituent parties and generally more restraint in expressing specific positions than other groups, possibly, due to internal divisions between its core members and its Baltic and Eastern European members such as Estonia's National Conservative Party (EKRE). In addition, the League's inclusion in Italy's new conservative government appears to have also sensibly affected the party's stance as the most recent developments in the EP seem to indicate.

When it comes to the European Left, its position appears more supportive towards Ukraine and less affected by the Kremlin's discourse than its constituent national parties. While the European party group does not seem to buy into the 'anti-fascists' narrative of Moscow popularized by Moscow, the European Left still adopts a strong anti-imperialist narrative towards NATO and the West, depicted as 'co-responsible' for the war together with Russia. In their earliest common position on Russia's aggression (dating back to late March 2022), the party unequivocally "condemn the war of Putin's regime against Ukraine, in flagrant violation of international law" (The Left 2022). At the same time, while rejecting military assistance to Ukraine in the name of pacifism, it condemns "EU militarism" and "call[s] for the institutions of the European Union and NATO to refrain from statements or actions that undermine the possibility for dialogue."

The European Parliament's Voice and Some Concluding Considerations on Future Scenarios

In the last part of our conversation, we will focus on the voting patterns and narratives underpinning the EP's strongest and most intransigent condemnation of Russia since February 2022.

In November 2022, the Chamber approved by a very large majority a resolution recognising the Russian Federation as a state sponsor of terrorism (see European Parliament 2022a), following the example of a number of Member states' parliaments and of the parliamentary assemblies of NATO and the Council of Europe. While the resolution has no direct legal implications for the EU, the EP voice can hardly be ignored by the Council and the Commission, with potential future ramifications also in terms of international criminal justice.

With very few exceptions, the MEPs belonging to mainstream party groups massively endorsed the resolution, jointly drafted by the European People's Party, Renew Europe, and the group of the European Conservatives and Reformists, with the open external endorsement of Socialists and Greens. When it comes to ID and the European Left, the picture appears more nuanced than expected. Overall, the Leftist MEPs appeared quite united not to endorse the resolution (with only four exceptions from Nordic legislators), but seemed rather divided on the stance to adopt, with most of the MEPs abstaining and a substantial minority (mostly from Germany's Left Party) voting against it.

Very interesting appears the position of the Eurosceptic national-conservative ID group. While most of the MEP voted against the resolution, led by French National Rally and Alternative for Germany, unexpectedly, all Salvini's MEPs endorsed the resolution with no single exception. The League's stance can only be rationalized in the light of the party's recent inclusion in Italy's governing coalition as a junior partner of Giorgia Meloni's national-conservative Brother of Italy (Cerasa 2022). Unlike the League, the Meloni's party has traditionally shown a rather cold attitude towards the Kremlin as evident from its membership in the Poland's PiS-led European Conservative and Reformist groups. Additionally, in the context of the war in Ukraine, the new Italian executive has been very keen to establish itself as a credible and mainstream conservative government trusted by European and transatlantic partners. The League's apparent U-turn seems to be the result of such effort, potentially encouraged by the moral suasion of Italy's Prime minister.

Given the very evident split inside the ID group, it is no surprise that during the debate preceding the vote the fraction and its leadership appeared completely silent, with not a single declaration recorded in the EP minutes. On the contrary, particularly vocal appears the stance of the European Left, well summarized by the words of the Irish MEP Mick Wallace: "[...] The European Parliament, instead of pursuing peace and an end to this bloody war, [...] instead of any effort at diplomacy to remedy this disaster, you have voted to call Russia names. What's worse, NATO is one of the most blood-drenched terrorist groups to curse this earth. The idea that any representative of a NATO member state would label anyone else a sponsor of terrorism before calling out their own state is absurd" (European Parliament 2022b). Here the above-mentioned themes of Western responsibility, lack of Ukrainian agency, and *de facto* equidistance emerge once again very powerfully.

Whether a fourth phase of transformation will come for Europe's Russia-friendly parties and in which direction, remains an open question. Its answer – be it pragmatic or ideological, strategic or tactic – depends both on the evolution of the conflict and on the domestic developments in the member states.

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