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Who are the “Putinversteher” in the European Parliament? Far-right and far-left parties in the European Parliament and their pro-Russia stances

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Abstract

Previous research on pro-Russian parties in the European Parliament (EP) has primarily used quantitative methodologies, providing limited insight into the nuanced foreign policy positions of far-right and far-left parties towards Russia. This paper aims to address this gap by mapping out the pro-Russian themes of far-right and far-left parties in the EP following the 2014 annexation of Crimea, which led to a deterioration in EU-Russia relations. Drawing on existing research, an analytical framework comprising six key themes defining a “pro-Russian position” is developed and applied to analyse Russia-related debates in the EP using thematic content analysis. The findings reveal a convergence between far-right and far-left parties in their attitudes towards Russia. Both express ideological affinity towards Russia. Furthermore, the far right and the far left are sceptical towards NATO and the EU, arguing that they provoked Russia to invade Ukraine. Furthermore, these parties hold revisionist views on Ukraine, such as calling the Maidan revolution a “coup” and viewing Crimea as part of Russia. Far-right and far-left actors in the EP are also against sanctioning Russia, arguing that they have failed to achieve their objectives and have inflicted significant damage on Europe’s economy. Instead, they advocate for the removal of sanctions and closer ties with Russia. This study contributes to the literature on partisan foreign policy and research on far-right and far-left parties.

Abbreviations

EFD	Europe of Freedom and Democracy
EFDD	Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy
ENF	Europe of Nations and Freedom
EP	European Parliament
EU	European Union
FPA	Foreign policy analysis
FPÖ	Freedom Party of Austria (<i>Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs</i>)
GUE/NGL	The Left in the European Parliament
ID	Identity and Democracy
MEP	Member of the European Parliament
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
RN	National Rally (<i>Rassemblement National</i>)
UK	United Kingdom
USA, US	United States of America

Table of Contents

1.	Introduction	5
2.	Literature review	9
2.1.	Defining the far right and the far left	9
2.2.	Foreign policy positions of political parties.....	9
2.3.	External relations in the European Parliament	11
2.4.	Foreign policy positions of far-right and far-left parties.....	12
2.5.	Summary and gaps in literature	18
3.	Research design.....	20
3.1.	Methodology	20
3.2.	Case selection	21
3.3.	Material	23
3.4.	Limitations	24
4.	Analytical framework.....	26
5.	Analysis	31
5.1.	Far left	31
5.2.	Far right	39
5.3.	Comparison between the far left and the far right.....	46
5.4.	Change of positions after the 2022 invasion of Ukraine	47
6.	Discussion	50
7.	Conclusion	53
8.	References	56
	Appendix A.....	64
	Appendix B.....	65

1. Introduction

While EU-Russia relations already began to deteriorate following Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea, the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine marked a turning point in these relations. This aggressive act triggered swift condemnation from the EU, culminating in unprecedented sanctions and the severing of almost all economic ties with Russia (Meister, 2022). The European Parliament (EP) has also become increasingly vocal regarding Russia-related issues, for instance, declaring Russia a state sponsor of terrorism (European Parliament, 2022c). Previously overlooked in the EU's external relations, the EP's powers have expanded since the Lisbon Treaty, and its influence on the EU's foreign policy continues to grow (Goinard, 2020; Servent, 2014). Recent years have seen a growth in research concerning partisan foreign policy in the EP, finding that foreign policy positions are predominantly contested along party-ideological lines rather than national lines (Otjes et al., 2023; Raunio & Wagner, 2020a, 2021).

European political party foreign policy positions towards Russia were of limited interest to scholars only a decade ago. This is hardly surprising as before Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea, most European political parties paid little attention to Russia. In fact, most parties generally viewed Russia positively or at least neutrally (Onderco, 2019). This changed rapidly following the 2014 annexation of Crimea, prompting most European political parties to take a critical stance towards Russia and its behaviour in the international arena (Onderco, 2019). Yet, several European parties continue to maintain foreign policy positions that are accommodating towards Russia (Braghioli, 2023; Golosov, 2020; Onderco, 2019). In the EP, far-right and far-left parties are the most inclined to vote pro-Russia (Golosov, 2020).

Previous studies investigating pro-Russian parties in the EP predominantly relied on quantitative methodologies, scratching only the surface of the pro-Russian stances of far-right and far-left parties in the EP. Therefore, there remains a gap in our knowledge regarding a comprehensive understanding of what constitutes the pro-

Russian foreign policy positions of far-right and far-left parties in the EP. This paper aims to address this gap by mapping out the pro-Russian themes of far-right and far-left parties in the EP by addressing the following research question: “What key themes constitute the pro-Russian positions of far-right and far-left parties in the European Parliament?”. With the EP election in sight and the projected success of extreme and populist actors (Wax, 2024a), the time is ripe to thoroughly examine the positions of far-right and far-left parties in the EP towards Russia.

Far-right political parties are often seen as the “usual suspects” for taking pro-Russian positions, due to their ideological alignment with the conservative elements of Russia’s ideology and their view of Russia as an “alternative ally” to the EU and NATO (Klapsis, 2015). Therefore, in the last decade, we have seen increased scholarship examining the positions of European far-right parties towards Russia (Klapsis, 2015; Lemke, 2020; Political Capital Institute, 2014; Shekhovtsov, 2017; Wondreys, 2023). The media has also closely followed this topic, particularly scrutinising Marine Le Pen, the French presidential candidate from the far-right National Rally. She attracted significant attention for her meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin, her party’s acceptance of a loan from a Russian-linked bank, and her recognition of Crimea as part of Russia following its widely condemned annexation in 2014 (Basso, 2023; Geoffroy & Vaudano, 2022).

However, some authors have suggested that the European far-left might be equally or even more pro-Russian than their far-right counterparts (Braghioli & Makarychev, 2016; Golosov, 2020). For instance, when Sahra Wagenknecht of Germany’s The Left party argued that Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014 was justified due to its “legitimate interests in the region”, the German newspaper Der Spiegel coined the term “Putinversteher” (Putin understander) to describe politicians who empathize with Vladimir Putin (Reinbold, 2014). Hence, this paper aims to bridge the existing but often separate scholarship on the far right and far left stances on Russia by carefully mapping out the positions of both far-right (ID Group, ENF, EFD and EFDD) and far-left (The Left Group) groups in the EP. Furthermore, by

examining both groupings we can better understand why these extreme actors converge on Russia.

The EP is an interesting setting to examine due to various reasons. First, it represents some 448 million people (Eurostat, 2024) living in the vicinity of Russia. Second, following the Lisbon Treaty, the EP has gained increased institutional power and autonomy in foreign affairs (Raunio & Wagner, 2020a). Third, most research focusing on the far right and far left's positions toward Russia has primarily explored national contexts (Greene, 2023; Lemke, 2020; Onderco, 2019; Ostermann & Stahl, 2022; Political Capital Institute, 2014), making the supranational EP the perfect setting to test if previous findings from national settings can be applied to a pan-European scale. Moreover, the European elections in June 2024 are expected to see significant gains for far-right and populist parties (Wax, 2024a). Examples from national governments show that far-right and populist actors are likely to take pro-Russian positions. For instance, Hungary's far-right Prime Minister Viktor Orban has been deemed as "Putin's buddy" for maintaining accommodating policies towards Russia even after the 2022 invasion of Ukraine (Barbara et al., 2023). Similarly, since the populist Prime Minister Robert Fico's return to power in 2023, Slovakia has also taken a more pro-Russia position (Hornak & Whitelaw, 2024). Therefore, if these actors gain influence over policy-making, this investigation will equip us with tools to make sense of how a potentially more populist and extreme EP may approach Russia.

Drawing from existing research on the foreign policy positions of far-right and far-left political parties, this paper presents an original analytical framework consisting of six key themes which constitute a "pro-Russian position": 1) an ideological affinity towards Russia; 2) anti-Atlanticism and Euroscepticism; 3) advocating for deeper political and economic ties with Russia; 4) opposition to sanctioning Russia; 5) delegitimizing post-Maidan Ukraine and post-2008 Georgia; and 6) viewing conflicts in Ukraine and Georgia as a double responsibility of Russia and the EU/NATO. The primary material for this study is drawn from debates in the EP concerning Russia. Only debates after 2014 are examined, as this corresponds with the annexation of

Crimea, which prompted European political parties to pay more attention towards Russia. The relevant debates were imported into Taguette, a qualitative data analysis tool, and subsequently analysed and coded into themes. The results are presented in a fashion corresponding to the identified themes, with distinct chapters dedicated to far-right and far-left parties within the EP.

The findings reveal a surprising convergence between the far-right and far-left parties in the EP in their stance towards Russia, highlighting a shared narrative across six themes. Both parties show ideological affinity towards Russia, with far-right groups praising Russia's conservative policies and the far left commending its anti-fascist stance. They express deep scepticism towards NATO and the EU, accusing them of escalating tensions with Russia. When discussing Russia's military engagements and human rights record, these MEPs frequently deflect blame towards NATO's involvement in countries like Iraq and Afghanistan. Furthermore, far-right and far-left parties view conflicts in Ukraine and Georgia as a double responsibility of Russia and the EU/NATO, arguing that Western countries have provoked Russia and are not interested in fostering peace. These parties also tend to have revisionist views on Georgia and Ukraine, regarding these countries as part of Russia's sphere of influence, refusing to recognise Russia's annexation of Crimea and calling the pro-European revolutions as illegitimate "coups". Furthermore, far-right and far-left parties in the EP advocate for renewed political and economic connections with Russia, calling to abolish existing sanctions, which they argue have been more detrimental to Europe's economy and ineffective in achieving their intended goals.

This study contributes to the broader research on far-right and far-left parties, partisan foreign policy, and far-right and far-left party positions on Russia in particular. By identifying key pro-Russian themes of far-right and far-left parties in the EP, it offers insights with a high generalizability potential to national settings across European countries. Moreover, the findings of this study are particularly relevant before the 2024 European Parliament elections, potentially assisting in informing voters about the foreign policy stances of political parties in the EP.

2. Literature review

This section begins with concise definitions of far-right and far-left parties before moving forward to cover previous research on partisan foreign policy stances. Furthermore, it briefly examines external relations within the EP, followed by prior research on far-right and far-left party positions in Russia. Finally, it concludes with a summary outlining the existing contributions and identifying gaps in the literature.

2.1. Defining the far right and the far left

Before delving into the foreign policy positions of far-right and far-left parties, it is important to establish clear definitions of what constitutes the “far right” and the “far left”. This paper adopts the term “far right” as an umbrella concept used by Pirro (2023), “to refer to the “(populist) radical” and “extreme” variants of right-wing politics. It is, by definition, a generic term used to identify and bring together collective actors located on the rightmost end of the ideological left-right spectrum” (p. 103). Furthermore, according to March (2008), “far left parties are those that define themselves as to the left of, and not merely on the left of social democracy, which they see as insufficiently left-wing or even as not left-wing at all” (p. 126).

2.2. Foreign policy positions of political parties

Recognising Onderco’s (2019) observation that scholars exploring the ties between far-right, populist parties and Russia have largely overlooked the growing research on the role of political parties in foreign policy, this literature review accounts for the recent developments in this field. While many studies have explored the positions of national parties on domestic issues, such as economic policy and welfare state matters, party positions regarding foreign policy have attracted comparatively less scholarly attention beyond the case of the USA (Alden & Aran, 2016; Cicchi et al., 2020; Raunio & Wagner, 2020b). Given the still popular realist concept of states as unitary actors driven by the “national interest”, political parties have also been the “neglected element” among international relations scholars (Alden & Aran, 2016; Kaarbo, 1996). Despite

this, Alden and Aran (2016) argue that “political parties can be seen as the key site for a number of activities attributed in FPA [foreign policy analysis] to domestic sources of foreign policy” (p. 80). Political parties simultaneously are agenda setters in foreign policy (through ideological discourses), agenda followers and interest aggregators (Alden & Aran, 2016). Furthermore, recent studies challenge the idea that “politics stops at the water’s edge”. They reveal that political parties hold systematically different views on various foreign policy questions, and these views can have a genuine impact on actual foreign policy decision-making (Haesebrouck & Mello, 2020; Hofmann & Martill, 2021; Raunio & Wagner, 2020b).

The positions of political parties on foreign policy are primarily structured along the left-right dimension (Haesebrouck & Mello, 2020; Raunio & Wagner, 2020a). The values underpinning parties’ stances on domestic issues, based on specific moral views on how society should be ordered, often also guide their foreign policy. Therefore, we can expect differences in foreign policy positions between left-wing and right-wing parties (Rathbun, 2004). Leftist parties are generally more “pacifist” when it comes to using force, favouring international agreements and multilateralism instead (Rathbun, 2004; Wagner, 2020). Furthermore, left-wing parties pursue an inclusive foreign policy that stresses the importance of equality both domestically and internationally, promotes human rights treaties, supports social and environmental initiatives, and focuses on the protection of minorities and the underprivileged. They also support development aid and international financial institutions (Raunio & Wagner, 2020b; Simmons, 2009; Thérien & Noël, 2000). On the other side of the political spectrum, right-wing parties are more likely to be more “hawkish”, supporting increased defence spending, free trade, military alliances, and the protection of the “national interest”. Right-wing parties are generally more pro-free trade than leftist parties who advocate protectionism. Furthermore, populist and far-right parties are very sceptical of development aid (Milner & Judkins, 2004; Rathbun, 2004; Raunio & Wagner, 2020b).

2.3. External relations in the European Parliament

The influence of the EP on the EU's foreign policy remains limited (Wisniewski, 2013). However, after the implementation of the Lisbon Treaty, the EP has broader powers in the realm of external relations, thus increasing its influence over the EU's foreign policy (Goinard, 2020; Servent, 2014). The EP has leverage over the EU's foreign policy due to its role as a co-legislator in external affairs such as humanitarian aid, trade, and cooperation with third countries (Goinard, 2020). Furthermore, the EP can also approve or reject international agreements, and the EP notably displayed its agency when in February 2010 it voted against the ratification of the SWIFT Agreement on bank data transfers between the EU and the USA (Goinard, 2020; Servent, 2014). Moreover, the EP's foreign relations role should not be underestimated, given its efforts in promoting democratisation and human rights abroad, as well as its dual roles as an interlocutor and agenda-setter (Rosén, 2015).

In line with evidence from national parliaments, the left-right dimension appears to be the most significant predictor of party positions in the EP as well, both regarding domestic issues (Hix, 2001) and external issues (Otjes et al., 2023; Raunio & Wagner, 2020a, 2021). While international crises tend to create a “rallyaround-the-flag” effect that makes criticism of the government look inappropriate, this is not the case with the EP (Raunio & Wagner, 2020b). In contrast to other parliaments such as the US Congress, Raunio and Wagner (2020a) find that “in the EP external relations are not exempted from party politics. MEPs do not rally around an EU flag when they vote on external relations. Nor do MEPs from the same countries reach higher levels of unity when it comes to foreign affairs” (p. 548). Thus, foreign policy is not a “special case” in the EP and external relations votes are structured along a left-right dimension (highlighting the main cleavage in the EP). In other words, external policy is politicized in the EP, and coalition partners in external relations are very close to the ones in different fields (Raunio & Wagner, 2020a). Furthermore, external relations are not structured along conflicting national interests, as MEPs do not vote as national blocs on issues related to external affairs (Otjes et al., 2023; Raunio & Wagner, 2020a).

However, Otjes et al. (2023) find that MEPs with similar positions on EU integration are more likely to vote similarly on foreign policy issues.

2.4. Foreign policy positions of far-right and far-left parties

Until a decade ago, parties in the EU generally portrayed Russia in a positive or at least neutral light in their manifestos, not perceiving the neighbouring state as a threat. However, the 2014 annexation of Crimea marked a “breaking point” for many European parties and their stance towards Russia, with the majority becoming increasingly critical in response to Russia’s aggression (Golosov, 2020; Onderco, 2019). Despite this, some European political parties stayed loyal to Russia (Braghioli & Makarychev, 2016). Recent literature has begun identifying the party groups in Europe that have a positive stance on Russia. The far-right has emerged as a “usual suspect” in literature (Braghioli & Makarychev, 2016; Chryssogelos, 2010; Futak-Campbell, 2020; Greene, 2023; Klapsis, 2015; Lemke, 2020; Ostermann & Stahl, 2022; Political Capital Institute, 2014; Shekhovtsov, 2017), albeit far-left parties in Europe also appear to take pro-Russian positions (Braghioli, 2015; Chryssogelos, 2010; Golosov, 2020). While research has primarily focused on far-right parties’ stances on Russia, these insights could help develop an analytical framework applicable to the far-left as well.

Previous studies have mostly explored national parties, finding that the main pro-Russian parties on the European far-right include France’s National Rally (RN), Alternative for Germany (AfD), UK Independence Party, the Flemish *Vlaams Belang* in Belgium, Northern League in Italy, and the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) (Braghioli, 2015; Klapsis, 2015; Ostermann & Stahl, 2022). On the far left, the main pro-Russian parties in Europe include Germany’s The Left, Spain’s *Podemos*, the Party of Italian Communists, the French Communist Party, and *Syriza* in Greece. (Braghioli & Makarychev, 2016). As previously discussed, the left-right scale matters in shaping partisan foreign policy positions, and the case of attitudes towards Russia is no exception. Chryssogelos (2010) was among the first scholars to identify that pro-Russian parties lie on the political fringes, as both far-right and far-left parties seem

to be “united by a common positive approach towards Russia” (p. 273). Braghieri and Makarychev (2016) also find that pro-Russian parties are primarily found within the far right and the far left. Golosov’s (2020) roll-call vote analysis shows that this pattern repeats in the EP, with “Putin-sympathizer parties” lying across both ends of the left-right spectrum. This might suggest that far-right and far-left parties share an ideological affinity towards Russia.

Why do far-right and far-left parties adopt pro-Russian stances? Golosov (2020) offers four non-mutually exclusive possible explanations about why (far-right and far-left) European parties take Russia-friendly positions: “(1) The foreign policy linkage; (2) The ideological radicalism linkage; (3) The right-wing linkage (4) The populist linkage” (p. 54). Among these, Golosov (2020) finds that the foreign policy linkage is the strongest one. In other words, these parties share a similar position on foreign policy, and one of the most profound of them is opposing European integration. One of the main reasons why we see policy congruence among the far-right and the far-left on Russia is because they are “anti-system parties” (Golosov, 2020). According to Golosov (2020), “[t]hese parties are united by their ideological radicalism, whether left-wing or right-wing. They reject the contemporary liberal democratic order and/or the contemporary form of capitalism” (p. 61). Thus, the author argues that far-right and the far-left parties in Europe take a favourable stance on Russia because they see Putin’s Russia as an alternative to mainstream Western politics.

But how can parties with radically conflicting ideologies converge on Russia? Braghieri and Makarychev (2016) have an interesting contribution to this debate, arguing that this is the result of the Kremlin’s “trans-ideological approach” towards Europe, described “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” (p. 214). They note that the main goals of this strategy are to reduce the potentially explosive contradictions between these partners’ divergent ideological positions (for instance, far-right vs. far-left) and to maximise external political support,

particularly from non-mainstream and highly ideological partners. The Kremlin strategically uses targeted ideological messaging to appeal to different groups, invoking a mythic Soviet anti-fascist past for the far left and traditional Christian values for the far right. Despite their contradictory ideological implications, these messages showcase a pragmatic, trans-ideological approach that transcends traditional left-right boundaries through diverse communication strategies (Braghiroli & Makarychev, 2016).

According to Klapsis (2015), “far-right parties across Europe are attracted by Putin’s ultra-conservative and semi-authoritarian form of governance. They see it as a model that, if given the chance, they might be willing to follow. This common approach on a number of issues forms the basis of the ideological connection between European far-right parties and the Kremlin.” (p. 22). For example, Hungary’s far-right Prime Minister Viktor Orban has praised Putin’s Russia as a model of a successful nation and has mirrored Putin’s crackdown on Russian liberal NGOs in Hungary (Braghiroli & Makarychev, 2016). The “protection of conservative and family values” is another topic which has made various European far-right parties appreciate Russia. The Russian government says that Europe has become too tolerant, immoral and untraditional, and European far-right parties agree with this idea (Braghiroli & Makarychev, 2016). Furthermore, Shekhovtsov (2017) argues that far-right parties view Putin’s Russia as an ally in opposing Western liberal democracy and multiculturalism, hoping that a future alliance with Moscow will help them rebuild their idealised nation-state and “take our country back”. Perhaps one of the most profound manifestations of the European far-right’s affinity for Russia is when members of far-right parties like the FPÖ and RN attended Crimea’s secessionist referendum in March 2014 as “international observers” to legitimise the falsified results (Klapsis, 2015; Shekhovtsov, 2017).

Interestingly, far-left parties also share an ideological affinity towards Russia. The European far left is strongly anti-fascist and they have an uncritical memory of the Soviet victory over Nazism in World War II. Therefore, far-left parties in Europe

are tightly captured by the attractiveness of Putin's functional use of anti-fascist rhetoric. (Braghioli & Makarychev, 2016; Chryssogelos, 2010). According to Braghioli and Makarychev (2016), this explains why the far left supported the so-called "anti-fascist" pro-Russian rebels in Eastern Ukraine.

Populism is another key feature shared by the pro-Russian parties on the far left and the far right (Balfour et al., 2016; Chryssogelos, 2010; Golosov, 2020). Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017) define populism as a "thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps, "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" (p. 6). In fact, Chryssogelos (2010) finds populism as the key feature, which unites the far right and the far left (and their foreign policy positions). The populist right and the left in Europe share a strong dislike towards the modernisation and liberalisation of society and the economy – this view shapes their foreign policies which challenge the concept of "the West" (Chryssogelos, 2010).

Despite their different origins and ideologies, both far-right and far-left political parties in Europe are Eurosceptic, consistently opposing the project of European integration (Braun et al., 2019; Chryssogelos, 2010; Golosov, 2020; Halikiopoulou et al., 2012; Rohrschneider & Whitefield, 2016). Halikiopoulou et al. (2012) argue that the strong Eurosceptic nature of both far-right and far-left parties can be attributed to the "paradoxical role of nationalism as a central element in both party families" (p. 504). Furthermore, for these parties "European integration is seen as a threat to the autonomy, unity and identity of the nation. The radical right expresses this from a predominantly ethnic viewpoint, while the radical left adopts a predominantly civic perspective" (Halikiopoulou et al., 2012, p. 506). According to Klapsis (2015), far-right leaders across Europe oppose European integration and the transfer of sovereign rights to the EU, viewing it as a threat to national sovereignty and advocating for its dissolution. He argues that far-right leaders view Putin as a defender of national

sovereignty aligned with their nationalist ideals, looking to Russia to potentially help dissolve the EU and support European nations post-EU.

Anti-Americanism is another foreign policy position taken by both the far-right and the far-left, albeit their reasons for taking such a stance are different (Chryssogelos, 2010). The European far right sees the United States as an “omnipresent superpower”, whose power politics weaken the sovereignty of nation-states. Far-right parties view the nation-state as an ethnic and homogenous community, and the USA’s promotion of a globalising culture goes against this (Chryssogelos, 2010). Interestingly, France’s RN and FPÖ were rather pro-USA as anti-communist parties during the Cold War, however, after the end of the Cold War, they became increasingly anti-American as they saw the USA grow into a global hegemon which threatens the economic, political and cultural sovereignty of nation-states. However, all far-right parties in Europe do not share this aversion towards the USA – some, such as the Danish People’s Party, are supportive of the USA. Interestingly, anti-American parties like France’s RN shifted to a favourable view of the USA when their ideological ally, Donald Trump, was elected (Ostermann & Stahl, 2022).

The far left, on the other hand, takes an anti-American position because it allows them to “aim its critique at the structure of the global economic system and the pace of globalisation that is apparently leading to radical deregulation and the weakening of the nation-state vis-à-vis financial and transnational economic actors” (Chryssogelos, 2010, p. 270). Far-left parties also view the USA as a threat to the traditional concept of the nation-state – albeit they see it more in economic, not ethnic terms. The far-left blames the US-led globalisation for the increasing exploitation of the working class. In other words, the far left’s opposition to the USA can be seen as a revamped version of the traditional communist anti-Americanism (Chryssogelos, 2010). According to Braghieri and Makarychev (2016), ‘Europe’s subordination to the US interests represents one of the most persistent claims of these parties, which seems to play directly in Putin’s hands’ (p. 225).

The European far-left is also anti-Atlanticist, taking critical positions on NATO (Braghioli & Makarychev, 2016; Chryssogelos, 2010, 2021). “For the Left, courting Russia complements its ideas on NATO and the international system: whereas NATO is seen as the choice for war, Russia is seen as a choice for peace” (Chryssogelos, 2010, p. 274). The far-left has opposed NATO and US-led interventions in the Middle East and the Balkans in the previous 25 years. However, the far-left is not anti-internationalist, nor it is opposed to the liberal international order as such – the core issue is the hegemonic position of the United States in the international area and organisations such as NATO. For this reason, many far-left parties have called for their respective countries’ withdrawal from NATO, including Germany’s Die Linke, and France’s La France Insoumis (Chryssogelos, 2021). It seems that far-right parties are more divided on NATO, for instance, Austria’s Freedom Party is anti-NATO, while Poland’s Law and Justice is strongly pro-NATO (Chryssogelos, 2021).

Far-right and far-left parties see Russia as a potential ally, which will help Europe counterweight the USA in a multipolar world. These “anti-system parties” see international politics in terms of realpolitik and material interest, which by default contradicts the ideas of European integration (Chryssogelos, 2010, 2021). For example, Germany’s far-left Die Linke is in favour of creating a collective security system in Europe together with Russia. While Die Linke acknowledges Russian aggression in Ukraine and Syria, it regards them as a reaction to Western aggression. Furthermore, Die Linke also does not speak out on the human rights abuses conducted by the Russian government, e.g. the poisoning of lead opposition figure Alexei Navalny (Chryssogelos, 2021). Ostermann and Stahl’s (2022) study of the foreign policy positions of two prominent Western European far-right parties AfD and RN found that they view Russia as a great power in a multipolar system and condone its sovereigntist and illiberal foreign policy while arguing for more cooperation.

Far-right and far-left parties often justify Russia’s interventions in other sovereign states, notably Ukraine. For example, the far-right leader of RN, Marie Le Pen, has said that Russia’s annexation of Crimea is a legitimate reaction to the EU’s

interference in Ukraine (when allegedly the EU led a “coup” against the pro-Russian president Yanukovych) (Braghioli & Makarychev, 2016). The far left is also rather supportive of the Russian stance. They see the developments in Ukraine as the West’s fault, and they also see Putin as less dangerous than European and American imperialism (Braghioli & Makarychev, 2016).

Previous literature also shows that various European far-right and far-left parties are against sanctioning Russia for its actions in Ukraine (Chryssogelos, 2021). For example, Italy’s far-right Lega has strongly opposed sanctioning Russia, and its leader Salvini has labelled sanctions against Russia as a threat to the national interest and the economy (Braghioli & Makarychev, 2016). Even after the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, far-right parties such as RN have been staunchly opposing sanctions against Russia, arguing that sanctions are counterproductive and harm European citizens (Fagerholm, 2024). The far-left is also critical of sanctioning Russia, and according to Bragholt and Makarychev (2016), “the radical left’s understanding of national sovereignty and interests is represented by their critical stance towards EU’s punitive measures against Russia” (p. 224).

2.5. Summary and gaps in literature

In summary, existing literature shows that partisan foreign policy positions do indeed vary, diverging from the traditional realist view that “politics stops at the water’s edge”. Ideology emerges as the primary determinant of these stances, including within the EP. Furthermore, far-right and far-left parties tend to be the most pro-Russian parties in EU member states. They share an ideological affinity towards Russia and strongly criticise actions that isolate Russia or impose sanctions. In fact, they advocate for greater cooperation with Russia. These parties are Eurosceptic and anti-American, preferring to see Russia as an alternative to the EU and NATO. Lastly, far-right and far-left parties often justify Russia’s interventions in other sovereign states, notably failing to recognise Russia’s wrongdoings in the annexation of Crimea.

It is important to note that most studies have focused on national parties, with a comparatively greater emphasis on the far right. While prior research has identified that pro-Russia parties in the EP are usually situated on both the far-right and far-left ends of the political spectrum, there is still a significant gap regarding a detailed examination of the specific nature of these pro-Russia positions held by far-right and far-left groupings in the EP.

3. Research design

This section outlines the research design employed in the study to answer the proposed research question, elaborating on the methodology, cases and material. It concludes by examining potential study limitations, validity, and reliability.

3.1. Methodology

This paper examines the stances of far-left and far-right political parties in the EP towards Russia by mapping out the key themes which constitute the pro-Russian rhetoric of these parties. The central research question, “What key themes constitute the pro-Russian positions of far-right and far-left parties in the European Parliament?”, is explored through a qualitative approach employing thematic content analysis. According to Pennings et al. (2006), “[t]hematic content analysis aims at an assessment of the (frequency of the) presence of specified themes, issues, actors, states of affairs, words or ideas in the texts or visuals to be analysed” (p. 58). Therefore, this method is particularly suited for a detailed and nuanced analysis of textual material, enabling the identification and assessment of key themes constituting the far-right and far-left party positions towards Russia. A qualitative approach was chosen over a quantitative one because it facilitates a nuanced analysis of the pro-Russia themes, going beyond simple quantifications of pro-Russian statements. This approach allows for the uncovering of nuances in the pro-Russia positions of far-right and far-left parties that a quantitative approach might overlook, identifying subtle differences in their statements.

For this analysis, debates in the EP concerning Russia (e.g., the April 17, 2018 debate on the “Situation in Russia”) and debates concerning Russia’s neighbouring countries which it has invaded (e.g., the February 2, 2023 debate on the “Preparation of the EU-Ukraine Summit”) from 2014 to 2024 were selected. This timeframe was chosen as 2014 represents a critical point in EU-Russia relations, marked by Russia’s annexation of Crimea. Following this, EU-Russia relations deteriorated, prompting increased scrutiny of Russia by European political parties (Onderco, 2019). The

selected debates were imported into Taguette, a qualitative data analysis tool, and subsequently analysed and coded into themes using a deductive approach informed by previous literature and the analytical framework.

Responding to Raunio and Wagner's (2020a) calls for "further research on individual foreign policy questions in the EP or other legislatures," (p. 560) this paper focuses on the European level, examining the EP in particular. The EP is a compelling setting for this study for various reasons. Since the Lisbon Treaty, the EP has seen a growing institutional role and increased autonomy in foreign relations (Goinard, 2020). Although its influence on foreign affairs is still limited, the EP's impact can no longer be ignored. Furthermore, while most empirical research on this subject has concentrated on the member-state level, primarily examining national parties (Greene, 2023; Lemke, 2020; Onderco, 2019; Ostermann & Stahl, 2022), the European level has received comparatively less scholarly attention (Braghioli, 2015; Otjes et al., 2023). With the 2024 European Elections in sight and the projected success of far-right and populist groups (Wax, 2024a), understanding how these parties position themselves on Russia becomes crucial, particularly if traditional parties require the support of these groups to form a coalition. An additional advantage of studying the EP is its representation of all EU member states and the full spectrum of political ideologies, including both far-right and far-left parties. Otjes et al. (2023) highlight this, observing that the EP represents the "full geographical and ideological diversity in the EU" (p. 1793).

3.2. Case selection

This paper studies the pro-Russian stances among the far-right and far-left political groups in the EP, rather than focusing on statements by individual MEPs. It is important to acknowledge that several non-inscrit MEPs are infamous for their pro-Russian stances, notably the Latvian MEP Tatjana Ždanoka, who was accused of spying on behalf of the Russian Federal Security Service (Wax, 2024b). While these individual cases are intriguing, this study prioritises the examination of the main

political groups. This methodological choice not only offers greater potential for generalizability but also provides insights into whether pro-Russian sentiments are systematically endorsed or tolerated within the main groups in the EP. Political groups in the EP are more likely to form coalitions and have a significant impact on the EP's foreign policy compared to non-inscrit MEPs. Thus, such an approach ensures that the research produces insights into collective political dynamics rather than isolated individual viewpoints.

While far-right and far-left parties might seem like ideological opposites, they share similar foreign policy preferences, taking anti-American and Eurosceptic positions, and instead prefer closer relations with Russia (Braghioli & Makarychev, 2016; Chryssogelos, 2010). Recent studies also indicate that parties voting pro-Russia in the EP predominantly come from these political extremes (Golosov, 2020; VoteWatch EU, 2022). Therefore, far-right and far-left parties emerge as the “most-likely” cases to take pro-Russian positions in the EP. While there may be pro-Russian MEPs in other political groups, this approach is better suited to uncovering broader, collective patterns rather than isolated instances.

Previous research suggests that the European far right have accommodative positions towards Russia (Butt & Byman, 2020; Klapsis, 2015; Ostermann & Stahl, 2022; Shekhovtsov, 2017), making far-right groups in the EP the “usual suspects” to take pro-Russia positions. Despite their shared ideologies, the far right in the EP has struggled to cooperate and form stable groups, resulting in multiple, often short-lived distinct groups (McDonnell & Werner, 2020). The timeframe of this study covers the seventh through ninth EP, and during this period four distinct far-right groups can be identified: the Europe of Freedom and Democracy (EFD) group in the 7th EP, Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy (EFDD) and Europe of Nations and Freedom (ENF) in the 8th EP and the Identity and Democracy (ID) group in the 9th EP (Manucci, 2021). The European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) present a complex case. While they are self-described “conservatives”, several authors prefer to categorise ECR as far-right (Manucci, 2021; Mudde, 2024). However, unlike the ID group, ECR

maintains a strict anti-Russia and pro-Ukraine stance (Becker & Ondarza, 2024). Notably, ID's Maximillian Krah suggested that differences in foreign policy are the main obstacle to forming a unified far-right “supergroup” in the EP (Deconinck, 2023). Given this study’s focus on mapping out the pro-Russian themes, the ECR will not be included due to their clear opposition to Russia and the differing scholarly views whether this party is indeed far-right, allowing a more targeted investigation.

While the far left’s accommodating positions towards Russia have received comparatively less scholarly attention, recent research indicates that the far left in the EP, specifically The Left Group (GUE/NGL), is also “more-likely” to adopt a Russia-friendly stance (Golosov, 2020; VoteWatch EU, 2022). In contrast to the far right, the far left has been more cohesive in the EP, consistently represented by one main group, The Left (GUE/NGL), from the seventh to the ninth EP sessions. Therefore, the aforementioned far-right and far-left political groups will be the focus of the study, as they are “most-likely” to adopt pro-Russian positions within the EP.

3.3. Material

The primary material for this study consists of debates from the EP related to Russia, selected from 2014 onwards. This year marks a significant turning point in EU-Russia relations due to Russia’s annexation of Crimea, which led to a deterioration of relations and increased scrutiny by European political parties (Onderco, 2019). EP debates are a good primary source of information because they can be publicly accessed via the EP’s official website. Furthermore, they are all interpreted in all the 24 official languages of the EU, making it easier to overcome language barriers and enabling analysis of statements made in any EU language. To identify the relevant debates concerning Russia within the 7th to 9th EP sessions, a search was performed on the EP’s plenary website using the keywords “Russia”, “Ukraine”, “Moldova”, “Crimea” and “Georgia”. These additional keywords besides “Russia” were included because these countries and territories have been subject to military interventions by Russia, and issues related to Russia are frequently discussed in the debates.

In total, 29 debates were identified and analysed. 19 of these debates span from 26 February 2014, marking early discussions on Russia's intervention in Crimea, to 24 February 2022, when Russia launched the full-scale invasion of Ukraine (see Appendix A for a detailed account of these debates). The other 10 examined debates were held after the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, with the most recent being on 6 February 2024 (see Appendix B for a detailed account of these debates). Although 29 debates may appear extensive, it is important to note that speaking time in the EP is allocated based on group size (European Parliament, 2023a). Given that the far-right and far-left groups are relatively small, they make few or no statements in some debates. This prompts analysing a sizeable number of debates to effectively capture their positions on Russia.

3.4. Limitations

This study has several limitations that must be acknowledged. First, it relies exclusively on EP debates concerning Russia-related issues, which may not fully represent all parties' positions due to allocated speaking times and other political considerations, such as simply deciding not to participate in the debate. For example, a pro-Russian MEP can decide not to share their opinion, particularly at a time when mainstream European political parties tend to be strongly critical of the Russian government. This aspect, while beyond the control of the author, potentially overlooks details in party stances towards Russia that are not expressed in the selected debates.

Another limitation involves the nature of qualitative data analysis, introducing the potential for subjectivity in coding and interpretation. However, to mitigate this limitation, a deductive approach is used in the study, and efforts are made to maintain objectivity and consistency throughout the analysis. To enhance validity and reduce bias, the structure of the thematic analysis is informed by existing literature, providing a sound foundation for the interpretation of themes. To improve the study's reliability and replicability, a transparent and detailed outlook of the material and the analytical process is provided. Given that this study has exclusively examined political parties in the EP, a potential limitation is the generalizability of the results to other, national

settings. While generalising the findings to other contexts outside the EU should be approached with caution, the results present a high generalizability potential to member state settings, as the EP itself is a collection of various national parties. This study examines material after the 2014 annexation of Crimea, which significantly impacted EU-Russia relations. Hence, the results might not hold up in periods preceding 2014.

4. Analytical framework

THEMES	INDICATORS	EXAMPLES
Ideological affinity towards Russia (1)	<p>1. “The re-actualization of the neofascist rhetoric” (Braghioli & Makarychev, 2016).</p> <p>2. Praising Russia’s anti-LGBT and “family values” policies.</p> <p>3. Praising other aspects of Russia’s ideology.</p> <p>4. Accusing the West of being Russophobic.</p>	João Ferreira (GUE/NGL): “The rise to power of openly fascist forces, following the coup d'état (European Parliament, 2014d).
Anti-Atlanticism and Euroscepticism (2)	<p>1. Scepticism of NATO, the EU and the USA.</p> <p>2. Redirecting discussions about Russia to criticise NATO’s and the USA’s military interventions in other countries.</p> <p>3. Seeing Russia’s military invasions of neighbouring conflicts as a fault of EU policy.</p>	Jordan Bardella (ID): “By supporting the NATOization of Europe for nearly twenty years, effectively placing us under the American flag, our leaders have missed the opportunities to open a balanced relationship with Russia” (European Parliament, 2022a).
Conflicts in Ukraine and Georgia as a double responsibility of Russia and the EU/NATO (3)	<p>1. Viewing the EU and/or NATO countries as the (only) cause of military interventions in Ukraine and Georgia.</p> <p>2. Underemphasising Russia’s role in invading Ukraine and Georgia.</p>	Sandra Pereira (GUE/NGL): “Much was said in the debate on the situation in Ukraine, but few voices recalled the role and responsibility of the European Union in the situation that exists in that country today” (European Parliament, 2019c).
Delegitimizing post-Maidan Ukraine and post-2008 Georgia (4)	<p>1. Seeing Maidan as a coup and delegitimizing the Maidan revolution.</p> <p>2. Viewing Yanukovych’s government as the legitimate government.</p>	Nigel Farage (EFDD): “We saw Western Ukrainians waving European flags, rioting, setting fire to things and effectively staging a coup d'état which brought down the Ukrainian President, leading to this

	<p>3. Rejecting the illegality of Russia's annexation of Crimea.</p> <p>4. Supporting the pro-Russian separatists in Donbas.</p> <p>5. Justifying the 2008 Russian military intervention in Georgia.</p>	<p>instability" (European Parliament, 2014d).</p> <p>Miloslav Ransdorf (GUE/NGL): "There is also a humanitarian crisis because the gangster regime in Kyiv is organizing a human organs business" (European Parliament, 2015a).</p>
Advocating for deeper political and economic ties with Russia (5)	<p>1. Advocating for closer political ties with Russia.</p> <p>2. Advocating for deeper economic links with Russia.</p>	<p>Thierry Mariani (ID): "The Council of Europe has just reintegrated Russia. I think that it is rather this path that we must follow, that of reestablishing a dialogue. We take the opposite route; we are going to a dead end" (European Parliament, 2019d).</p> <p>James Carver (EFDD): "Our approach to Russia needs to be multi-layered and must take account of Russian national interests" (European Parliament, 2018a).</p>
Opposition to sanctioning Russia (6)	<p>1. Discarding sanctions as ineffective/illegitimate.</p> <p>2. Arguing that sanctions hurt the EU more than they hurt Russia.</p> <p>3. Arguing that sanctions should be abolished.</p>	<p>Bernhard Zimniok (ID): "The sanctions are completely meaningless and only harm us" (European Parliament, 2022b).</p> <p>Mick Wallace (GUE/NGL): "Mr President, a year ago, after German people thought the EU sanctions hurt Germany more than Russia, this sentiment can only be stronger now, as Russia's economy overtook Germany's in August. The Russian sanctions triggered persistent inflation across the EU" (European Parliament, 2023c).</p>

This paper conceptualises and operationalises the variable “pro-Russian position”. In general, the concept of a “pro-Russian position” describes a supportive stance towards the Russian government, Russia’s President Vladimir Putin and Russia’s foreign and domestic policies. Therefore, to effectively distinguish a pro-Russian position, a valid operationalisation is needed. For this purpose, this paper takes as a springboard and further develops the key dimensions of the Kremlin discourse identified by previous literature to identify which themes constitute a “pro-Russian position”.

Prior research indicates that far-right parties have an ideological affinity towards Russia due to its ultra-conservative and authoritarian policies, viewing Putin’s regime as a model and Russia as a guardian of traditional “family values” (Braghioli & Makarychev, 2016; Klapsis, 2015; Shekhovtsov, 2017). Far-left parties resonate with Russia’s ideology, seeing it as a successor to the Soviet Union and its policies, and as an international fighter against fascism (Braghioli & Makarychev, 2016; Chryssogelos, 2010). This brings us to the first theme in the analytical framework: “ideological affinity towards Russia”.

The second theme, “anti-Atlanticism and Euroscepticism”, arises from the far right’s and far left’s anti-American, Eurosceptic and anti-NATO positions. Both party families are critical to the USA’s role as an “omnipresent superpower”, and tend to see Europe as “subordinated” to the USA. In fact, they would prefer the dissolution of the EU and would like to see a Europe without NATO’s presence. For them, Russia is the foreign policy alternative to the USA, NATO and the EU. (Braghioli & Makarychev, 2016; Chryssogelos, 2010; Halikiopoulou et al., 2012).

The anti-Atlanticist and Eurosceptic positions of the far right and the far left are closely related to the third theme, “viewing conflicts in Ukraine and Georgia as a double responsibility of Russia and the EU/NATO”. While these parties might recognise Russia’s wrongdoing in invading Ukraine and escalating the conflict in Georgia, they frequently underplay Russia’s role, portraying it as a response to “Western aggression” (Braghioli & Makarychev, 2016; Chryssogelos, 2021).

Moving on to the fourth theme, far-right and far-left parties are “delegitimizing post-Maidan Ukraine and post-2008 Georgia”. In other words, these parties reject the territorial integrity of Ukraine and Georgia, echoing the Russian narrative that Crimea is rightfully Russian territory and failing to condemn Russia’s annexation of Crimea. They are critical of Ukraine’s pro-European “Maidan revolution” and often view the former pro-Russian government of Viktor Yanukovych as legitimate. Instead, they view the post-Maidan government as a puppet of the “West” and even label it as neo-Nazi (Braghioli & Makarychev, 2016; Klapsis, 2015; Shekhovtsov, 2017).

Furthermore, far-right and far-left actors are advocating for deeper political and economic ties with Russia (5) and opposed to sanctioning Russia (6). Previous literature examining national parties suggests that far-right and far-left parties oppose imposing sanctions on Russia, even in light of its military involvement in Ukraine. Instead, they advocate for re-establishing and expanding economic and political relations with Russia. (Braghioli, 2015; Ostermann & Stahl, 2022)

The themes, summarised in the above analytical framework, will be applied to the debate material in a deductive fashion and analysed with the help of thematic content analysis. To further the reliability of the paper, I present an example of how the coding was performed in an ambitious case using a statement by ENF MEP Jean-Luc Schaffhauser by dividing it in two separate parts:

Mr President, dear colleagues, what you deny to the Crimeans, you grant to the Kosovars. You denounce the illegal occupation of Crimea but you support the illegal occupation of Kosovo. You denounce the Russians but you approve of NATO’s illegal war against Yugoslavia, the sad twentieth anniversary of which we commemorate today. You denounce the referendum in Crimea but you support the illegal declaration of independence of Kosovo, a mafia entity, in 2008, which violated Security Council resolution 1244. You preach the rule of law but you support the putschist power in Kyiv, resulting from a violent coup

d'état – the Maidan – controlled by the United States (European Parliament, 2019a).

The first part of the statement is coded under the theme “anti-Atlanticism and Euroscepticism” (2) because it puts most attention to criticising NATO military interventions and highlighting Western policies as hypocritical. Furthermore, the juxtaposition of Crimea and Kosovo highlights the overarching narrative of Western “double standards”.

Unlike Kosovo and Maidan, not a single shot was fired in Crimea. What you hate about Crimeans is their patriotic desire to return to their historic homeland, Russia. By denying them this right, you are doing like the Soviet dictator Khrushchev who, with an illegal stroke of his pen, also gave Crimea to the Ukrainian Soviet Republic. Your stateless policy is that of the Bolsheviks of 1954! (European Parliament, 2019a).

The second part of the statement is coded under the “Delegitimizing post-Maidan Ukraine and post-2008 Georgia” (4) theme due to its explicit delegitimisation of Ukraine’s territorial integrity and sovereignty over Crimea by invoking a falsified presentation of history. The narrative constructs an image of the Russian annexation of Crimea as a “correction of historical errors”, rather than an act of aggression, thus rejecting Ukraine’s legitimacy over Crimea.

The findings are organised into separate sub-sections for the far left and the far right within the EP, with an additional sub-section dedicated to comparing the stances of these two groups on Russia. It is difficult to overlook the potential influence of the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine on this subject. Although this is not the main focus of the study, a separate sub-section will be devoted to a brief comparison and reflection to assess whether the themes identified are relevant after the 2022 invasion.

5. Analysis

5.1. Far left

The analysis of statements given by MEPs from The Left Group reveals that they have an ideological affinity towards Russia (1). As expected, they do not share Russia's conservative and anti-LGBT views, however, they view Russia as a fighter of neo-Nazism. An analysis of the debates indicates that the most profound manifestation of this narrative is seeing Ukraine's post-Maidan government as a "neo-Nazi" one, a narrative spread by the Russian government with no factual backing. Such a view is taken by several MEPs from The Left group, including João Ferreira: "[n]ot a word about the brutal interference and destabilization of the USA, the EU and NATO in the internal situation of Ukraine which – promoting and supporting far-right, neo-Nazi and xenophobic forces and fomenting the exacerbation of tensions, divisions and cleavages – aims to ensure political, economic and military dominance of this immense country" (European Parliament, 2014b). A similar view is taken by his colleague MEP Javier Couso Permuy: "Who is interested in the fact that there is no good neighbourliness with Russia? Because it is not good neighbourliness to authorize a violent change of government with neo-Nazi elements" (European Parliament, 2014d).

Previous literature suggests that a key characteristic of the contemporary European far-left is Euroscepticism and anti-Atlanticism. Surely, anti-EU and anti-Atlanticist feelings should not make one automatically "pro-Russian". However, the far-left in the European Parliament often invoke their anti-Atlanticist and Eurosceptic stance (2) on topics related to Russia or the neighbouring countries which Russia has invaded – Ukraine and Georgia. Several MEPs also tend to view the ousting of Ukraine's pro-Russian Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovych by protesters in the Maidan revolution as a "coup", allegedly backed by the US and the EU. For example, MEP Miguel Viegas takes this standpoint, arguing that the Maidan revolution was a "coup" backed or even orchestrated by EU and NATO member states: "This coup d'état had the explicit support of the United States of America, the European Union and NATO,

a supreme demonstration of complete hypocrisy and contempt for national institutions and the international order (European Parliament, 2014c).

Furthermore, the far left in the EP is reluctant to criticise the prosecution of the Russian opposition and Russia's meddling in other countries' democratic elections. Instead, they say that the USA, NATO and EU member states are doing the same – so there is no reason for the EP to criticise Russia. This view is highlighted by the speech of MEP Clare Daly from Ireland:

But the reality is that foreign electoral interference has been going on since there were elections. The USA has been interfering on a grand scale not just in South America or the Middle East but actually in the heart of Europe itself. And the only reason we're now invoking the spectre of Russian interference is to blame somebody for the catastrophic electoral failures of the establishment parties in Europe and the failure of neoliberal policies that have left millions of European citizens behind, have left them demoralised and disillusioned (European Parliament, 2019b).

A similar view is taken by the Irish MEP Mick Wallace, denying Russian interference in democratic elections but highlighting American meddling in elections: "America has been meddling and interfering in other countries' elections and democratic processes for over a hundred years and has done so in a ruthless and brutal manner that makes the alleged Russian interference in the 2016 elections in America look like child's play" (European Parliament, 2019b).

While the "mainstream" political groups identify Russia as the aggressor, MEPs from the far left often blame NATO and the USA for pursuing an aggressive policy towards Russia. For example, Portuguese MEP João Ferreira argues that "in conjunction with the USA and NATO, the aggressive policy of siege against Russia continues – threatening security and peace in Europe" (European Parliament, 2014d). MEPs on the far left also view that the anti-Russian sentiment is promoted by American interests and that Europe should not follow the American policy on Russia.

This is highlighted by MEP Javier Couso Permuy: “Dear deputies, ladies deputies: stop the warmongering slogans; stop playing into the hands of those who do not want a Europe with normal relations with its neighbours; stop fuelling the fire in Europe with the gasoline of American interests” (European Parliament, 2014d).

Furthermore, far-left MEPs are particularly concerned about the increasing influence of NATO in the wake of the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. This sentiment was articulated by French MEP Manon Aubry during a debate immediately following the invasion: “The road to peace may be difficult, but it is the only reasonable one. NATO, the military alliance inherited from the Cold War, is not the solution. The international judge of peace is not NATO; it is the UN” (European Parliament, 2022a). Hence, we can see that the far left in the EP is sceptical of NATO’s efforts to broker peace between Russia and Ukraine. They also strongly oppose the EU’s deepening military cooperation with NATO in response to the invasion. Such a view is expressed by MEP Manu Pineda: “We are against war and, precisely for this reason, we cannot support a Resolution that calls for arms and that is referred to as a guarantee of peace in an instrument of war such as NATO” (European Parliament, 2022a).

NATO and the USA are frequently depicted as warmongers in the context of the war in Ukraine, with little interest in brokering peace between Russia and Ukraine. In fact, far-left MEPs tend to view NATO and the USA as complicit in the conflict, portraying them as provocateurs who have pushed Russia into invading Ukraine. This narrative is exemplified in the words of Spanish MEP Manu Pineda: “After decades of policies of pressure and harassment against Russia by the United States and NATO, using the European Union as a tool in the service of these objectives” (European Parliament, 2022b).

From the aforementioned statement, we can also see that MEP Pineda views the European Union as a body that unquestioningly aligns with the foreign policies of the United States, particularly concerning Russia. Furthermore, he sees the relationship between the USA and the EU as unequal, with America leveraging the

EU to fulfil its foreign policy objectives. Conversely, far-left MEPs advocate for the EU to pursue a distinct and autonomous foreign policy approach towards Russia, separate from that of the USA. The far-left opposes the EU's alignment with US policy of supporting Ukraine militarily and isolating Russia. Instead, they advocate for the EU to exert pressure on both Russia and Ukraine to negotiate a peace deal. This perspective is shared by several MEPs from The Left Group, including Spanish MEP Idoia Villanueva Ruiz:

Two years after Putin's invasion of Ukraine, after Europe's subordination to the United States to escalate this war, arming [Ukraine] militarily and not pushing for negotiation processes because it was done for the Ukrainians, are they better off today? Is peace any closer? No. ... But not everyone has lost in these two years: the United States has doubled its gas exports to Europe, becoming the main supplier today. ... The European Union and this Parliament are also responsible for this, whose only response to the conflict has been to defend the interests of the United States and not those of Europe (European Parliament, 2024).

Far-left MEPs also tend to think that NATO is not interested in supporting peace negotiations between Ukraine and Russia, and is instead doing the opposite. For example, such a view is taken by the Irish MEP Mick Wallace: "Why are we still facilitating this senseless and bloody war in Ukraine? Why did NATO block the peace deal that we knew had both Ukrainian and Russian backing in March 2022?" (European Parliament, 2024). The German MEP Özlem Demirel also agrees with this: "But what has NATO been doing since then, apart from rearming in real and verbal terms? Stop it! Why were you silent when Britain and the US torpedoed peace negotiations in Turkey last year?" (European Parliament, 2023b). From these statements, we can see that far-left MEPs acknowledge Russia's responsibility for the war in Ukraine, albeit they also criticise NATO for allegedly trying to sabotage peace negotiations for its interests.

Far-left MEPs also tend to view the conflicts in Ukraine and Georgia as a double responsibility of Russia and the EU/NATO (3). While some MEPs from the Left group do criticise Russia for its military involvement in Ukraine and Georgia, they also highlight that the EU and the USA are also responsible for this. For example, Czech MEP Jiří Maštálka notes that “[the resolution] makes all kinds of references to democracy, proclaims an interest in dialogue with Russia and yet is constructed in such a way as to continue to prevent its resumption. It completely unilaterally accuses Russia of all the sins that can be contained in the text” (European Parliament, 2015b). The far left in the EP views Russia’s invasion of neighbouring countries such as Ukraine and Georgia as the fault of the USA, NATO, and the EU. In practice, this means that far-left MEPs underplay the responsibility of Russia in attacking neighbouring countries and instead argue that the situation in Ukraine and Georgia is the fault of the USA, NATO, and the EU. Such a narrative is highlighted in the speech given by the Portuguese MEP Inês Cristina Zuber from the GUE/NGL group:

It is very clear that the USA, NATO and the EU do have enormous responsibilities in the situation in Ukraine, from now on because they were complicit in the provocations, in instigating violence, in the violation of freedoms and rights and in the crimes of the ultranationalist and fascist forces that were responsible for a coup d'état, itself promoted by the EU (European Parliament, 2014d).

After the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, far-left MEPs acknowledge that Russia started the war but they also note that NATO and the “collective West” should bear responsibility for provoking Russia to invade Ukraine. For example, MEP Manu Pineda argues that “Mr Putin bears the greatest responsibility for this war, but do not sell us the idea that NATO is working for peace, since its growth eastwards over so many years shows that it wants a return to a bipolar world, to a new Cold War” (European Parliament, 2022a). In other words, far-left MEPs argue that while Russia might have started the war, NATO and the West are not particularly interested in stopping the war, and are instead fuelling it. This standpoint can be seen in the statement given by Mick Wallace:

“Also unforgivable is how willing Western leaders are to ensure this becomes a war without end. Instead of calls for ceasefires, dialogue and peace talks, we are deepening Western involvement in the war with no apparent concern for the repercussions” (European Parliament, 2023b).

Furthermore, far-left MEPs view the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine as a “NATO proxy war”, as highlighted by the Irish MEP Mick Wallace: “The NATO proxy war has seen Europe sacrificed for US interests” (European Parliament, 2023c). In other words, the war in Ukraine is seen as a power struggle between the USA and NATO (and sometimes the EU) on one side, and Russia on the other side. Such a view is also taken by the MEP from Germany Özlem Demirel: “A year of war also means a year of brutal power struggle between NATO and Russia on the backs of the people of Ukraine and peoples around the world” (European Parliament, 2023b).

The far-left in the EP is delegitimizing post-Maidan Ukraine and post-2008 Georgia (4). In other words, they see Ukraine and Georgia as part of Russia’s sphere of influence and view the pro-European revolutions in the respective countries as illegitimate “coups”. For example, MEP Jaromír Kohlíček argued that “the situation in Ukraine reminds me very intimately of coup d’etats in banana republics. In this case, however, the coup d’état was not organized by the army, but by an apparently well-trained and supplied group of suitably motivated so-called demonstrators” (European Parliament, 2014a). MEP Miguel Viegas, representing the Left Group, also characterises the ousting of the pro-Russia President Viktor Yanukovych during the Maidan revolution as a “coup”: “This situation [in Ukraine] is the result of a coup d’état that took place last February and which was marked by an escalation of violence and political repression, promoted by the most reactionary sectors of the Ukrainian oligarchy and by forces of a fascist nature” (European Parliament, 2014c).

The far left in the EP also does not acknowledge Russia’s annexation of Crimea, as highlighted by MEP Javier Couso Permuy, who spoke on behalf of the GUE/NGL Group during the “Five years of illegal occupation of Crimea by the Russian

Federation” debate: “Mr. President, today the five years of what you call the occupation of Crimea are being debated here, a definition that jurists such as Professor Reinhard Merkel, member of the German Ethics Council, have questioned for years” (European Parliament, 2019a).

While most “mainstream” MEPs are cautious to forge deeper political and economic ties with Russia given Russia’s annexation of Crimea and military involvement in Eastern Ukraine, several far-left MEPs favour deeper political and economic ties with Russia (5). For example, such a view is taken by The Left Group MEP Marina Albiol Guzmán:

Russia is the European Union’s main neighbour, one of its main trading partners - especially regarding energy needs - and a country with which all the countries of the European Union have closely shared a part of history. Therefore, I believe that relations between the EU and Russia must be treated with the utmost care and great responsibility (European Parliament, 2015b).

Last but not least, far-left MEPs oppose sanctioning Russia (6). They view sanctions as a tool that would further deteriorate the EU’s relations with Russia and fail to contribute to peace in the war between Russia and Ukraine. MEP Manu Pineda, for instance, holds this view, stating, “Nor can we support sanctions which directly affect the civilian population and which have historically demonstrated their ineffectiveness. Sanctions have never in our lifetimes served to end any conflict” (European Parliament, 2022a). This statement also indicates that far-left MEPs oppose sanctions because they worsen the living conditions of the working class both in the EU and Russia. A similar view is taken by Czech MEP Kateřina Konečná: “Only people whose lives are de facto made more difficult by the sanctions are civilians. Unless the only aim of the sanctions was to worsen the standard of living of European and Russian civilians, there can be no doubt that no sanctions are an effective solution” (European Parliament, 2023c).

The recurring narrative is that EU sanctions towards Russia should be repealed because they are not effective and do more harm to Europeans, as indicated by MEP

Georgios Katrougkalos: “We have been engaged in a bras de fer and a trade war with Russia, which is poisoning Ukraine’s internal political life and, at the same time, harming European farmers and the European economy” (European Parliament, 2014d). The 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine has not particularly impacted the far left’s stance on sanctions, with MEP Mick Wallace arguing that sanctions are having a more detrimental effect on the EU than on Russia and have resulted in a recession in Europe. This view is shared by MEP Mick Wallace:

Mr President, a year ago, after German people thought the EU sanctions hurt Germany more than Russia, this sentiment can only be stronger now, as Russia’s economy overtook Germany’s in August. The Russian sanctions triggered persistent inflation across the EU, higher interest rates, a fall in real wages for workers, a cost of living crisis and the cost of energy crisis (European Parliament, 2023c).

A similar view is also taken by MEP Manu Pineda:

The sanctions are not being paid for by Putin, they are being paid for by our peoples, with inflation unprecedented in the last 40 years, while the rouble is appreciating by 35% against the euro. The industrial and agricultural sectors are already suffering the effects of these sanctions through shortages of, for example, steel, cereals and fertilisers (European Parliament, 2022b).

Lastly, far-left MEPs criticize the EU’s sanctions towards Russia as “hypocritical”. Some MEPs highlight the fact that the EU allegedly purchases the same sanctioned Russian products through other countries. This statement by MEP Manu Pineda captures such viewpoint: “The European Union’s sanctions policy is hypocritical. For example, we buy the same Russian oil, but now we pay an extra cost because we buy it from India instead of Russia” (European Parliament, 2022b). Other far-left MEPs draw attention to the lack of sanctions against countries that have militarily invaded others, highlighting the “hypocrisy” of the EU’s actions towards Russia. Belgian MEP Marc Botenga expressed this view, stating, “When Russia attacks Ukraine, Europe

obviously sanctions. But when the United States bombs Iraq, there are no sanctions, when Saudi Arabia bombs Yemen, there are no sanctions” (European Parliament, 2022b).

Interestingly, the anti-American theme is also echoed in talks about abolishing sanctions on Russia, as indicated by MEP Miloslav Ransdorf: “Our trade with the Russian Federation amounts to about 120 billion euros. The United States has only 3 billion euros, but it is pushing us into sanctions that are stupid, pointless and counterproductive and that are damaging to us” (European Parliament, 2015b).

To sum up, we can see that far-left MEPs from 2014 until 2022 displayed ideological affinity towards Russia, highlighting the Ukraine as a “neo-Nazi state” narrative in particular. Furthermore, far-left MEPs take anti-Atlanticist and Eurosceptic stances in debates related to Russia, often shifting the focus from Russia to the USA or NATO when it comes to issues such as meddling in elections or the annexation of Crimea. Far-left MEPs are also questioning the legitimacy of Ukraine and Georgia, and viewing the annexation of Crimea as not only Russia’s but also NATO’s and the EU’s fault. Lastly, far-left MEPs are critical of sanctioning Russia and argue in favour of closer political and economic cooperation with Russia.

5.2. Far right

Far-right MEPs display ideological affinity towards Russia (1). Several statements show that far-right MEPs are attracted by Russia’s illiberal governance model and its “protection of conservative and family values”. For example, the positive view of Russia as a conservative power is promoted by the Flemish MEP Filip De Man from the ID group: “Russia does not want to bend down to the left-liberal dogmas - as do Poland and Hungary - and that is why all devils are unleashed [towards Russia]” (European Parliament, 2021). Far-right MEPs also accuse the West of being “Russophobic”, a narrative widely used by the Russian government “to position itself as a moral victim despised by the West and its allies” (Ventsel et al., 2021, p. 32). “Russophobia” is often used as an argument against the expansion of NATO and the EU, and equates

opposition to the Kremlin's policy with opposition to Russian culture (Darczewska et al., 2015). Such a stance is highlighted by the German MEP Maximilian Krah (ID group) in a 2021 "Direction of EU-Russia political relations" debate: "This report before us is a declaration of war in a Cold War. It is aggressive in tone and content, and it does not allow for any possibility of constructive cooperation with Russia. This Russophobia that is being cultivated here has no roots in the population, and it is also characterized by double standards" (European Parliament, 2021).

Initially, it was believed that the narrative portraying Ukraine as a "neo-Nazi state" would primarily garner support from far-left groups. However, the analysis shows that far-right parties in the EP also endorse this narrative. This is intriguing given that far-right parties in the EU are frequently accused of being neo-fascist themselves. Indeed, several far-right MEPs subscribe to the Russian "Ukrainian neo-Nazi" narrative, viewing the post-Maidan pro-EU government of Poroshenko as "neo-Nazi". This view is highlighted by the French MEP Jean-Luc Schaffhauser (ENF) when talking about the Poroshenko government: "This Parliament therefore continues to disgrace itself by its unconditional support for a corrupt, mafia-like power supported by neo-Nazis" (European Parliament, 2017). A similar view is taken by his colleague Jacques Colombier (ENF): "Worse, the report ignores the misdeeds of neo-Nazi militias in the pay of the government, who carry out attacks and assassinations with complete impunity" (European Parliament, 2018b).

Anti-Atlanticism and Euroscepticism (2) is another recurring theme among MEPs from far-right parties speaking at Russia-related debates. Statements given by far-right MEPs usually combine anti-American, anti-NATO and Eurosceptic attitudes, albeit the EU receives slightly more negative attention. Far-right MEPs criticise the EU's post-Crimea policies towards Russia, as highlighted by British MEP James Carver, speaking on behalf of the EFDD group: "Through your neo-colonialist desire for European Union expansion, as well as the militarisation of your capabilities, you have put yourselves on an unnecessary collision course with Russia that can only end in tears" (European Parliament, 2018a).

For far-right MEPs, the EU is also the “usual suspect” to blame for the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas. Furthermore, the EU is seen as a “provocateur” of Russia and its President Vladimir Putin, particularly in the context of the conflict in Ukraine (given the adoption of the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement). For example, such a position can be seen in the statement by British MEP Nigel Farage:

Mr President, amongst the long list of foreign policy failures and contradictions in the last few years, including of course the bombing of Libya and the desire to arm the rebels in Syria, has been the unnecessary provocation of Vladimir Putin. This EU empire, ever seeking to expand, stated its territorial claim on the Ukraine some years ago (European Parliament, 2014d).

Interestingly, Farage’s statement also indicates that far-right MEPs refuse to condemn Russia’s imperialist policies in Ukraine, yet they highlight and criticise the foreign interventions of Western powers (e.g., in Libya, and Kosovo). A similar stance is also taken by the French MEP Jean-Luc Schaffhauser: “What you deny to the Crimeans, you grant to the Kosovars. You denounce the illegal occupation of Crimea, but you condone the illegal occupation of Kosovo. You denounce the Russians, but approve NATO’s illegal war against Yugoslavia” (European Parliament, 2019a). Therefore, we can see that far-right MEPs often accuse the West of having a “hypocritical” or “double standard” stance towards Russia, as in their view NATO and the EU also invade foreign countries and meddle in their internal affairs – the exact same thing “mainstream” politicians accuse Russia of. This narrative is also repeated by the German ID group MEP Gunnar Beck: “Who finances Western NGOs in Russia? And who intervened in Iraq and Libya in violation of international law? Who other than the EU and its members? Compared to Russia, however, quite unsuccessfully” (European Parliament, 2021).

The far-right in the EP is also reluctant to criticise Russia’s authoritarian laws and diverts the attention to the USA instead. For example, when speaking about the

Russian “Foreign Agents” Law, French MEP Thierry Mariani from the ID group says: “This resolution almost simultaneously condemns the United States. May I remind you that in 1938, the FARA law, which resembles in many respects what is currently being passed in Russia, already condemned foreign agents in the United States” (European Parliament, 2019d).

The far-right in the EP also sees the 2014 Maidan Revolution and the removal of the pro-Russian President Viktor Yanukovych as an act supported by or even orchestrated by the United States and the EU. This view often goes hand-in-hand with the narrative that the West provoked Russia to invade Ukraine, best illustrated by MEP Nigel Farage’s statement:

We [the “West”] directly encouraged the uprising in the Ukraine that led to the toppling of President Yanukovych; that led in turn to Vladimir Putin reacting; and the moral of the story is: if you poke the Russian bear with a stick, do not be surprised when he reacts. (European Parliament, 2014d)

The expansion of NATO eastwards has been also interpreted as a Western provocation of Russia by far-right MEPs, as seen in this statement by the German ID group MEP Bernhard Zimniok: “NATO has been gradually moving towards Russia for decades and not the other way around. I therefore reject a one-sided condemnation of Russia” (European Parliament, 2022d).

In the debates following the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, far-right MEPs tend to view the growing role of the EU in the context of the war in Ukraine as a threat to the sovereignty of member states. This view is articulated by the French ID Group MEP Thierry Mariani: “Mr President, as was the case with the COVID crisis, the European Union ... are using the war in Ukraine to create a European superstate” (European Parliament, 2022b). Anti-NATO sentiment was also present in the statements given by MEPs from the ID Group. For instance, in this statement, the French MEP Jordan Bardella condemned the Russian invasion of Ukraine but criticized Europe’s close relationship with NATO as the cause for the strained relations

with Russia: “By supporting the NATOization of Europe for nearly twenty years, effectively placing us under the American flag, our leaders have missed the opportunities to open a balanced relationship with Russia” (European Parliament, 2022a).

Moving on to the next theme, far-right MEPs view the military conflicts in Ukraine and Georgia as a double responsibility of Russia and the EU/NATO (3). In practice, this means that far-right MEPs to some extent agree that Russia should take some responsibility for the war in Georgia and/or Ukraine but so should the EU, NATO and the USA. While there is some discrepancy, it should be noted that usually the responsibility of the West is stressed more than the responsibility of Russia. For example, such a viewpoint can be seen in the statement by the British MEP James Carver (EFDD): “I agree with you that Russia is far from innocent in this crisis, but there is blame on both sides and the EU’s actions have done nothing to promote peace and reconciliation” (European Parliament, 2015b).

The far-right in the EP is also delegitimizing post-Maidan Ukraine and post-2008 Georgia (4). In other words, far-right MEPs follow the Russian government’s framing of the Maidan Revolution in Ukraine as an illegitimate coup, staged by violent rioters. This narrative is evident in the statement given by British MEP Nigel Farage (EFDD): “We saw Western Ukrainians waving European flags, rioting, setting fire to things and effectively staging a coup d’état which brought down the Ukrainian President, leading to this instability. Yes, you [the EU] are the guilty people and you refuse to accept it” (European Parliament, 2014d). Here we can also see that several MEPs tend to view that this “coup” was staged by the EU.

MEPs from the far right delegitimize Ukraine’s territorial integrity and sovereignty over Crimea by presenting a falsified version of history. For example, the French MEP Florian Philippot (ENF) justifies views Crimea as a legitimate part of Russia and objects to calling the incorporation of Crimea into Russia an “illegal annexation”:

The report also criticises ... the incorporation of Crimea into Russia, described as an “illegal annexation”, despite the fact that the Crimean people have sovereignly decided to do so, and that a recent survey conducted by one of Germany’s leading institutes showed that 93% of Crimeans supported this incorporation (European Parliament, 2015c).

Instead, the Russian annexation of Crimea is portrayed as a “correction of historical errors”, viewing the Russian annexation as corrective rather than aggressive. For example, this statement by the French MEP Jean-Luc Schaffhauser (ENF) highlights this stance:

Unlike Kosovo and Maidan, not a single shot was fired in Crimea. What you hate about Crimeans is their patriotic desire to return to their historic homeland, Russia. By denying them this right, you are doing like the Soviet dictator Khrushchev who, with an illegal stroke of his pen, also gave Crimea to the Ukrainian Soviet Republic. Your stateless policy is that of the Bolsheviks of 1954!” (European Parliament, 2019a).

Given that the MEPs from far-right parties in the EP do not recognise the Maidan Revolution in Ukraine as legitimate, they also question the legitimacy of the subsequent governments of Ukraine. For instance, the Italian MEP Dario Tamburrano (EFDD) argues that “the wave of violence that still involves the Ukrainian people, such as the pogrom in Odessa, forces us to reflect on the legitimacy and real capacity of the government of Poroshenko and his ministers” (European Parliament, 2014c).

The far-right in the EP is also advocating for deeper political and economic ties with Russia (5). Most of these statements are rather general, asking for the EU to resume cooperation with Russia and “forgive” Russia for its actions towards Ukraine, e.g. the statements by French MEP Thierry Mariani (ID) “The Council of Europe has just reintegrated Russia. I think that it is rather this path that we must follow, that of reestablishing a dialogue. We take the opposite route; we are going to a dead end” (European Parliament, 2019d) and British MEP James Carver (EFDD): “Our

approach to Russia needs to be multi-layered and must take account of Russian national interests” (European Parliament, 2018a).

Lastly, the far-right in the EP is opposed to sanctioning Russia (6). As we know from the previous theme, far-right MEPs are in favour of deepening the political and economic relations with Russia, and sanctions are a major obstacle to achieving that. Therefore, far-right MEPs view are strongly against introducing new sanctions towards Russia and call for the EU to abolish the existing sanctions. Such a view is highlighted in this statement by the German MEP Bernhard Zimniok (ID): “There must also be no new sanctions against Russia. Instead, the existing sanctions should be withdrawn in the long term to reduce these unnecessary tensions [with Russia]” (European Parliament, 2022d). Besides the general criticism of sanctions, far-right MEPs also repeatedly stress that the sanctions impact Europe more than Russia. For example, the Italian MEP Fabio Massimo Castaldo (EFDD) claims that the European “people” and the Mediterranean “people” are “on their knees because of the crisis and the sanctions that are hitting us more than Russia” (European Parliament, 2015b).

In the debates following the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, far-right MEPs maintain their opposition to sanctions towards Russia and argue for repealing sanctions. They tend to perceive the new sanctions introduced by the EU after the invasion as more damaging to the EU than to Russia, as argued by MEP Harald Vilimsky: “We have imposed eleven waves of sanctions on the Russians, and our situation has deteriorated again and again. Today we have a gigantic rise in inflation. We have a gigantic rise in poverty in Europe” (European Parliament, 2023c). Therefore, from this statement, we can deduce that far-right MEPs view the EU’s sanctions on Russia as the main reason for the EU’s rising inflation and general economic hardships. Additionally, far-right MEPs argue that the EU acts hypocritically by bypassing its own sanctions and allegedly importing Russian gas via other countries. Such a stance is taken by the German MEP Gunnar Beck:

Mr President, the EU sanctions against Russia were intended to take effect quickly and painfully - in fact, the sanctions are hurting us more than Russia. This is precisely why the EU is undermining its own sanctions and continuing to import large quantities of Russian gas at higher prices via Azerbaijan. ... Your hypocrisy shows: your sanctions are failing (European Parliament, 2023c).

This analysis shows that the far right in the EP display ideological affinity towards Russia by praising Russia's ultra-conservative policies and viewing Ukraine as a "neo-Nazi" state. Furthermore, far-right MEPs invoke their Anti-Atlanticist and Eurosceptic stances in Russia-related debates, blaming the USA and the EU for not facilitating good relations with Russia. While some far-right MEPs acknowledge Russia's responsibility in the military conflicts in Ukraine and Georgia, they also repeat that the EU and NATO member states are also responsible for provoking Russia to invade Ukraine. Lastly, the far right in the EP advocates for deeper political and economic ties with Russia and calls to abandon the existing EU sanctions towards Russia.

5.3. Comparison between the far left and the far right

The analysis of pro-Russian statements of MEPs from far-right and far-left parties in the EP reveals a notable degree of similarity. Indeed, all the deductively derived themes were present in the statements given by politicians from both ends of the political spectrum.

However, there are several minor, but interesting differences. For example, both the far-right and far-left seem to share an ideological affinity towards Russia (1). However, for the far right, this manifests as an attraction to Russia's ultra-conservative policy and its "protection of family values". This comes as no surprise, given that the far-right's positions on these issues converge with the policies of the Russian government. The far left, on the other side, is critical towards Russia's ultra-conservative ideology and its crackdown on LGBT rights in the name of the protection of "family values". However, the far-left MEPs still have an ideological affinity towards

Russia (1) because they converge with the Russian narrative of the “rise of neo-Nazism in Europe” and see Russia as a global fighter against Nazism. Interestingly, both party families subscribe to the Russian narrative that Ukraine is a “neo-Nazi” state.

Both the far-left and the far-right express their anti-Atlanticist and Eurosceptic (2) attitudes in Russia-related debates. Usually, this is expressed in arguing that the EU and Russia have provoked Russia and that NATO expansion is the reason why relations with Russia have deteriorated. Interestingly, it seems that the far left tends to criticise the USA and NATO more, while the far right gives most of the negative spotlight to the EU (for instance, the far-right believes that the EU has provoked Russia by adopting the EU-Ukraine association agreement.) Furthermore, until the 2022 re-invasion of Ukraine MEPs from both sides of the political extreme also are reluctant to condemn Russia’s military actions in foreign states, arguing that EU and NATO member states are doing the same.

There were no major differences among the statements given by far right and far left MEPs following the remaining four themes: Conflicts in Ukraine and Georgia as a double responsibility of Russia and the EU/NATO (3); delegitimizing post-Maidan Ukraine and post-2008 Georgia (4); advocating for deeper political and economic ties with Russia (5) and opposition to sanctioning Russia (6).

5.4. Change of positions after the 2022 invasion of Ukraine

While assessing the shift in positions of far-right and far-left parties in the EP towards Russia after the full-scale invasion was not the primary focus of this research paper, several noteworthy observations can be made. Generally, both the far left and the far right in the EP are not as outspokenly pro-Russia as before the 2022 war. In fact, previously many MEPs from the far-right and the far-left groups in the EP failed to condemn Russia’s breach of Ukraine’s sovereignty and territorial integrity by annexing Crimea in 2014. However, in the wake of the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, almost all statements given by the far-left and the far-right include a condemnation of Russia’s

decision to invade Ukraine. No statement has openly voiced support for Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

A notable observation is the absence of three themes in the statements made by both far-left and far-right MEPs in the debates preceding the 2022 invasion of Ukraine (see Table 1 and Table 2). These themes are ideological affinity towards Russia (1), delegitimizing post-Maidan Ukraine and post-2008 Georgia (4), and advocating for deeper political and economic ties with Russia. However, far-left and far-right MEPs still maintain anti-Atlanticist and Eurosceptic views (2) on issues related to Russia. They argue that NATO and the USA are interested in prolonging the war and are not actively seeking to broker peace between the conflicting parties. Additionally, they perceive conflicts in Ukraine and Georgia as a shared responsibility of both Russia and the EU/NATO (3), attributing Russia's actions to provocation by the USA and NATO. Lastly, far-left and far-right MEPs continue to oppose sanctions against Russia (6), as they perceive them as a threat to ordinary citizens in both the EU and Russia. Moreover, they argue that sanctions disproportionately harm the EU's economy and have caused a recession in the EU.

No major differences in positions towards Russia after the 2022 invasion of Ukraine were identified between the far-left and the far-right in the EP. However, it appears that the far-right group in the EP is more internally divided on Russia when compared to the far-left group. This is evidenced by the wide range of positions on Russia articulated by far-right MEPs even within a single debate. Additionally, in certain significant debates, such as the one on 18 October 2022 titled "Recognising the Russian Federation as a state sponsor of terrorism," no far-right MEPs spoke, perhaps suggesting a failure to articulate a common position.

Table 1

Far right count of themes

Themes	Pre-2022 invasion	Post-2022 invasion	Total
Ideological affinity towards Russia (1)	6	0	6
Anti-Atlanticism and Euroscepticism (2)	17	5	22
Conflicts in Ukraine and Georgia as a double responsibility of Russia and the EU/NATO (3)	6	4	10
Delegitimizing post-Maidan Ukraine and post-2008 Georgia (4)	9	0	9
Advocating for deeper political and economic ties with Russia (5)	6	0	6
Opposition to sanctioning Russia (6)	4	12	16

Table 2

Far left count of themes

Themes	Pre-2022 invasion	Post-2022 invasion	Total
Ideological affinity towards Russia (1)	6	0	6
Anti-Atlanticism and Euroscepticism (2)	30	24	54
Conflicts in Ukraine and Georgia as a double responsibility of Russia and the EU/NATO (3)	8	4	12
Delegitimizing post-Maidan Ukraine and post-2008 Georgia (4)	11	0	11
Advocating for deeper political and economic ties with Russia (5)	4	0	4
Opposition to sanctioning Russia (6)	5	6	11

6. Discussion

The analysis reveals that the positions of far-right and far-left parties in the EP do not substantially diverge on Russia. In fact, all of the six themes were identified in the statements given by MEPs from both far-right and far-left parties in the EP. This raises the question of how parties from opposite ends of the ideological spectrum find common ground on Russia. Golosov (2020) suggests that this phenomenon can be attributed to the fact that they are “anti-system parties” and their favourable view of Russia is partly influenced by their perception of Russia as an alternative to mainstream Western politics. A similar explanation lies in the observation that populism is a key characteristic of far-right and far-left parties, shaping their foreign policy positions (Balfour et al., 2016; Chryssogelos, 2010).

Another plausible explanation is Russia’s trans-ideological approach towards Europe, as suggested by Braghieri and Makarychev (2016). They suggest that Russia’s government effectively secures support from both far-right and far-left groups by adopting a trans-ideological strategy. This approach transcends traditional ideological boundaries by spreading tailored ideological messages to appeal to various, often conflicting political groups. Hence, this paper finds support for Braghieri and Makarychev’s (2016) thesis, as the findings demonstrate that Russia’s trans-ideology effectively attracts support from both the far right and the far left in the EP, despite their conflicting ideological positions on other issues.

A good example of Russia’s trans-ideology in action can be observed in the ideological affinity towards Russia (1) theme, evident in statements made by both the far right and the far left. Despite Russia’s conservative, Christian, and “family values” policies lacking resonance with the far left, they find support among the far-right political groupings in the EP. However, Russia succeeds in gaining support from the far left by positioning itself as a “global fighter against fascism”, a narrative that resonates with the far left’s ideological leanings. Furthermore, the far left’s pro-Russian sentiments may also derive from their historical affinity with the Soviet Union, as the

far-left views Russia as a successor to the Soviet Union and a counterforce to Western dominance (Braghioli & Makarychev, 2016).

Notably, many of the pro-Russia statements voiced by MEPs from far-right and far-left parties incorporated a Eurosceptic narrative, which is not surprising given the existing literature suggests that one of the major linkages between pro-Russian parties is their opposition to European integration (Golosov, 2020; Halikiopoulou et al., 2012). Moreover, anti-Atlanticist and anti-American sentiment was also evident in many of these statements, which is in line with prior research from other contexts indicating (Chryssogelos, 2010, 2021; Ostermann & Stahl, 2022).

An intriguing finding is that these parties tend to shift the focus away from Russia towards NATO's involvement in conflicts in Iraq and elsewhere. This suggests that the pro-Russia stance of these groups in the EP may stem from their broader antipathy towards the USA, NATO, and the EU. While anti-American, Eurosceptic, or anti-NATO views do not automatically equate to being pro-Russia, existing literature implies that anti-Americanism is a significant aspect of the Kremlin's narrative (Braghioli & Makarychev, 2016). Another interesting finding is that these MEPs frequently emphasise the role of "the West" in allegedly provoking Russia to invade neighbouring countries. This aligns with suggestions from previous literature that these parties seek to counterbalance the USA's alleged dominance as an "omnipresent superpower" by turning to Russia as a "foreign policy alternative" (Chryssogelos, 2010; Klapsis, 2015). Consistent with previous literature examining national contexts (Braghioli & Makarychev, 2016; Klapsis, 2015; Shekhovtsov, 2017), both far-right and far-left politicians refrain from condemning the annexation of Crimea and even view Crimea as part of Russia. Additionally, support is found for previous literature's suggestions that far-right and far-left parties are against sanctions and prefer closer political and economic ties with Russia (Chryssogelos, 2021; Ostermann & Stahl, 2022).

While not the main focus of this paper, it is hard to deny that the 2022 invasion influenced the positions of far-right and far-left parties towards Russia, with these parties coming slightly closer to the mainstream position. Nevertheless, they remain the most pro-Russian groupings within the EP. Even after the invasion they predominantly reject sanctions and blame “the West” for provoking Russia. Drawing conclusive impacts of the war is premature, as there are indications of “Ukraine fatigue”, and further progress of the war may see far-right and far-left parties moving back to their pre-2022 positions. Premature signs of this are already observable, with many representatives condemning Russia but abstaining from imposing sanctions.

7. Conclusion

This paper aimed to identify the key themes constituting the pro-Russian positions of far-right and far-left parties in the European Parliament. The decision to focus on far-right and far-left parties was driven by existing literature on partisan foreign policy, which suggests that the primary Russophile parties in the EU member states belong to the far-right camp (Klapsis, 2015; Political Capital Institute, 2014; Shekhovtsov, 2017; Timofejevs, 2022; Wondreys, 2023) and the far-left camp (Braghiroli & Makarychev, 2016; Chryssogelos, 2010). In contrast to earlier studies that mainly focused on national parties, this paper adopted a pan-European perspective, examining the foreign policy stances of far-right and far-left parties in the EP on Russia. While recent studies find that pro-Russia parties in the EP are typically found across both political extremes (Golosov, 2020), there is a significant gap in the literature regarding a comprehensive understanding of what exactly constitutes the pro-Russian positions of far-right and far-left parties in the EP. This paper sought to address this gap in the literature by providing a detailed analysis of the pro-Russian positions taken by far-right and far-left parties in the EP and identifying the key themes which define these positions.

The findings of this study uncover a convergence between far-right and far-left parties in the EP regarding their stance towards Russia, revealing a shared narrative across six distinct themes. Firstly, parties on both ends of the political spectrum exhibit an ideological affinity towards Russia. For the far right, this translates as support for Russia's ultra-conservative policy, while for the far left, it entails viewing Russia as a fighter against fascism in times when, according to them, neo-fascism is on the rise. Secondly, both party groups express scepticism towards the USA, NATO and the EU. This scepticism is evident when discussing Russia's military involvement in neighbouring states, as MEPs from these parties often shift the spotlight to NATO's involvement in conflicts such as those in Iraq and Afghanistan, accusing "the West" of having double standards towards Russia. Thirdly, both far-right and far-left parties in

the EP view conflicts in Ukraine and Georgia as a shared responsibility of Russia and the EU/NATO, arguing that Western countries have provoked Russia and lack genuine interest in fostering peace. Fourthly, these parties also delegitimize post-Maidan Ukraine and post-2008 Georgia by viewing them as part of Russia's sphere of influence, refusing to recognise Russia's annexation of Crimea and deeming the pro-European revolutions as illegitimate "coups". Fifthly, these parties advocate for renewed political and economic ties with Russia. Lastly, far-right and far-left parties in the EP oppose sanctioning Russia and instead advocate for the abolition of existing sanctions, citing their impact on Europe's economy and their failure to achieve their intended goals. Thus, this study provides a comprehensive understanding of the pro-Russian positions held by far-right and far-left parties in the EP, shedding light on their shared narratives and foreign policy preferences.

This paper provides insights into the foreign policy preferences of far-right or far-left groups in the event they gain leverage over foreign policy in the EP. Such a scenario cannot be ruled out, especially considering the example of Hungary, where the governing far-right Fidesz party has positioned the country as one of the most, if not the most, pro-Russia country in the EU. These findings are also increasingly relevant considering the anticipated success of these actors in the forthcoming 2024 European elections (Wax, 2024a).

These findings contribute to several domains of political science research. First, this paper contributes to the research of political parties in the EP, which have garnered comparatively less scholarly attention than national parties. Second, this study enriches the existing literature on partisan foreign policy positions by enhancing our understanding of the role of (far-right and far-left) ideology in partisan foreign policy positions. Moreover, this research contributes to the expanding body of literature on far-right and far-left political parties. Specifically, it sheds light on their foreign policy positions, an aspect that has often been overlooked in comparison to their domestic positions.

The study has, however, several limitations. First, it is important to acknowledge that EP debates cannot capture all parties' positions due to constraints such as the allocated speaking times and potential non-participation. Furthermore, qualitative data analysis introduces subjectivity in coding and interpretation, however, a deductive approach was utilised to maintain objectivity and consistency. Given that the paper examines political groups in the EP which itself are constituted of various national parties, this paper has a high generalizability potential to parties in the EU member states.

Future research could explore the pro-Russia stances of far-right and far-left actors outside Europe. For example, it could delve into the ambivalent positions of Brazil's President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva and the pro-Russia factions within the US Republican Party. Furthermore, quantitative approaches such as EP roll-call vote analysis could examine how the positions of far-right and far-left towards Russia were affected by the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Additionally, process tracing could be employed to map the extent of influence exerted by extreme parties on foreign policy in countries where they have been coalition partners (e.g. *Podemos* in Spain). Finally, future research could assess if there has been increased convergence or divergence on Russia-related issues among extreme and mainstream parties following the 2022 invasion.

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Appendix A

Debates examined dated 26 February 2014 – 24 February 2022

Date	Debate
26.02.2014	Situation in Ukraine
12.03.2014	Invasion of Ukraine by Russia
15.07.2014	Situation in Ukraine
16.09.2014	Situation in Ukraine and state of play of EU-Russia relations
10.02.2015	Situation in Ukraine
25.03.2015	Macro-financial assistance to Ukraine
09.06.2015	State of EU-Russia relations
14.02.2017	Deterioration of the situation in Eastern Ukraine
01.03.2017	Recent partial decriminalisation of domestic violence in Russia
16.03.2017	Ukrainian political prisoners in Russia and situation in Crimea
17.04.2018	Situation in Russia
26.03.2019	Five years of illegal occupation of Crimea by the Russian Federation
09.10.2019	Situation in Ukraine
10.10.2019	Foreign electoral interference and disinformation in national and European democratic processes
19.12.2019	The Russian “Foreign Agents” Law
09.02.2021	EU Association Agreement with Ukraine
14.09.2021	Direction of EU-Russia political relations
13.12.2021	The 30th anniversary of the dissolution of the Soviet Union and its importance for the future of Russia and Europe
16.02.2022	EU-Russia relations, European security and Russia’s military threat against Ukraine

Appendix B

Debates examined following the 24 February 2022 invasion of Ukraine

Date	Debate
06.02.2024	The need for unwavering EU support for Ukraine, after two years of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine
17.10.2023	Effectiveness of the EU sanctions on Russia
19.04.2023	Repression in Russia, in particular the cases of Vladimir Kara-Murza and Alexei Navalny
15.02.2023	One year of Russia's invasion and war of aggression against Ukraine
02.02.2023	Preparation of the EU-Ukraine Summit
18.10.2022	Recognising the Russian Federation as a state sponsor of terrorism
05.10.2022	Russia's escalation of its war of aggression against Ukraine
07.06.2022	The EU's Foreign, Security and Defence Policy after the Russian invasion of Ukraine
07.06.2022	Security in the Eastern Partnership area and the role of the common security and defence policy
01.03.2022	Russian aggression against Ukraine