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**TOWARDS A COMMON VISION?  
POPULIST RADICAL RIGHT  
PARTIES' POSITIONS  
ON THE EU COMMON FOREIGN  
AND SECURITY POLICY TOWARDS  
RUSSIA**

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## **TOWARDS A COMMON VISION? POPULIST RADICAL RIGHT PARTIES' POSITIONS ON THE EU COMMON FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICY TOWARDS RUSSIA**

The growth of populism in the EU member states, as a large-scale internal challenge to the European integration project, has a projection on foreign policy of both national states and the European Union. The EU foreign policy, towards Russia, is the area where the deviation of populist programs and strategies from the positions of the mainstream is most clearly manifested. In this regard, it is necessary to determine the foreign policy orientations of the populist radical right parties of the EU member states regarding the EU foreign policy, towards Russia, and opportunities for their synchronization. The main conclusion of this research is that populist foreign policy orientations highlight the internal heterogeneity of the populist phenomenon. Populism in power and in opposition does not have the capacity to change the EU's foreign policy towards Russia. The nature of populism as an ideology, the instrumental use by right populists of the “theme of Russia” for “internal consumption”, and their mainstreaming in power are a significant barrier to the real challenge of the EU policy towards Russia

Keywords: Populism, populist radical-right parties (PRRP), Alternative für Deutschland, United Kingdom Independence Party, Fidesz - Hungarian Civil Union, CFSP, EU-Russia relations, comparative case study

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## **Introduction**

“Populist zeitgeist” [Mudde, 2004] or “populist moment” [Brubaker, 2017] have become stable characteristics of contemporary European politics. Populist parties, both right and left, successfully incorporate their programmatic elements into the policy of traditional political forces (Conservative Party and Brexit in the UK), strengthen their representation in the national legislatures of the EU member states and the European Parliament, and come to power in the Central Eastern (Austria, Hungary, Poland) and Southern Europe (Italy, Greece).

Against the background of an array of works on the domestic political effects of the “populist wave”, it is important to understand that populism is no longer a phenomenon isolated in domestic politics [Cryssogelos, 2019]. Populism is actively blurring the line between party competition in domestic and foreign policy. The populist «vision of the world», which is determined by the antagonistic rivalry between the «people» and the «elite», impacts not only the foreign policy of national states, but also for various directions of the EU’s Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), especially towards Russia (both before and after Russia’s invasion in Ukraine). Populist forces perceive Russia as an organic part of the new, “illiberal” world order and a potential partner in the fight against traditional elites and the institutional structure that perpetuates their dominance.

The research question, accordingly, is to determine the foreign policy orientations of the populist parties of the EU member states regarding the EU foreign policy, towards Russia, and opportunities for their synchronization. The answer to the above question requires, firstly, the definition of what populism is, trying to conceptualize its foreign policy orientations, and relying on an ideological approach to populism (C. Mudde, B. Stanley). Secondly, to analyze to what extent the foreign policy programs of the populist parties of the three EU member states (Germany, UK, and Hungary) deviate from the content and norms of the CFSP based on the analysis of party and strategic documents in the period 2014-2019 (when UK was a member of a European Union) and after Ukrainian crisis 2021-2022. Thirdly, to analyze to what extent these deviations have the potential to synchronize and change the policy of the EU towards Russia.

The hypothesis of this research is that the deviation of the foreign policy orientations of the populists from the norms and content of the EU foreign policy is indeed present, but the populists do not seek to challenge it, based on ideological and structural barriers.

The main research method is comparative case study. We found cases with maximum differences [Przeworski, Teune, 1970: 34-46.]. First, the cases were selected based on different “weight” in political systems: populism in power - Fidesz in Hungary; populism as “the main opposition in parliament” - AfD in 2017-2019 in the German Bundestag; “populism as an extra-parliamentary

opposition” - United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) in 2014-2019. Second, the analysis includes cases of both consolidated democracy (Germany, Great Britain) and countries in democratic transition (Hungary), which allows us to see the foreign policy orientations of the populist radical-right parties (RPPPs) in various institutional contexts. The empirical basis of this study is party documents, statements by populist leaders, and the results of voting in national legislatures and the European Parliament.

### **Can we conceptualize RRPP’s foreign policy?**

In this article, we use the ideational approach to define RPPP, which is dominant among party scholars [March, 2017: 284]. This approach means that populism is a ‘thin-centred’ 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: 543]. Hence, populism in its right variation, uses nationalism [Rydgren, 2007], or in a narrow sense nativism [Mudde, 2007; Guia, 2016], to defend the “pure people” and their “heartland” [Taggart, 2000].

The ideological approach is most relevant for use in the context of the research question of this paper. The conceptual features of populism identified within this approach elucidate the carriers of ideology in the party systems of the EU member states based on an analysis of their programs. This will avoid the “blurring” of the object of research when using a discursive approach. As the empirical analysis has shown, many mainstream politicians selectively use populist language depending on the audience and the broader social context [Banilovsky: 13], as was the case, for example, with the Labor Party of Great Britain under the leadership of Jeremy Corbyn [see Bale 2019]. A strategic approach to understanding populism makes it even less possible to highlight the foreign policy dimension of the functioning of populist actors in view of the focus on communication between the leader and followers within the framework of a populist party or movement [Weyland 2011]. This “leaves out” the process of politicizing European integration and related issues, which is used by populists from the EU member states as a resource [Hadiz, Chryssogelos, 2017]. While the populists of Latin America are traditionally viewed through the prism of a political-strategic approach [Barr, 2018], the populists of the EU member states, being “agents of politicization” of European integration, require a different lens for analysis.

In general, the vast majority of research relies on the analysis of a small number of cases. One of the few attempts to draw general conclusions is the research by Angelos Chrisogellos “Populism and foreign policy” (2017) based on a comparative approach. Using existing approaches to populism, when talking about the impact of populism on foreign policy, the author suggests taking into account two factors: the conceptual heterogeneity of the concept of populism itself and the

“variegated nature” of populism in different countries of the world. The author proceeds from the premise that populism is a reaction to the crisis of political representation and economic imbalances of the globalized world. Chrisogellos denies the possibility of deriving a formula for "populist foreign policy", but formulates its main common features or markers. Among them, he accentuates the priority of national sovereignty over global and transnational political interests, nationalism (since the people are determined by populists on the basis of ethnicity), and anti-western features. Note, that here we are talking about right-wing populism, but not about its left-wing variation.

A different position is taken by the researcher from the Paris Institute for Political Studies David Cadier (2019, 2020). He believes that populist political forces are united not by ideology (views range from the extreme right to the radical left), but by a "provocative political style", which leads to an extremely contradictory foreign policy. Thus, populist leaders view foreign policy as a continuation of domestic politics. Domestic conflicts are more likely to take precedence over diplomatic considerations. Developing this thesis on the example of the EU foreign policy, the author points out that, despite their anti-systemic nature, populist actors rarely translate these positions into clear-cut and decisive policies at the EU level. They rarely go so far as to influence or block decisions and the results of the EU foreign policy. However, they are capable of influencing the EU normative power [Manners 2002], on which the foreign policy of the integration association is largely based. Since some populist member states (Poland, Hungary) question these norms and standards domestically, there is a risk of weakening the EU's legitimacy when exporting these norms.

We see a limited ability to translate the programs and strategies of populists into the foreign policy. In the case of “populism in opposition,” the populists' toolbox is almost completely limited to the struggle for the content of the political agenda. When populists are in power, they face inertia and pressure from the external environment, which was clearly demonstrated by the case of the participation of the Northern League in the government of Silvio Berlusconi [Verbeek and Zaslove 2015]. The reason is the forced mainstreamization and the adoption of the rules of the game after coming to power. The analysis of the literature and empirical material suggests that the influence of populists in foreign policy, while in power, was limited [Mudde, 2013]. According to Balfour [2016: 14], populists “did not influence important decisions regarding war and peace”, demonstrating international socialization and pragmatism [Verbeek and Zaslove, 2015; 2017; Chrysogelos, 2017]. Right-wing populism, being in power or in a coalition, does not make a U-turn in foreign policy [Cadier 2019] in accordance with its programs except for the migration policy, where it forces coalition partners to co-opt their programs (as in the case of the first

coalition of the Austrian People’s Party and Austrian Party of Freedom in Austria and the “coalition of change” in Italy).

Moreover, populist actors do not and cannot carry out a similar policy based on the conceptual essence of populism as a fragmented ideology and, as a consequence, it results in the eclecticism of party programs and strategies under the influence of a dynamically developing internal and external environment. The dichotomy of the “people-elite“ and variations of Euroscepticism is an insufficient common denominator for developing common foreign policy positions in the case of right-wing populism. This thesis is most clearly demonstrated by the part of the political programs, which is devoted to the present and future of European integration. According to Vassilopoulou, Euroscepticism of right-wing populists “is based on a careful balance between representation of interests, electoral politics and party competition.” This means that the content of positions on the “European question” changes in the course of external and internal impulses. The National Rally’s maneuvering strategy is an excellent illustration of this approach. After the unsuccessful parliamentary elections in 2017 and the impulse of Brexit, Marie Le Pen moved from the discourse of the collapse of the EU and the need for Frexit to the discourse of the need to reform the EU.

### **PRRPs and CFSP towards Russia**

The cases we have selected confirm that the “ideal types” of foreign policy orientations [Veerbek and Zaslove, 2017] cannot cover the entire spectrum of foreign policy programs of populist actors and their dynamics, determined, to a large extent, by the nature of the populist phenomenon.

*Tab 1. Foreign policy orientations of RRPPs*

Policy/Party	AfD	UKIP	Fides
CFSP	Denying the CFSP as a structural embodiment of common foreign policy action	Denying the EU foreign policy in general	Support
Russia (before 24 <sup>th</sup> February)	Strategic alliance	Ambivalence	Pragmatic pro-Russianness
Russia (after 24 <sup>th</sup> February)	Dialog with Russia	Anti-Russianness (but with the accusation of the EU)	Limited and pragmatic cooperation with Russia

In general, German right-wing populists most clearly deviate from the norms and content of the CFSP, not accepting it in its current form. For instance, AfD stands for the development of European common foreign policy positions against the restrictions imposed on the sovereign rights of member states to conduct an independent foreign policy; conclusion of separate agreements

between countries on joint actions in certain areas; against the creation of a European army; the abolition of the European External Action Service; the PESCO project and the European Defense Fund. It should be noted that although the AfD speaks of the inadmissibility of CFSP in its current form, it does not pedal foreign policy reform in its programs.

The right-wing variation of UK populism (UKIP) linked the solution to the CFSP's problems with leaving the EU. UKIP is against the creation of a European army and a common European foreign policy that threatens Britain's Anglo-sphere policy, or countries that traditionally have strong ties to Britain. British foreign policy, according to UKIP, should pursue national interests and be based on bilateral agreements.

The party "Fidesz - Hungarian Civil Union" clearly demonstrated the internal and foreign policy vector of development that differed from the countries of Western Europe. As a result, Prime Minister Orbán is striving for greater diversification of foreign policy ties, including China and Russia. The diversification of foreign policy ties is combined with a fairly clear and stable understanding of the logic of national interests, expressed in the inviolability of Hungary's membership in NATO and the European Union. Moreover, Fidesz did not even want to leave the centre-right faction of the European People's Party in the European Parliament.

In this regard, the party demonstrates a positive perception of CFSP without detailed elaboration of its position. Suffice to point out that, in accordance with the 2012 National Security Strategy, the main objective of Hungary's security policy is to promote and strengthen the common foreign and security policy of the European Union, as well as the common security and defense policy, which is an integral part of the first. According to the party program, peace in the Balkans and Ukraine should be achieved with the CFSP as the main instrument.

Populist political programs highlight the internal heterogeneity of the populist phenomenon. The perceptions of Russia can be diametrically opposite or dual, not only at the level of various types of populism (left and right), but also within each of the variations.

All three parties of right-populist coloring included in our analysis (AfD, UKIP, Fidesz) demonstrate a deviation from the perception of Russia in the international arena, recorded in the EU foreign policy documents and the rhetoric of officials. However, this deviation has varying degrees and emphases. In total, three approaches to the perception of Russia can be distinguished: "strategic alliance" (AfD); "Pragmatic pro-Russian" (Fidesz), and "ambivalence" (UKIP).

The "Alternative for Germany", whose leadership made an official visit to Russia at the end of 2020, demonstrates the greatest pro-Russianness and the perception of Russia as a "strategic ally." This is expressed in an integrated approach to cooperation in various fields, from the intensification

of trade and economic ties and cooperation in the energy sector to work within the framework of a pan-European security architecture [Unser ... 2020].

It is important that the AfD not only reminds the German elites of the end of the Cold War and calls for the lifting of sanctions against Russia [Unser ... 2020], but tries to institutionalize the pro-Russian policy. In January 2019, the AfD proposed to promote "cooperation, not confrontation with Russia" However, in a vote in the German parliament, the proposal was rejected [Für eine ...]. In 2017 and 2019, the MPs from the party also promoted the demand for the lifting of sanctions against Russia and the strengthening of economic relations with it [Sanktionen ...]. In June 2020, the AfD faction deputies prepared a report in which they demanded that the federal government should oppose the extension of the EU sanctions against Russia [Auswärtiges / Antrag ...]. This report clearly demonstrates the threat to the achieved solidarity in the EU's foreign policy towards Russia.

In the conditions of the CDU / CSU and SPD "cordon sanitaire" around the AfD, which does not allow it to institutionalize the pro-Russian policy in the Bundestag, the focus on strategic cooperation with Russia is a "bait" for the Russian-speaking electorate living in Germany. The share of "Russian Germans" is from 3 to 5% of Germany's population. Until the end of the 2000s, "Russian Germans" voted for the CDU, which still remains the most popular party among Russian-speaking immigrants [Zakharova, 2019]. The situation began to change in connection with the migration crisis of 2015-2016, which demonstrated the irritation of "Russian Germans" with migrants and refugees from the Middle East.

The AfD claims that a third of its support comes from the votes of the Russian Germans [Times ...], but this information is unconfirmed. Rather, judging by the data presented in the literature, we are talking about the support of 15% of the Russian-speaking population [Kretter, 2020]. In the 2017 elections to the Bundestag, AfD nominated six Soviet-born candidates. Two of them - Anton Friesen and Waldemar Herdt - became MPs [Decker, 2020]. "Russian Germans" see AfD as a party promoting their interests and providing political and economic preferences to them, not Muslim migrants, defending traditional values and helping feel "their own among almost their own people" [Zakharova 2019]. Based on this, the factor of "Russian Germans" plays a role in promoting the AfD's international pro-Russian agenda.

The party "Fidesz - Hungarian Civil Union", which grew out of the student anti-communist Alliance of Young Democrats, against the background of the EU crises, has significantly shifted to the right in the past ten years. The party leadership more clearly demonstrated the internal and foreign policy vector of development to its electorate that was different from the countries of Western Europe. As a result, Prime Minister Viktor Orban strives for greater diversification of



foreign policy ties, demonstrating not only openness to dialogue and cooperation with Russia, but a desire to expand ties with China [Chrysogellos, 2017].

The Hungarian prime minister often speaks of the rise of Eurasia and believes that Hungary is in the center of the Berlin-Moscow-Istanbul triangle [Hungary ...]. Like the AfD, Fidesz is regularly noted for criticism of the sanctions policy towards Russia. Back in October 2014, Hungarian Foreign Minister Peter Siyarto criticized the EU sanctions against Russia, questioning their effectiveness [Hungary questions ...]. However, at the level of practical policy, Orbán does not dispute the EU's unity on the issue of sanctions against Russia [Times ...].

Against the background of rather serious contradictions with the Western European elites, who consider Orbán's internal politics an attempt to dismantle the system of checks and balances, the incentive to support Russia in the Hungarian case is an attempt to promote "illiberality" at the national level and to discredit the idea that there is no alternative to the model of liberal democracy promoted by Western European elites [Krastev , 2020]. In this context, solidarity and dialogue with Russia is logical, which also does not resemble the model promoted by "Old Europe".

In its program, the United Kingdom Independence Party demonstrates the "ambivalence" of perception of Russia [Byshok, 2020]. Russia, according to PNC, is Britain's most important partner in the fight against Islamic terrorism. With regard to the Ukrainian crisis, the PNC emphasizes the short-sightedness and ill-considered policy of the EU, and, as a result, argues that British foreign policy should pursue national interests and be based on bilateral agreements [UKIP ...]. The events of the Ukrainian crisis are used to discredit the EU's actions, but not to justify Russia's actions. Nigel Farage, commenting on the beginning of the Ukrainian crisis stated that "We instilled false hope in people in western Ukraine, and they were so excited that they effectively overthrew their elected leader. This provoked Putin, and I think that, frankly, the European Union has blood on its hands in Ukraine" (Osborn, James, 2014).

In the UK case of right-wing populism, the Atlantist component of the country's foreign policy orientation plays a significant role. The "special relationship" with the United States acts as a structural factor for the development of foreign policy positions and creates limited room for maneuver with the "theme of Russia". As a result, Russia is perceived by UKIP as an ally in the fight against Islamic terrorism, but no more.

Despite the recorded deviations from the understanding of solidarity towards Russia, the limited ability to translate programs and attitudes into the foreign policy is clearly manifested. During the debates in the European Parliament during the Ukraine crisis, populist parties resorted to "loud rhetoric", but refrained from institutionalizing it, for example, in the framework of negotiations on

joint resolutions. In other words, populist parties challenge the preservation of solidarity and the European consensus reached in the EU foreign policy, but do not seek to influence the policy outcomes themselves [Cadier, 2019]. In many ways, this thesis manifested itself in the example of the “coalition of changes” of the League and the “5 Star Movement” in Italy in 2018-2019, which were not included in our analysis.

Populists are making concessions to the mainstream in shaping the pro-Russian agenda at the EU level. In the 2019 vote in the European Parliament for a resolution on the equal guilt of the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany in unleashing the Second World War, the Identity and Democracy faction, which includes the AfD, supported the adoption of the document. It should be noted that the voice of the faction turned out to be the least united in comparison with other groups: out of 73 members of the group, 16 abstained.

It would seem that big levers for changing the situation are available to “populism in power”. At the same time, proceeding from the fact that decisions on sanctions are taken by the EU Council on the basis of consensus, the populists in power (Fidesz) do not dispute or limit the EU's ability to use the sanctions mechanism as an instrument of policy towards Russia.

### **Ukrainian Crisis 2021-2022**

Ukrainian crisis 2021-2022 became in many ways an evidence of the instrumental pro-Russian nature of the populist camp and the «chameleonist» character of populism as an ideology. After the 24<sup>th</sup> February of 2022, the AfD as other European political forces condemned Moscow in aggression against Ukraine [Weidel/Chrupalla, 2022]. However, its leaders appeared to be against breaking ties between Moscow and Berlin presuming that it is necessary to conserve the framework for their further dialogue. As the UKIP, the AfD views previous EU and NATO policies towards Ukraine to cause the current crisis in the region and consider sanctions as a useless instrument being hazardous to the German economy primarily [Versagen des Westens, 2022]. Moreover, the Federal executive board of the Party still supports the idea of negotiations between Russia, the EU and the USA devoted to the European security structure and demilitarization, which is able to terminate further confrontation [Bundesvorstand fordert sofortige Einstellung, 2022].

UKIP accused the Russian Federation of international law norms violation [North, 2022]: claiming Vladimir Putin as an aggressor and identifying the Russian policy towards Ukraine as a war, the UKIP adhered to the trend presuming sharp criticism on the part of principle European political forces, including right-wing populist ones. At the same time, remaining the party of hard Euroscepticism, UKIP also scarified the Western position and its previous relations with Ukraine presuming that both Brussels and Moscow are responsible for the current crisis [North, 2022].

According to Pete North [2022] Ukraine is the sphere of Russian vital economic and military interests; consequently, any attempts having been taken by either NATO, or EU to enhance its influence in this region caused further deterioration of geopolitical situation. Furthermore, the UKIP disagrees with the methods implemented by the European Commission and considers diplomatic methods to prevail over such strategies as arms supply to Ukraine or Europe direct participation in this conflict [North, 2022].

As for Fidesz, which representatives define the Hungarian foreign policy, this party also reacted negatively to Russian actions in Ukraine and supported first EU sanctions against Moscow [Számunkra a Magyar, 2022]. However, the further discussions in Brussels dedicated to the probable embargo on Russian gas and oil were met in Budapest unfavorably. Fidesz leaders are against any sanctions that may affect Hungarian energetic sector as the Russian Federation is the principal exporter of hydrocarbons. Moreover, Fidesz proved its readiness to counter the official EU position in case of its contradictions with Hungarian interests: for example, Hungary was the first EU country to agree pay for gas on the scheme proposed by Russia. Finally, as all previous right-wing populist parties, Fidesz supported diplomacy as a primary instrument to terminate the conflict and opposed the possibility usages of the territory of Hungary for the arms transfers to Ukraine [Nem engedélyezzük halált, 2022]. Of the three cases analyzed, it was Fidesz who largely retained its original state of pragmatic approach, although the pro-Russian rhetoric and intentions were reduced.

Summing up, the reaction of right-wing populist parties to the Ukrainian crisis 2021-2022 confirms the fact that right-wing populism quite easily adjusts its orientations and approaches towards Russia, if this is required by the domestic and foreign political situation. The Ukrainian crisis has made the likelihood of bringing their programs to a common denominator even less achievable. Considering that the «theme of Russia» was used instrumentally by the populists to demonstrate the anti-system nature of their party and deviate from the positions of the establishment, this could have been abandoned at the moment of the unprecedented unity of the “collective West”. The adjustment from pro-Russianness occurred with reservations. They use the emphasis on dialogue with Russia, rather, as another opportunity to shift responsibility for ineffective and/or unpopular decisions in the course of overcoming the Ukrainian crisis by the European Union to Brussels.

## **Conclusion**

The perception of EU foreign policy should be diametrically opposed or ambivalent, not only at the level of various types of populism (left and right), but also within each of the variations. The analysis of the political programs of the populists showed that they demonstrate diametrically opposite positions regarding the CFSP - from denial (AfD) to strengthening (Fidesz), not allowing

the general external populist policy to be clearly defined. Populists do not develop policy alternatives.

The nature of populism as an ideology, which allows it to combine sometimes mutually exclusive elements in its programs, acts as a barrier to bringing the foreign policy orientations of populists to a common denominator and translating them into a political course upon coming to power. The “theme of Russia” is used by populists instrumentally for the purpose of “domestic consumption.” The perception of Russia depends on the room for maneuver that exists in the interaction of populism with the mainstream in a particular national context.

Our analysis, on the one hand, confirms the thesis voiced in the academic literature that populist parties promote the discourse of realpolitik and the primacy of national interests in international politics. This is contrary to the values and ideas that underlie EU foreign policy. Populists, especially in the right-wing variation, reinforce their vision of sovereign nation states asserting their interests without reference to universal values or prior institutional obligations [Cryssoygelos 2017]. On the other hand, limitations for the synchronization of populists' foreign policy positions represent the fragmented nature of populism as an ideology and its gradual mainstreamization in the event of coming to power. The latter leads to the fact that foreign policy issues act as a bargaining chip in negotiating with the political forces of the mainstream.

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