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Charting the Radical Right's Influence on EU Foreign Policy

Rosa Balfour and Stefan Lehne, editors

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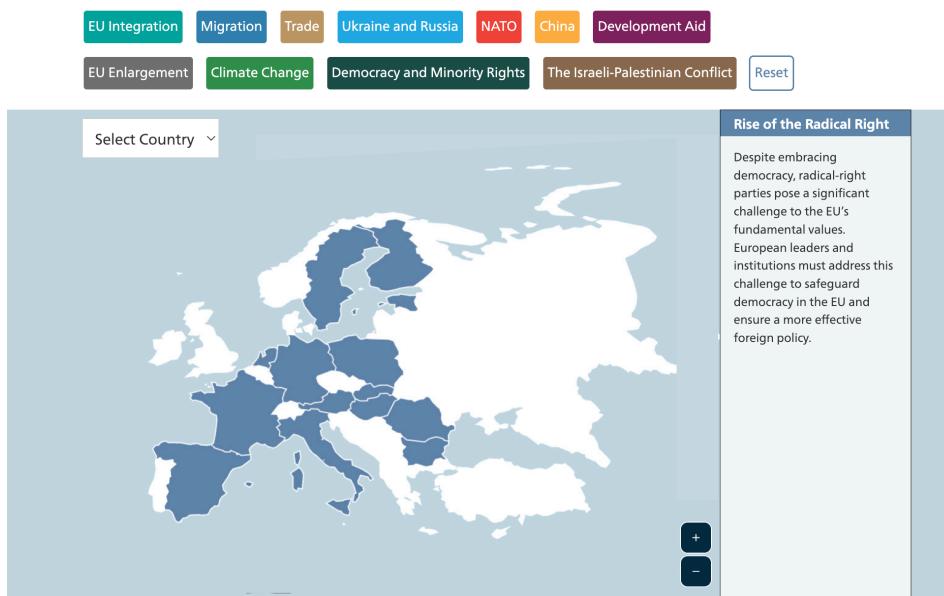
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Mapping the Radical Right's Positions on Foreign Policy

A one-stop source for investigating the impact of radical-right parties on the EU, its foreign policy, and its potential future. This interactive map serves as an in-depth visual and analytical tool to explore the positions of fourteen European radical-right parties on different foreign policy issues. The map draws on the data and the findings collected in this compilation, supplemented by original research conducted by the map's authors.



Explore the map at:
<https://carnegieeurope.eu/publications/interactive/radical-right-europe-foreign-policy>

The map's authors are Zakaria Al Shmaly, Mattia Bagherini, and Elena Ventura.
The map has been designed by Jessica Katz, Tim Martin, and Jocelyn Soly.

INTRODUCTION

The European Radical Right and Foreign Policy

Rosa Balfour and Stefan Lehne

A New Political Landscape

The political landscape in the European Union (EU) is changing rapidly. For decades, the traditional mainstream parties of the center right and center left have been losing ground, while antiestablishment parties have been gaining support. According to research by the University of Amsterdam, 32 percent of voters opted for antiestablishment parties in 2021, up from 12 percent in the early 1990s.¹ Radical-right parties make up about half of this share, and their support has risen faster than that of any other group.

Many of the fourteen parties examined in this study have achieved vote shares of 20 percent or more. The radical right is now in government, or supports the government, in Finland, Hungary, Italy, Slovakia, and Sweden. In the Netherlands, it is likely that Geert Wilders's Party for Freedom (PVV) will be part of a governing coalition. In other countries, these parties have become the leading opposition groups. In France, Marine Le Pen's National Rally (RN) has been carefully preparing to win the 2027 presidential election.

Setbacks for the radical right in Poland and Spain in the second half of 2023 have shown that the relentless rise of these parties is not a foregone conclusion. However, current polling for several national elections and the June 2024 European Parliament elections indicates a strong likelihood of their continuing electoral success.² Chega (Enough), a recently established party that shot to 18 percent of the vote in Portugal's March 2024 election, ended the country's exceptionalism as one of the few European nations without a right-wing populist party.³ The June 2024 Belgian federal election may see the Flemish nationalist party Vlaams Belang (Flemish Interest), which so far has been strong in Flanders but kept out of national politics, break through at the federal level. Polling for Austria's September 2024 parliamentary election suggests a surge in support for the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ).⁴

In contrast with populism, which has a thin ideology focused mainly on fomenting the anger of the so-called pure people against corrupt elites and which has risen on both the left and the right of the political spectrum, the radical-right parties of the 2020s have a more distinct ideological profile.⁵ All have national specificities, such as rural origins in Northern Europe or ethnonationalism in Central Europe. Several parties are rooted in postwar fascism, such as the FPÖ, RN, Brothers of Italy (FdI), the Alliance for the Unity of Romanians (AUR), and the Sweden Democrats (SD). For some groups, strong connections with society and well-developed party structures compensated for their marginal impact in national politics. Before its landslide victory in Italy's 2022 parliamentary election, support for FdI hovered at around 5 percent, as it did for the party's predecessor throughout the period since World War II.⁶ Other parties, such as Hungary's Fidesz, gained ground as classic populist or even mainstream parties and benefited from an aura of respectability even as they shifted toward ethnonationalist or nativist positions.

Since the 1990s, liberal-democratic parties have started to adopt some of the ideas of the radical right while keeping the parties themselves out of government. In the 2000s, the radical right became normalized, in some countries becoming part of the political mainstream. During this process, as political scientists Cas Mudde and Jan-Werner Müller have argued, liberal-democratic parties have shifted toward the radical right in the hope—mostly in vain—of keeping their traditional electorates. Yet, in practice, this approach has led voters to prefer the real radical right to its imitators. In other words, the tactic of chasing the radical right has not paid off electorally. Voters have moved toward the radical right as a consequence, not as a cause, of liberal-democratic parties' attempts to contain it.⁷

Today, the far right is dominated by the radical right, which, unlike the extreme right, accepts the essence of democracy but rejects its liberal elements: minority rights, the rule of law, and the separation of powers.⁸ The radical-right parties selected for this study all share deep antimigration sentiments, often determined by race or religion; a nationalism that makes these parties Euroskeptic and opposed to what they see as a Brussels-based dictatorship; and skepticism of climate change policies. Many of these parties also espouse deeply conservative family values that go against women's and LGBTQ rights.

Foreign policy is usually not the strong suit of these parties, apart from their keen interest in the external dimension of migration policy. These parties pay close attention to Russia's aggression against Ukraine but are sharply divided on this issue, with positions ranging from deep mistrust of Russia to close alignment with the Kremlin's arguments. A future Donald Trump administration could lead to new divisions in the EU, as some member states are likely to align with the United States under any circumstances. This would mean that many of the EU's current foreign policy positions, such as support for Ukraine, would come to an end. As radical-right parties rise to prominence at the national and the EU level, they are developing views on a range of foreign policy issues, building increasingly influential international networks and think tanks, and learning from each other's successful tactics in solidifying their control of the state and propagating their values.⁹

For some radical-right parties that have been established in government, such as Fidesz and, until October 2023, Poland’s Law and Justice (PiS) party, the upgrading of foreign policy on their political agendas can be inferred by the fact that all diplomatic postings in the EU are political appointments. Hungary’s foreign policy machinery is under the direct control of the prime minister.¹⁰ Diplomatic colleagues of the Hungarian representatives in Brussels know that the country’s negotiating positions are micromanaged in Budapest.¹¹ Other countries, such as Italy and Finland, have chosen to rely on the credibility of career diplomats to navigate the Brussels machinery, preferring compromise over confrontation and isolation.

For a long time, European politicians and EU institutions have assumed the radical right could be contained. Now, the challenge of the radical right needs to be addressed more seriously. Just as this phenomenon has eroded democracy and the rule of law in some EU member states, so foreign policy may become affected at a time when collective action is most needed to address international issues. As the radical right challenges the EU’s attempts to navigate a dangerous world, European politics can no longer afford complacency.

The New Euroskepticism

Radical-right parties’ views on EU foreign policy are, of course, to a large extent determined by their overall attitudes to European integration. Here, parties have moderated their positions in the years since the United Kingdom’s (UK’s) 2016 Brexit referendum. Demands for countries to leave the EU or the eurozone have mostly been abandoned. The UK’s messy and painful departure from the union has turned such initiatives into vote losers in electoral campaigns. But there is growing ambition in wanting to shape Europe. Le Pen, for example, rallies about an upcoming liberation of Europe’s nations and peoples from a meddling EU “that does not hold a federal but [an] imperial vision.”¹² As Hungary’s Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has put it, “Our plan is not to leave the EU. Our plan is to conquer it.”¹³

Whether this shift represents a genuine change of attitude or just a tactical adjustment may vary from case to case. All of the parties covered by this study remain deeply skeptical of the EU. But tactics and goals differ. Many of these parties now propagate what Le Pen calls a “European alliance of nations,” organized strictly along intergovernmental lines, and this view is gaining traction.¹⁴ When in government, these parties can oppose specific policies not only based on their view of the policies’ merits but also with the aim of disrupting the policymaking process or undermining European integration generally—or as part of a tactical negotiation to get something in return.

Some parties demand a renegotiation of the EU’s treaties and a repatriation of powers to the member states. Others just reject any further transfers of competencies to the European level or the introduction of more majority voting, as opposed to decisionmaking by unanimity. Some parties, including the Alternative for Germany (AfD), threaten to leave the EU if

returning powers to national capitals is unsuccessful. Insisting on the primacy of national law over EU law is another position broadly shared by these parties. With few exceptions, when national interests are directly concerned, radical-right parties are hostile to further EU enlargement.

There is no single pathway to interpret the behavior of the radical right when in government or opposition. The Finns Party and FdI have so far proved more pragmatic than many observers had expected, raising hopes that the radical right can be socialized into the system. In the case of the Finns Party, it is constrained by a carefully negotiated coalition agreement that has reined in some of the party's foreign policy requests to ensure continuity with Finland's traditional pro-European stance. In Italy, where FdI governs in coalition with another radical-right party and a populist center-right one, the government has chosen a pragmatic policy toward the EU, provided that Brussels responds to the country's long-standing demands on migration—requests that have been made by Italian governments of all stripes.

Conversely, both PiS and Fidesz became more Euroskeptic during their terms in office and took steps to pursue confrontational relations with Brussels, mostly over rule-of-law issues but also by stoking bilateral relations with other member states and obstructing policy processes. Outside the eurozone and without the restraint associated with coming from a founding EU member state, these two parties have fewer inhibitions to creating tension with Brussels than, for instance, Italy, a large founding member.

Most of the radical-right parties covered by this study are represented in the European Parliament. Despite several attempts, they have so far failed to unite their forces within a single party group. Since the 2019 parliament elections, the parties are primarily organized in two groups: the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) and, farther to the right, Identity and Democracy (ID). Fidesz was a member of the center-right European People's Party (EPP) until 2021, when it left following a two-year suspension from the group. There have been considerable fluctuations between these groups, with some parties and members of the European Parliament (MEPs) changing their alignment several times and others staying out of any group. There have been reports about Fidesz's interest in joining the ECR.¹⁵ This could increase the group's size, but it might hinder a rapprochement with the EPP.

An analysis of MEPs' voting behavior on foreign policy issues confirms that these matters are contested on ideological grounds. Although nationality is a determining factor in the way an MEP votes, party affiliation tends to be more important.¹⁶ But these parties' impact on the parliament's foreign policy positions has so far remained modest. The mainstream party groups generally work well together on these issues, and the radical right remains divided.

This might change after the 2024 elections, when, according to current polling, both the ECR and ID can expect to make considerable gains.¹⁷ The two groups together might have around 25 percent of the MEPs in the new parliament. A significant rightward turn of the

legislature could reduce support for measures to implement the European Green Deal, a package that aims to set the EU on the path to a green transition; for the enforcement of EU standards on the rule of law; and for EU enlargement. It could also result in a clear majority of MEPs supporting very restrictive immigration policies.¹⁸ And the parliament could become even more polarized on critical foreign policy challenges, such as supporting Ukraine’s defense against Russia’s invasion and responding to the Israel-Hamas war and the escalation in the Middle East.¹⁹

How the Radical Right Shapes EU Foreign Policy

Whereas populism has expanded in Europe over the past four decades, the radical right has only recently become politically important. The radical right’s achievement of positions of responsibility raises the need for deeper research into its foreign and security policy stances to better gauge its potential influence and impact in the near future. With this in mind, this study has three broad aims: to map the foreign policy positions of fourteen radical-right parties in different EU member states; to understand why and how these parties are influencing EU foreign policy; and to identify potentially divisive areas that could disrupt EU foreign and security policy.

Understanding how the radical right can influence EU foreign policy requires methodological rigor. Studies on the impact of populism—rather than of the radical right—on EU foreign policy have shown that there is more noise and media hype than concrete impact on decisionmaking. Alone, populist parties are rarely able to obstruct foreign policy decisions, show little interest in foreign policy, and often use critical rhetoric at home while falling into line in Brussels. Where they excel is in framing debates in polarizing and securitized terms, most notably on migration. And in doing so, they influence liberal-democratic parties, which take on positions that were previously prerogatives of populism.²⁰

EU foreign policy making has always been fraught with divisions and obstructions. It is an intergovernmental process that allows each member state to exercise a veto power, regardless of its political weight. Common EU positions have frequently been blocked or made hard to achieve by the opposition of one or more member states that claim to be acting in their national interests, notwithstanding the political stripe of the government. This study explores the extent to which the rise of the radical right puts this fragile component of EU policymaking further at risk.

Through the fourteen case studies, a review of existing literature, empirical research, and confidential interviews with individuals in key positions in the EU policymaking system, we have identified several ways in which the radical right shapes EU foreign and security policy. This analysis can shed light on whether these diverse radical-right parties can come together with an EU foreign policy agenda and, if so, what issues may become hard to handle at the EU level.

The dynamics through which the radical right impacts foreign policy can be indirect, by putting pressure on mainstream actors, or direct, by blocking consensus building, aligning with external powers, resisting the development of EU foreign policy architecture, or abusing institutional positions. The consequences of these tactics include the EU's inability to agree on certain policies, a downgrading of the content of these policies, an erosion of trust among the actors in the foreign policy system, and a weakening of the EU's international impact and credibility.

Putting Pressure on Mainstream Actors

The most evident dynamic is pressure on mainstream politics. Concerned about increasing electoral competition from the radical right, some European centrist and conservative parties have moved significantly to the right in their positions. These parties now advocate more restrictive migration and asylum policies, and some have even become hostile toward EU-level solutions, preferring a stronger national approach. In 2015–2016, several countries joined Hungary in calling for tough immigration policies and fiercely defensive border controls; today, most governments have moved toward restrictive policies. The needle has shifted toward the radical right.

A similar dynamic is now visible in the EU's climate change policies. Several center-right parties have become very cautious about EU legislation in this area, particularly when it affects the lifestyle choices of voters or entrenched interests, such as agriculture. This shift has not yet changed the EU's ambitious climate diplomacy, but the risk of a backlash is undeniable.

Several mainstream parties are also becoming more reluctant to deepen European integration. Reform through changes to the EU's treaties is widely perceived as unacceptably risky: the negotiations would reveal too many divisions among European governments, and even if they were to reach agreement, the national referendums that would be needed to amend the treaties might be exploited by the radical right for political ends. But even reforms short of treaty change, such as more majority voting, have become unpopular in some countries. Across the EU, there is growing support for protecting member states' regulatory freedom in economic, fiscal, and other areas.

Blocking Consensus Building

The radical right has raised its game by disrupting EU unity and blocking EU-level initiatives. Consensus building is notoriously difficult in foreign and security policy, especially when national interests are at stake. National vetoes have always plagued EU foreign policy making, but they have been relatively rare. When a government found itself in isolation, it usually fell into line after gaining some face-saving concessions. In recent years, however,

the international atmosphere has favored realpolitik tactics and transactionalism. In the EU, blockages have become more frequent, and governments' aversion to isolation has receded.

To a considerable extent, this trend is due to countries led by radical-right parties, in particular Hungary, which is responsible for the largest number of blockages in EU foreign policy making.²¹ Vetoes by radical-right governments can express strong disagreement over policy, but they can also be employed as leverage to promote other, unrelated objectives—as Hungary showed with its veto of EU financial support for Ukraine in 2023.

A proliferation of national vetoes necessarily weakens the solidarity of EU member states. Many governments find themselves in disagreement with proposed EU policies from time to time. If some member states regularly employ their vetoes, others will be increasingly tempted to do likewise. And as the likelihood of obstruction by one or more states increases, the ambition of EU foreign policy making will inevitably diminish. What is more, time spent in long internal negotiations to overcome national vetoes comes at the expense of outreach to external actors and thus reduces the effectiveness of EU action.

Aligning With External Powers

When in government, radical-right parties have aligned their countries with external powers. The EU's relative decline on the global stage comes as other major powers are exerting growing influence on the EU in general and on individual member states in particular. The number of cases in which member states have blocked EU positions to accommodate such external powers has grown. Hungary has done this most often, usually for the benefit of China, to restrain criticism of Beijing's human rights record and territorial ambitions; of Russia, to limit the scope of sanctions since Moscow's 2022 invasion of Ukraine; or of Israel, to curb criticism of its practices in the occupied territories. Some diplomats are concerned about U.S. interference if Trump wins the 2024 U.S. presidential election.²²

Aside from external powers that willfully seek to influence EU positions, occasionally the radical right deviates from established EU policy and aligns with like-minded nonstate actors that operate outside the EU. For instance, on women's and LGBTQ rights, the European radical right converges with global organizations such as evangelical churches and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation.

Often, alignment with outside powers is rhetorical and not followed through in practice. Nonetheless, it is harmful for EU cohesion, as the suspicion that some partners' loyalties at times lie with such powers undermines trust within the bloc. In particular, aligning with external powers erodes confidence among foreign policy actors working in the EU system by affecting the habit of collegial cooperation and the behavioral practices of diplomats. This impedes practitioners' readiness to share intelligence and confidential information, making work on some issues, such as strengthening economic security and enforcing sanctions, very challenging.

Resisting the Development of Foreign Policy Architecture

In line with their overall skeptical attitude toward EU integration and their nationalist philosophy, radical-right parties resist the further development of EU foreign policy institutions and procedures. They reject moving to majority voting on foreign policy and are skeptical of the empowerment of EU institutions and foreign policy actors. Most of these parties envisage EU foreign policy at best as a loose coordination mechanism that fully respects member states' sovereignty to run their own national foreign policies. Most parties also take a negative view of efforts to develop the EU's defense policy while looking more positively at the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

These parties' skepticism of European integration extends to external policies, particularly trade. Many of these parties sharply criticize the European Commission's lead role in these areas and would prefer to put the member states in charge.

Abusing Institutional Positions

When they do take on roles in the EU system, radical-right parties perform unevenly. Fidesz and PiS were the first radical-right parties to nominate members of the European Commission. During the commissions of former presidents José Manuel Barroso and Jean-Claude Juncker, the commissioners from Hungary and Poland joined their colleagues and did not stand out by promoting national agendas. In the case of Hungary, this changed under the commission headed by the current president, Ursula von der Leyen.

In 2019, Fidesz's first nominee as European commissioner, László Trócsányi, was rejected by the European Parliament for alleged conflicts of interest. His replacement, Oliver Várhelyi, was assigned the portfolio of EU enlargement and relations with the union's neighborhood. His conduct in office soon became controversial. He was accused by officials and MEPs of neglecting the EU's principle that progress toward accession should be conditional on the rule of law and democracy and of entertaining particularly friendly relations with Western Balkan leaders with autocratic tendencies, such as Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić and Bosnia and Herzegovina's Milorad Dodik.²³ Equally controversial were Várhelyi's repeated efforts to curtail the EU's support for the Palestinian Authority, both before and after Hamas's October 7, 2023, terrorist attacks against Israel. His actions at various points triggered calls by MEPs for an investigation into his conduct and for his resignation.

The rotating six-month presidency of the EU Council, which brings together national ministers, offers another opportunity for governments dominated by radical-right parties to attempt to shape EU policies according to their agendas. Hungary's first presidency in 2011, shortly after Fidesz came to power, was generally perceived as pragmatic and reasonably successful, even though restrictive legislation in the country, including a media law, caused some heated debates in the European Parliament.

Hungary's next presidency comes in the second half of 2024 at a time of much greater estrangement between Budapest and Brussels. Many voices in the parliament and civil society have called for Hungary's presidency to be suspended or postponed. However, the decision lies with the council, and most member states prefer to respect the established sequence of presidencies. It will be interesting to see how Hungary will handle the challenge—although as far as foreign policy is concerned, the presidency's role is limited, because both the European Council, which brings together EU leaders, and the Foreign Affairs Council have permanent chairs.

Areas Where the Radical Right Can Have an Impact

Despite sharing similar worldviews, European radical-right parties have not formed a coherent block capable of reshaping EU foreign policy, with the exception of migration policy. However, the situation could change if more radical-right parties were to win power or if there were a change in international circumstances, such as a victory of the radical right in the next U.S. presidential election. Thus, it is worth mapping the areas in which the current EU consensus could be undermined or even altered.

Migration

Opposition to migration and, by extension, to EU migration policies is the single issue that unites all radical-right parties and the area in which they have had the most significant impact. Some, such as FdI, RN, and the AfD, go as far as to warn against “ethnic replacement.”²⁴ These parties are particularly exercised about Muslim immigrants, with the PVV, for instance, having adopted Islamophobia as its primary ideology. Some parties are also opposed to European migration and hostile to Ukrainian refugees. Worries about the economic costs of asylum seekers and the impacts of migration on law and order and the labor market are common features, too.

Most parties advocate renationalizing migration and asylum policies and would resort to drastic measures, including extremely strict border management, naval blockades, the offshoring of asylum procedures to non-EU countries, and the return of unsuccessful asylum seekers to their countries of origin. Many radical-right parties oppose any significant EU role in regulating these matters as well as international rules such as the 1951 United Nations (UN) Refugee Convention or the 2018 UN Global Compact for Migration. A strengthening of the radical right could impede the implementation of regulations on migration, weaken the EU's capacity to develop further common responses to the migration challenge, and result in a shift toward national policymaking on these issues.

Climate Change

Climate change policies have become fertile ground for exploitation by the radical right—and by external powers. For some radical-right parties, opposition to climate action is associated with nostalgia for a mythical rural past. These parties argue that the relatively small size of their countries compared with the biggest emitters, such as China, the United States, and India, makes national measures to reduce emissions irrelevant on a global scale. Many of the parties covered by this study accept the reality of climate change, but many of their members and followers question whether it is man-made.

The current European backlash against green policies, or greenlash, focuses on the European Green Deal and the Fit for 55 legislative package, which seeks to reduce EU emissions by at least 55 percent by 2030.²⁵ The radical right criticizes this package as an authoritarian elite project that ignores the economic and social costs to citizens and infringes on individual freedoms. Indeed, PiS and Fidesz fought a rearguard action against several elements of the green deal, but as these matters were subject to majority votes, the parties were unable to block them. Poland's attempts to challenge part of this legislation in the European Court of Justice were similarly unsuccessful.

However, as with migration, these parties' main impact on EU climate change policies may be indirect. If the radical right is successful in framing the debate about the green transition as an elite conspiracy against the people, mainstream parties will water down the scope and timeframe of the green agenda. The narrow majority with which the European Parliament adopted the EU's nature restoration law in February 2024 is an indication of this trend.²⁶

Ukraine and Russia

EU policymakers have drawn comfort from the fact that the radical right was sharply divided by Russia's invasion of Ukraine. In Poland and the Baltic states, Russia has long been perceived as a threat across the board. In Italy, the commitment of Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni's FdI-led government to Western efforts contrasted with the pro-Russia sentiments of her coalition partners and the views of earlier governments. Other radical-right parties moved from a Russia-friendly position to a condemnation of the Russian aggression.

But the radical right maintains a critical stance toward U.S. and EU policies, which, in its view, share some responsibility for the crisis. Several parties, including the FPÖ, Fidesz, Bulgaria's Revival, the Slovak National Party, and the AfD, view Russia favorably. So far, only Orbán has continued to pursue close ties with Russian President Vladimir Putin. Hungary has obtained exceptions to EU sanctions against Russia to protect its interests in the form of Russian investment and, more generally, has sought to limit the scope and soften the impact of the measures.

With several radical-right parties maintaining open sympathies toward Russia, and others having made scarcely credible U-turns, EU sanctions and military support for Ukraine could be affected if the international context changes. Should Trump, as the next U.S. president, pursue a peace deal with Russia, as he has promised to do, European unity over Ukraine would likely come to an end.²⁷ Conversely, for the anti-Russia radical right in Northern Europe, including the Baltic states, a Trump-Putin rapprochement would be challenging. Diverse attitudes on this issue will remain a serious obstacle to efforts to unite the radical right.

Great-Power Competition

U.S. engagement with European security is likely to diminish—in an accelerated fashion if Trump becomes the next president and in a more gradual way if President Joe Biden is reelected. At present, most radical-right parties align with their country’s mainstream political stance on NATO. But anti-NATO and anti-U.S. sentiments also exist, usually tied to broader antiglobalist or sovereigntist ideologies and often coupled with pro-Russia sympathies or aspirations for an independent defense.

For example, the AfD wants Germany to distance itself from the United States and, by extension, from NATO. The party is more supportive of closer defense cooperation among EU countries. RN has called for France’s departure from the alliance’s integrated military command and is equally hostile to a stronger EU defense policy. The FPÖ opposes NATO, as it fiercely defends Austria’s neutral status. On the whole, an emboldened radical right would make it even harder for Europe to build a strategic defense profile, whether under the umbrella of NATO or of the EU.

Unlike Russia, China has not yet developed ties with the European radical right. Beijing is viewed with some skepticism, especially by Northern European radical-right parties. Meloni’s government has also pulled out of China’s Belt and Road Initiative. Conversely, Fidesz and Revival are sympathetic to Chinese interests in Europe because they see Beijing as a source of investment. Because of its leanings toward external actors and its sovereigntist instincts, the radical right could become a hindrance to the EU’s work to bolster its economic security.

EU Enlargement

EU enlargement has long been the most important component of EU foreign policy and has assumed a new importance since the union granted candidate country status to Moldova, Ukraine, and Georgia in 2022–2023. The great majority of radical-right parties see enlargement critically and consider it costly and potentially conducive to more migration. RN, the PVV, the FPÖ, and the AfD have been particularly outspoken on this issue. Other parties, however, support particular candidates: PiS considers Ukraine’s accession important for

Poland's security; AUR looks at Moldova as part of Romanian territory; and Fidesz believes that EU membership for like-minded Western Balkan countries would enhance Hungary's own influence in the union.

Apart from their overall skeptical attitude to enlargement, radical-right parties tend to support the raising of historical grievances and identity issues in the context of EU accession negotiations. Attempts to leverage EU enlargement to extract concessions from candidate countries have become one of the biggest obstacles to moving the process forward.

Values

As illiberal parties, radical-right groups mobilize to defend national identity, family values, and their countries' Christian heritage, which they see as under attack from an undemocratic, oppressive liberal elite that has captured the EU's values agenda. These parties oppose the promotion of this agenda in EU foreign policy and block EU initiatives in this direction. Moreover, the radical right views foreign policy mostly in a transactional manner and shows little interest in promoting respect for human rights, democracy, or the rule of law at the international level. These parties see no reason to criticize powerful third countries for deficits in this area, particularly if doing so could have negative consequences for their own bilateral relationships.

Yet, diplomats agree that the EU's values-based agenda, especially with respect to women's and LGBTQ rights, has already been downgraded.²⁸ Sweden has abandoned its feminist foreign policy. PiS was the most ideologically consistent actor in blocking common European positions and was joined by some—but not all—like-minded and conservative-led countries. Some radical-right governments, notably Italy's, limit their skepticism of gender and LGBTQ rights to domestic politics, without letting their views affect their approach to EU policy.

Although the EU's values debate is framed in ideological terms, diplomats see the obstructionism of some governments as transactional.²⁹ As long as they are relatively isolated, radical-right governments are less likely to block EU consensus building unless they have something to gain. However, a strengthening of radical-right parties in the EU institutions, in particular the EU Council, would likely further downgrade the promotion of values as an element of EU foreign policy. As a consequence, the EU would lose credibility as a promoter of fundamental values and be exposed to criticism for hypocrisy and double standards. These European divisions also play out in international organizations and aggravate the EU's tensions with third countries.

The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

One area in which the EU is experiencing global accusations of double standards and suffering reputational damage is the Israel-Gaza war, on which the union has divided and divisive positions. The reasons for these divisions run deeper than the rise of the radical right, but these parties do share a pronounced pro-Israel stance. Radical-right parties perceive Israel as a frontline state against Islamist terrorism, a view that resonates with their domestic policies against immigration and multiculturalism. In some cases, paradoxically, anti-Semitic sentiments coexist with a pro-Israel position. Indeed, adopting such a position has helped some parties distance themselves from their anti-Semitic roots. The recent rightward drift of Israeli politics, and contacts between like-minded parties in Israel and Europe, has reinforced the pro-Israel stances of radical-right parties.

The divisions among EU member states are so deep that the radical right's influence plays only a small part in explaining the union's problems in agreeing on a common position on the Israel-Gaza war. But the radical right did contribute to the EU's paralysis. In February 2024, Hungary opposed the imposition of EU sanctions against Israeli settlers in the West Bank and blocked an EU statement that warned against Israel's planned offensive into Rafah. And days after the October 7 attacks, a post by Várhelyi on X (formerly Twitter) announcing the EU's suspension of aid to the Palestinians was viewed by 5 million people within the space of a few hours.³⁰

Development Aid

The most significant impact of radical-right parties on development cooperation is their insistence on leveraging aid to obtain reductions in migration flows. In these parties' view, recipient countries should make it more difficult for people to leave and should support the return of irregular migrants. The SD and the FdI have been particularly active in this regard, with Meloni in January 2024 launching a major investment program for Africa supposedly aimed at addressing the root causes of migration and promoting cooperation on these issues.³¹ Other parties, including the Finns Party and the PVV, place more emphasis on reducing overall levels of assistance. Central European rightist parties have generally been reluctant donors and slow in adopting EU guidelines on development aid. But whereas PiS remained close to the mainstream, Fidesz has been highly critical of EU aid policy while increasing bilateral funding aimed at promoting national objectives.

Radical-right parties have so far not significantly influenced development assistance provided by the commission and the European Investment Bank. But as many mainstream parties follow the radical right in linking aid to cooperation on migration, this idea is likely to become a prominent feature of future EU debates, including on new programs, such as the Global Gateway initiative for infrastructure investment.

Conclusions

All radical-right parties share a strong ethnonationalist orientation. This unites them in their reflexive mistrust of anything foreign and unfamiliar and in their skepticism of regional and global institutions and norms. But this orientation also divides them, as national interests and narratives vary a great deal and are often at odds with each other. As the fragmentation of these parties in the European Parliament shows, these divisions have so far hampered the parties' ability to work together and reduced their overall impact.

There are variations in the radicalism of these parties' aversion to European integration, but they all aim at protecting national sovereignty against further infringement by what they see as an unelected Brussels bureaucracy. They converge in their skepticism of the EU's migration and asylum policies, which they hold responsible for the massive inflows of migrants in recent years, and they are increasingly hostile to the European Green Deal. In defense of Christian and traditional family values, radical-right parties criticize the EU's gender and LGBTQ policies and are generally reluctant to raise human rights concerns in their relations with third countries. These parties are mostly opposed to further EU enlargement but make exceptions when national interests favor the inclusion of particular neighbors.

The sharpest divisions among radical-right parties concern their relations with Russia and China. A deep mistrust of Russia means that many parties support Ukraine's efforts in the ongoing war, while others are openly sympathetic toward Moscow and buy into its anti-Western narratives. On China, many of these parties have not yet developed clear positions, but an interest among Central European parties in strong economic relations with Beijing contrasts with the skeptical attitude of their Nordic counterparts.

Where radical-right parties converge, such as on migration and climate change, they are also likely to find support from mainstream parties and influence EU policies. EU initiatives with objectives that these parties oppose tend to run into difficulties. Where the parties are divided, their influence depends on the EU's decisionmaking procedures. On topics on which the EU decides by a majority vote, their impact is likely to remain limited. Where unanimity is required, such as on foreign policy, radical-right parties in governing coalitions still have an important blocking ability. In cases where a party that threatens to use its national veto can be isolated, as Hungary was on EU assistance to Ukraine, the chances of overcoming the blockage are good. But if other leaders with similar views are at the table, the risk of paralysis is high.

Contagion and Socialization

Interviews with foreign policy practitioners in Brussels have revealed two tendencies with opposite effects: contagion and socialization.

If individual actors aggressively assert narrow national interests, reject compromise, and block decisions, this tends to result in an overall lowering of solidarity in the entire group. This is particularly true in a setting such as the EU Council, which is based on cooperation and reciprocity and lacks effective means to penalize obstructionism. The more such actors appear on the scene and the more concessions they manage to extract, the greater the temptation will be—even for originally cooperative parties—to engage in similar behavior. Everybody has national interests to protect, and nobody wants to be played for a fool. As a consequence of this contagion, the quality of cooperation will deteriorate.

Orbán’s behavior has already had significant negative effects on EU foreign policy. However, on issues such as Ukraine, where the stakes are high and the vast majority of member states are united, the cohesion of the rest has so far been maintained. But if there are more EU leaders who prioritize purely national objectives and show little regard for the union’s common interests, centrifugal tendencies are likely to prevail.

Radical-right parties in opposition tend to adopt extreme positions to mobilize their voter base and attain a high national profile. When they come to power, these parties usually have to moderate their demands, either because they need to accommodate coalition partners or simply because their original views clash with a complex reality. Working in EU institutions can greatly reinforce this tendency toward greater pragmatism. Sitting in the European Council and the EU Council, radical-right leaders and ministers are drawn into a process designed to lead to negotiated outcomes based on compromise. For many—though by no means all—such politicians, this socialization effect will eventually overrule their ideological baggage. Gradually, outsiders can become insiders with a stake in the system.

Meloni’s FdI is currently the most prominent example so far of this trend. Fears that her government would become another disruptor in EU politics, possibly in close cooperation with Orbán’s, have not come true. Notwithstanding the traditionally pro-Russia views of her coalition partners, Meloni has supported Ukraine. Even on migration—a highly sensitive issue for her party—her policies have been more pragmatic than observers had expected. It remains to be seen how long this will last.

The two tendencies—contagion and socialization—work in parallel but also against each other. Should further crises and increased volatility in European politics bring several radical-right leaders, such as Wilders, Le Pen, or the FPÖ’s Herbert Kickl, to power in a short time, contagion would probably overwhelm the EU’s socialization capacity. A calmer period with only limited progress of the radical right might tame existing radical-right leaders and keep Orbán at bay.

Internal Cohesion and External Credibility

Radical-right parties' contentious ideology, which is at odds with the EU's fundamental values, as well as their transactional approach to foreign policy making and innate skepticism of the EU institutions trigger centrifugal dynamics in the EU. As a consequence, solidarity and trust among the member states and their willingness to deepen mutual interdependence are weakened.

All of these trends not only make the EU less able to withstand the pressures of future challenges, but they also have important ramifications for the EU's effectiveness as an international actor. Diplomats already complain that the time spent in exhausting committee negotiations to reach a consensus on foreign and security policy issues is to the detriment of the EU's engagement with the rest of the world.³² The EU's international stances and multilateral policies are further undermined when radical-right governments align with external powers or global organizations, or simply do not follow the EU's collective positions when voting in international bodies. As a consequence, the EU's values-based agenda becomes downgraded, damaging the union's credibility.

When democratic backsliding and the unraveling of the rule of law occur in the EU, the external impact is not only reputational damage. Such developments also give radical-right political forces in neighboring countries a blueprint to dodge the rule-of-law conditions the EU places on its closest partners. This trend weakens the union's enlargement agenda and contributes to the consolidation of illiberal forces in countries close to the EU.

The Trump Factor

A return of Donald Trump as U.S. president would have a hugely disruptive influence on the EU, which would splinter into various factions, with some countries advocating a stronger and more autonomous EU and others seeking to assuage Trump for the sake of U.S. security guarantees. In this context, it would be very hard for the EU to find unity in the pursuit of many of its current foreign and security policies. This challenge would be made even more difficult by European governments that include the radical right and share ideological affinities with Trump.

Ukraine would be the first victim of this political constellation, as the EU would find it difficult to muster sufficient commitment to continue its financial and military support for the country. Efforts to strengthen the EU's economic security would be paralyzed both by the influence of external actors seeking to shape EU positions and by the radical right's skepticism of coordination from Brussels on economic and foreign policies. Europe would become a playground for a possible heightened U.S.-China rivalry, with some radical-right parties acting as Trojan horses and others invoking national sovereignty and protectionism.

What is less clear is whether Trump can be a unifying factor for the European radical right, which currently represents a spectrum with anti-U.S. and pro-Russia sentiments at one end and pro-U.S. and anti-Russia preferences at the other. In the case of a Trump-Putin rapprochement, these parties might find themselves in a schizophrenic predicament.

Responding to the Radical Right

For the political mainstream, the rise of the radical right offers important lessons and needs to be met with robust, coherent responses. First and foremost, the EU as a liberal, democratic project has no future without its core values. Parties committed to these values need consistent cooperation to isolate the most determined disruptors and persuade wavering partners to come on board.

The responsibility to contain the radical right lies primarily with mainstream parties working at the national level. These need to resist the temptation to mimic the radical right. Experience has shown that this tactic backfires and strengthens the radical right, which may become the new mainstream. Whenever a national coalition with a radical-right party is inevitable, mainstream parties should ensure to include binding guardrails in coalition agreements so that the entire government remains committed to European values and principles.

Mainstream political forces should actively engage in dialogue with all parties that are democratic and not racist, even if they are critical of EU institutions and policies. Many of these parties have not yet fully developed positions on most foreign policy issues. There should be space for persuasion and convergence.

At the EU level, member states should pursue efforts to make the EU foreign policy making process more flexible. The rise of radical-right parties has made the transition to majority voting even more difficult than it was already, but there might be opportunities for softer measures, such as more use of constructive abstention. In some cases of blockages, the EU's treaty provisions on enhanced cooperation could offer a way forward. Also, making a declaration on behalf of a very large majority of member states is sometimes preferable to remaining silent.

The president of the European Commission has considerable influence over the nomination of European commissioners. She should make sure that they work in a nonideological manner for the EU's common interests and are assigned portfolios for which their party backgrounds do not create conflicts of interest.

The rule of law is not only a key principle of the EU but also a crucial requirement for the functioning of the internal market. The EU institutions therefore need to remain strict and consistent in their handling of instruments to ensure respect for the rule of law. The

institutions need to resist attempts to leverage other policy objectives to weaken the EU's rule-of-law conditionality.

Finally, interviews suggested that Trump's return as U.S. president would severely aggravate many of Europe's external challenges and exacerbate the internal disruption from radical-right parties. Preparing for this eventuality in both the EU and NATO requires serious planning that should start now.³³

CHAPTER 1

Austria: Fortress Austria, Permanently Neutral

Stefan Lehne

The Freedom Party of Austria: Evolution and Profile

The Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) was founded in 1956 as a coalition between German nationalists—many of them former members of the Nazi Party—and a more liberal political group. The following three decades, in which the party received only modest electoral support, were marked by repeated struggles between these two wings. During a relatively liberal period, the FPÖ joined a governing coalition with the center-left Social Democratic Party (SPÖ) from 1983 to 1986.

In 1986, Jörg Haider, the charismatic leader of the German nationalist wing, took over the FPÖ. Two years later, he called the Austrian nation a “freak,” but responding to the increasing European orientation of the country’s two mainstream parties, the SPÖ and the center-right Austrian People’s Party (ÖVP), he later undertook a far-reaching patriotic rebranding of the FPÖ, which he combined with xenophobic and Euroskeptic propaganda.³⁴ Skillfully exploiting the public’s fatigue with Austria’s prevailing model of grand coalitions between the two main parties, Haider led the FPÖ to a series of electoral successes.³⁵

From 2000 to 2006, the FPÖ joined a governing coalition led by the ÖVP’s Wolfgang Schüssel, a move that was perceived in Western Europe as a breach of the European Union’s (EU’s) cordon sanitaire around radical-right parties and triggered diplomatic sanctions by the other fourteen EU member states. The FPÖ’s participation in the government was overshadowed by scandals and resulted in electoral defeats and the party’s breakup—albeit temporarily. However, by 2017, the FPÖ had regained much of its earlier strength and again entered a governing coalition with the ÖVP under Sebastian Kurz; after further scandals,

this coalition broke up in 2019. In that year's parliamentary election, the FPÖ won 16.2 percent of the vote—a loss of 10 percentage points compared with the previous election.³⁶

Yet, once again, the party proved its resilience and skill in attracting the support of angry voters. The FPÖ gained ground in regional elections in Lower Austria, Carinthia, and Salzburg. As of this writing, the party is leading in polling for the next parliamentary election, due in fall 2024, with up to 30 percent of the vote, followed by the ÖVP and the SPÖ, with roughly 23 percent each.³⁷ Most Austrian parties have ruled out a coalition with the FPÖ, although the ÖVP is primarily objecting to the current party leader and to not the party as such.³⁸ The FPÖ is also expected to do well in the June 2024 elections to the European Parliament, where the party belongs to the Identity and Democracy group.

Under its current chairman, Herbert Kickl, the FPÖ maintains a strong focus on migration. The party is also highly critical of EU and Austrian climate change policies. The FPÖ considers Austrian support for Ukraine and sanctions against Russia a violation of Austria's neutrality, and the party is exploiting widespread anger about the cost-of-living crisis as well as enduring resentment toward Austria's relatively harsh restrictions during the coronavirus pandemic.

Relationship With the EU

The FPÖ's attitude to European integration has gone through profound changes. A 1968 party program contained a commitment to a European federal state with common foreign, monetary, and economic policies and supported Austria joining the European Communities, the precursor of the EU. At the time, the Austrian political mainstream considered participation in European integration to be incompatible with Austria's neutral status.³⁹ But in the early 1990s, as Austria was negotiating its accession to the EU, the FPÖ under Haider turned skeptical. In the campaign for the 1994 referendum on accession, the party opposed Austria's membership, arguing that Brussels's bureaucratic centralism would threaten Austria's national identity.

In the following years, FPÖ politicians repeatedly flirted with the idea of a referendum on leaving the EU or the eurozone.⁴⁰ However, during its periods in government, the FPÖ left the management of EU business mostly to the broadly pro-European ÖVP ministers. Against the background of a skeptical public, Austria's consent to the EU's big bang enlargement in 2004 and 2007 was masterminded by Schüssel. The FPÖ signaled its unhappiness and played for time but ultimately fell into line.

Like other radical-right parties, the FPÖ moderated its views on the EU after Brexit. An Austrian exit from the union is no longer on the agenda, but deep-seated Euroskepticism persists. The current party program asserts—under the telling headline “Austria First”—a

commitment to “a Europe of self-determined peoples and fatherlands and to cooperation within Europe according to the basic principles of subsidiarity and federalism. The destiny of Europe must be characterised by the organisational freedom of its states.”⁴¹ The program opposes “forced multiculturalism, globalisation and mass immigration” and highlights “the western values, the cultural heritage and the traditions of the European peoples.”

It follows from this position that the FPÖ opposes reform of the EU’s treaties, which would, in the party’s view, only result in more Brussels-based centralism at the expense of the member states’ sovereignty. For the same reasons, the FPÖ also rejects an extension of majority voting, as opposed to decisionmaking by unanimity, in the EU Council.

Recently, Kickl has ramped up the party’s aggressive anti-EU rhetoric. Speaking in May 2023, he accused the EU of “undermining Austria’s well-earned prosperity, its permanent neutrality, and its sovereignty” and demanded a “Fortress Austria” to protect the country not only against mass migration but also against the selling out of national competencies to Brussels.⁴²

A part of this aggressive tone is due to the incipient campaigns for the crucial 2024 national and European Parliament elections. However, one should not assume that if the FPÖ were to participate in the government after the next national election it would again behave pragmatically. According to current polls, the party might well end up as the stronger partner in a coalition, which would greatly enhance its influence. Also, the FPÖ’s only potential coalition partner, the ÖVP, traditionally a distinctly pro-European party, increasingly tends toward Euroskeptic positions as it worries about losing further voters to the FPÖ. Thus, there is a considerable risk of Austria hardening its line on European integration.

Foreign Policy Positions

Foreign policy has never been an important part of the FPÖ’s profile. The party’s general attitude to policy is framed by a strong focus on protecting Austria’s identity in a narrow and conservative sense. In line with the party’s slogan, “Austria First,” the FPÖ is distrustful of foreign entanglements, dismissive of notions of international solidarity, and skeptical of development cooperation. There is a strong current of anti-Americanism in the party, combined with considerable sympathy for Russia’s policies. The FPÖ’s earlier German nationalist orientation has been replaced by a heavy emphasis on Austrian patriotism. In terms of security policy, the party’s top priority is the preservation of Austrian neutrality, which it sees as threatened both by the EU’s active sanctions policies and by moves toward closer EU defense cooperation.

During the ÖVP-FPÖ coalition in 2017–2019, Karin Kneissl, who was nominated by the FPÖ but was not a party member, headed Austria’s foreign ministry. Apart from the

eccentric idea of inviting Russian President Vladimir Putin to her wedding and Austria's refusal to sign the United Nations Global Compact for Migration, Austrian foreign policy during that time did not deviate significantly from the EU mainstream.

Immigration and Asylum

Ever since Haider assumed the party leadership in 1986, resistance to immigration has been a central policy platform of the FPÖ and a major vote winner. Contrary to all the evidence, the party program insists that "Austria is not a country of migration."⁴³ In fact, as of August 2023, 26.4 percent of the country's inhabitants had a migration background.⁴⁴ The party ascribes a high value to Austria's identity, as shaped by its German language, culture, and history, and takes a highly restrictive line on the integration of foreigners. There is a particular bias against migrants and asylum seekers from Muslim-majority countries.

According to FPÖ politicians, if the EU cannot secure its external borders, the member states will have to defend their national borders and the passport-free Schengen Area will not survive.⁴⁵ In response to a recent rise in asylum applications, the party demanded a cap on such applications, pushbacks of migrants and effective technical barriers at the Austrian border, the criminalization of illegal border crossings, massive pressure on third countries to support migrant returns, and the transfer of asylum seekers to camps in third countries.⁴⁶ The party rejects the EU's attempts to develop a common asylum policy and, in particular, any notion of burden sharing.

While the FPÖ's positions are extreme, the party has succeeded in shaping the discourse on these issues in Austria. Particularly the ÖVP, which currently leads the government, but also other mainstream parties are shifting toward an increasingly restrictive stance on migration and asylum. It is difficult to see this trend changing anytime soon.

Russia and Ukraine

The Austrian political establishment has for decades enjoyed excellent relations with Russia. For a long time, the FPÖ remained an outsider in this respect. But around the time of Moscow's 2014 annexation of Crimea, relations between the party and Russia began to develop dynamically. FPÖ politicians began propagating the Russian narrative on the conflict and condemned EU sanctions on Moscow. Some even participated as election monitors in the 2014 referendum on the status of Crimea. In 2016, the FPÖ signed a cooperation agreement with Russia's leading party, United Russia—although, according to the FPÖ, the accord has since lapsed. So, while the Austrian mainstream finally distanced itself from Russia, the FPÖ intensified its engagement.

Kickl does not belong to the party's more pro-Russia faction. Nonetheless, after Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine, he pleaded for understanding on "both sides" and

assigned some of the responsibility for the conflict to the United States.⁴⁷ To this day, FPÖ politicians continue to argue along these lines. They reject sanctions against Russia, highlight the cost of the conflict to Austria's economy, and claim that Austria's participation in these sanctions violates the country's neutrality.⁴⁸ The FPÖ takes a particularly negative view of EU military support for Ukraine, maintaining that neutral Austria should instead work diplomatically toward an immediate ceasefire.

Security and Relations With the United States

In the 1990s, several prominent FPÖ politicians considered Austrian neutrality to be obsolete and supported an early application for the country's membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).⁴⁹ But in later years, the party took note of the enduring popularity of neutrality among Austria's population and turned itself into a passionate defender of the country's neutral status. With the exception of brief periods in 2000–2003 and 2017–2019 when FPÖ politicians held the position of defense minister, the party has looked at EU initiatives to develop its security and defense policy with suspicion and regularly criticizes the government for its participation in these efforts.

There is a significant anti-American bias in the FPÖ, which goes back to the party's German nationalist origins. Lately, some FPÖ politicians, like those in other radical-right groups in Europe, have attempted to build relationships with right-wing U.S. Republicans, with whom they share a distaste for liberal values.⁵⁰

Climate Change

For a long time absent from the Austrian debate on the climate transition, the FPÖ in 2023 discovered Austrians' widespread anger about energy transition measures and climate activists as an important new source of political support. FPÖ politicians stop short of denying the reality of climate change and take a positive view on promoting renewable energy. But they attack the European Green Deal—a package of policy initiatives that aims to set the EU on the path to a green transition—and the Austrian government's measures as excessive and overambitious, claiming that the main emitter countries, China, India, and the United States, are not making similar efforts.⁵¹ According to the FPÖ, oil and gas will remain essential to keep the European economy going.

The FPÖ considers the EU's climate change policies to be an authoritarian elite project that ignores the economic and social costs for normal people and massively constrains individual freedom, particularly of car owners. Kickl has even coined the phrase "climate communism."⁵² FPÖ politicians also criticize Austria's contribution to financial support for the Global South for climate goals.⁵³

EU Enlargement

Polls indicate very little support in Austria for EU enlargement to the Western Balkans or Ukraine.⁵⁴ Nonetheless, the government maintains a positive narrative about the accession ambitions of the Western Balkan countries. Unsurprisingly, this provokes heavy criticism from the FPÖ. According to Kickl, further EU enlargement would threaten the union's stability and economic balance. All of the newly acceding countries would receive huge funds from the EU budget and contribute very little to it. The FPÖ rejects collective EU debt as a way to finance support for Ukraine or future enlargement, arguing that this would progressively undermine the sovereignty of the member states.⁵⁵

The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

Despite its roots in Nazism, the FPÖ has held a pro-Israel stance for a long time. This alignment was particularly evident in the views of Heinz-Christian Strache, a previous party leader. Strache's perspectives on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict closely resembled those of Israel's right-wing Likud party and The Jewish Home, a former radical-right party.⁵⁶ He supported Israel's right to build settlements in the West Bank and advocated moving the Austrian embassy in Israel from Ramat Gan to Jerusalem. The current party leader, Herbert Kickl, sharply condemned Hamas's attack on Israel in October 2023.⁵⁷ Like other European radical-right parties, the FPÖ portrays itself as philo-Semitic and pro-Israel, a position that is also part of its broader anti-Muslim and hardline stance on migrants.

CHAPTER 2

Bulgaria: A Pro-Kremlin Disruptor Throws a Wrench in the Works

Rumena Filipova

Revival: Evolution and Profile

The Bulgarian radical right has in recent years been firmly occupied by the nationalist, anti-Western, pro-Kremlin party Revival. The name refers to Bulgaria's nineteenth-century revival of a national consciousness, cultural regeneration, and a revolutionary impetus for national liberation and autonomy from the Ottoman Empire. While other radical-right nationalist parties have not typically commanded a constant presence in Bulgaria's public and media space, Revival has been able to significantly exceed the traditional appeal and influence of such political groups.

Since it was established in 2014, Revival's ascendancy in Bulgarian politics has been shaped by the party's persistent messaging and positioning. It started to run a very effective, high-impact social media campaign, particularly on Facebook. Revival's ability to move from the political fringes to the mainstream of public debate was underlined not least by the party's appeal to pro-Russia societal sentiments and nationalist leanings. Bulgaria's permissive media and political environment further enabled Revival's anchoring in the mainstream. Nationwide television channels catapulted the party and its leader, Kostadin Kostadinov, from social media influencer to a larger political force.

The combined effect of the party's political communication strategy and the general political and societal receptiveness to its messages has been a steep increase in Revival's electoral support. In Bulgaria's November 2021 parliamentary election, the party garnered 4.9 percent of the vote and entered the parliament for the first time; by the April 2023 election, it had gained 14.2 percent of the vote.⁵⁸

Revival's political rise and its presence in the parliament have provided the party with a wide platform from which to advance its initiatives. Four methods employed by the party stand out. First, it has pushed virulent pro-Russia and anti-Western disinformation, undermining societal confidence in the importance of Bulgaria's Euro-Atlantic commitments. Second, Revival has consistently organized protests, especially against providing military aid to Kyiv and in favor of maintaining Bulgaria's neutrality in the Russian war against Ukraine. Third, the party has moved from rhetorical aggression to violent skirmishes in the parliament, including physical attacks on political opponents.⁵⁹ And fourth, Revival has weaponized the conduct of referendums, in particular on the introduction of the euro in Bulgaria, as part of its Euroskeptic campaign.

The main impact of Revival's activities has been to cause political disruption and undermine Bulgarians' faith in the whole political class, which the party sees as treasonous for acting against Bulgaria's national interests—defined by Revival as being in line with those of the Kremlin. Moreover, the party's propagandist discourse has sown doubt in the country's Euro-Atlantic path and its memberships in the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Revival has thus attempted to create a societal base with a predominantly anti-Western orientation that can hamper pro-Western politicians' decisiveness in situating Sofia as a reliable contributor to Euro-Atlantic decisionmaking.

Nevertheless, it remains to be seen whether the party has already reached its maximum electoral potential. In Bulgaria's October 2023 local elections, Revival's political fortunes dwindled, as the party came fifth in terms of the number of members of municipal authorities elected, and no large or medium-sized city elected a Revival candidate as its mayor. Revival's influence may be further reduced by robust civic and political leadership that can critique and unmask, rather than silently legitimize, the party's illegitimate discourses and actions. For instance, Bulgarian Prime Minister Nikolay Denkov has called out Revival's behavior as unacceptable and tantamount to a war on European values and urged greater scrutiny of the party's actions. The Ministry of Interior has pledged to intervene in cases of incitement of riots and violence.⁶⁰

Relationship With the EU

Revival's overall anti-Western, nationalist discourse weaves together emotionally tinged opposition to liberalism, globalization, gender ideology, and the West while extolling traditional conservative values. This discourse has defined the party's negative portrayal of the EU as a neocolonialist master that infringes on Bulgarian sovereignty.

At the same time, Revival characterizes the country's political elite as anti-Bulgarian puppets controlled by the EU, which the party compares with the totalitarian system established by the Soviet Union during the Cold War. The party uses this characterization of its political

opponents as an ostensible justification to demand a renegotiation of the terms of Bulgaria's EU membership. Revival's leader has spoken out against Bulgaria's lower levels of subsidies compared with other EU members, such as France and Germany (although without clarifying which subsidies he was referring to), and the EU's stratification along a two-speed model. Kostadinov has claimed that if he comes to power and no agreement on renegotiating Sofia's place in the EU is reached, a referendum on membership needs to ensue.⁶¹

Revival, which has not yet stood in a European Parliament election, looks to the June 2024 vote as a way to establish a reformed EU by strengthening member states' sovereignty. The party has announced its intention to set up a new parliamentary group, modeled on its political experience in Bulgaria, to "advance freedom" in the whole of Europe.⁶² In December 2023, Kostadinov attended a conference in Florence that gathered radical-right party leaders from across Europe and aimed to galvanize their campaigns ahead of the 2024 elections. Kostadinov emphasized that "the EU represents the greatest threat to European civilization" and reiterated an ostensible dilemma between reform of the union and a series of exits from the EU by member states.⁶³

Revival has also attempted to tarnish the agreement on Bulgaria's March 2024 partial entry into the EU's passport-free Schengen Area, labeling it a "criminal deal." Kostadinov has stoked unfounded claims and fears that the Bulgarian government conspired to accept more refugees, turning the country into a "huge refugee camp" in exchange for Austria's agreement to drop its opposition to Sofia's membership in the Schengen Area.⁶⁴

Rhetoric aside, Revival's most politically tangible activity has been the collection of some 470,000 valid signatures in favor of a referendum on the planned introduction of the euro in Bulgaria.⁶⁵ The party spearheaded the anti-euro campaign, promoting a narrative that the currency's introduction would infringe on Bulgarian sovereignty and lead to the impoverishment of Bulgaria's economy and population. Revival railed against what it saw as pro-euro propaganda, describing it as the silencing of alternative views critical of the currency and the European single market. Ultimately, however, the parliament's legal commission overthrew the draft resolution for the vote on the grounds that it breached the Bulgarian constitution and that the parliament had the ultimate competence to decide whether a plebiscite should take place.

Foreign Policy Positions

Revival's foreign policy positions have promoted Russia's interests and stances while undermining Bulgaria's Euro-Atlantic commitments. Overall, the leverage that the party exerts over Bulgaria's external relations is indirect: through the threat of civil unrest and the reinforcement of anti-Western attitudes, Revival has the potential to dilute the decisiveness with which Sofia pursues pro-Western policies.

The party has much less direct influence on Bulgaria's foreign policy, as Revival's prospects of becoming part of the executive are limited. Revival has declared a goal of governing on its own, which is currently unrealistic, given that the party's electoral support hovers at around 13 percent.⁶⁶ Moreover, even political forces with which the party shares common positions have not demonstrated any enthusiasm for formally aligning themselves with Revival.

Revival has made frequent use of protests to promote its foreign policy agenda. At a rally in 2023, the party railed against weapons supplies to Ukraine, the introduction of the euro in Bulgaria, and the Istanbul Convention, a treaty of the Council of Europe that opposes violence against women. The party claimed to be aiming to stop the EU's interference in Bulgaria's internal affairs, which it said would "destroy our motherland."⁶⁷ Revival's live coverage of the march pushed a disinformation narrative against Western values, which supposedly undermine Bulgaria's national sovereignty.

Immigration and Asylum

Since the start of the war in Ukraine in February 2022, Revival has condemned the reception of Ukrainian refugees and tarnished their image. The party has made false analogies, claiming that while Bulgarians emigrate, illegal migrants enter the country and wreak havoc by committing crimes. Kostadinov has painted an apocalyptic picture by asking whether refugees must start committing murder in the center of Sofia before the government will introduce restrictions on their entry.⁶⁸

At the same time, Revival has weaponized a propagandist discourse that deplores supposed abuses committed by the Ukrainian authorities against the Bulgarian minority in Ukraine. According to this propaganda, the Bulgarian government is not providing humanitarian aid for its compatriots in Ukraine, and Ukrainian special services will curtail the Bulgarian minority's linguistic freedom. Revival has further drawn an analogy—most often implicitly—between Ukraine's Russian speakers and its Bulgarian minority. The party's comparison of these two minorities was echoed by Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov at a press conference in March 2022. He specifically likened the ostensibly dire circumstances of Russian speakers in Ukraine to the situation of other minorities there, including Bulgarians and Hungarians.⁶⁹

Combining the two disinformation narratives about Ukrainian refugees and Bulgarian communities abroad, Kostadinov asserted in May 2023 that the Bulgarian minority in Ukraine should receive autonomy and threatened that if the party came to power, Revival would deport all Ukrainians from Bulgaria.⁷⁰

Russia and Ukraine

Revival has consistently and vociferously promoted Russia's narratives about its war against Ukraine and attempted to undercut Bulgarian support for Kyiv.

At the start of the Kremlin's military aggression, the party refused to vote in favor of a parliamentary declaration condemning the war, and it has since come out against sanctions on the Kremlin. Revival frames Russia-critical and pro-Western stances in Bulgarian politics as treasonous and a consequence of the EU's and NATO's domination of Bulgarian politics. Notably, when Kostadinov visited Ukraine in 2022, the Ukrainian authorities banned him from reentering the country for the next ten years because he heads a pro-Russia political party and was therefore thought to represent a threat.⁷¹

Revival has also organized numerous rallies calling for Bulgarian neutrality in the war. At the beginning of April 2022, Revival convened a pro-neutrality protest with the goal to get rid of "national traitors" who are critical of Moscow, "reestablish Bulgarian statehood," do away with NATO's "foreign occupation" of Bulgaria, and remove foreign interests that are allegedly trying to implicate the country in a war in which it has no stake.⁷² A similar protest against Bulgaria's provision of military aid to Ukraine took place in May 2022.

In November of that year, Revival organized a protest condemning the Bulgarian parliament's decision to support weapons supplies to Kyiv. Revival's supporters—along with those of the center-left Bulgarian Socialist Party—additionally protested against the renaming of areas near the Russian embassy in Sofia as "Heroes of Ukraine Alley" and "Boris Nemtsov Square," the latter after the murdered Russian liberal politician.⁷³ A public petition that opposed the renaming gathered over 2,600 signatures.⁷⁴ The party has also repeatedly attempted to forcefully remove the Ukrainian flag from the Sofia municipality building.

More broadly, Revival claims that Europe is the victim of a geopolitical clash between the United States and Russia and that Sofia silently supports the EU's decisions while losing out because of sanctions on Russia.

NATO

Revival further connects its pro-neutrality narrative to anti-NATO rhetoric. The party has asserted that NATO represents a threat to Bulgarian national security and called for Bulgaria's exit from the alliance. Revival has suggested that Bulgaria can leave NATO as soon as 2024 on the occasion of the twenty-year reassessment of the agreement on the country's 2004 entry into the organization.⁷⁵ Indeed, the party has opposed Sofia's NATO membership more insistently than its place in the EU.

Revival has publicized false claims that NATO membership has led to a threefold decline in Bulgaria's military capacity and that Bulgaria is an object rather than a subject of

international law.⁷⁶ At an event on March 3, 2022, to mark Bulgaria’s national independence day, Revival members and supporters carried the Russian flag, chanted pro-Russia slogans, and called for Bulgaria’s withdrawal from NATO.⁷⁷

Kostadinov has further promoted a false narrative about Bulgarian troops being dispatched to the battlefield in Ukraine. The supposed revelations were said to confirm his earlier declarations that the United States and NATO would like to embroil Bulgaria in the war and inflict Bulgarian casualties, which would open a gulf between Sofia and Moscow.⁷⁸ Nevertheless, a draft parliamentary resolution by the party to annul an agreement between the United States and Bulgaria on defense cooperation was overthrown by other political parties in June 2023.⁷⁹

China

Although positioning in relation to China has not been a lynchpin in Revival’s policies, the party has occasionally expressed pro-Beijing views. It has praised China as a model for Bulgaria’s development, particularly when it comes to the party’s desire for a “quick decolonization” of the Bulgarian state and economy.⁸⁰

In an exception to the general absence of political discussions and positioning on Taiwan, Revival has accelerated its contacts with Chinese diplomats and asserted its unwavering support for the One China principle. Kostadinov has condemned a “rude American intervention” in China’s internal affairs through U.S. support for Taiwanese “separatists” and has called for increased Bulgarian participation in the Belt and Road Initiative.⁸¹

Democracy and Minority Rights

As part of its attack on liberal Western values, Revival has promoted a conservative discourse and attempted to portray pro-Western, democratically minded politicians as fascists. Revival baselessly accused its main political opponent, the coalition between We Continue the Change and Democratic Bulgaria, of deploying “repressive and fascist” methods to oppose the Revival-led proposal for a referendum on the euro.⁸² A post on the party’s Facebook page cited Revival Member of Parliament Deyan Nikolov, who had claimed in the Bulgarian National Assembly that Euro-Atlanticism was a modern form of fascism.⁸³

Revival has persistently attempted to suppress minority rights. Anti-LGBTQ propaganda assumed a practical expression when the party forcibly boycotted the release of a movie as part of the 2023 Sofia Pride Film Fest. The party labeled *Close*, which tells the story of teenage boys coming of age as they explore issues of intimacy, friendship, and external opprobrium, a “pedophile” production that disseminates “gender ideology.”⁸⁴

The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

Revival has refrained from adopting a clear stance on the Israel-Hamas war, particularly in the immediate aftermath of Hamas's October 7, 2023, terrorist attacks. The party has not posted any positions on the conflict on its platforms, despite its frequent use of social media. However, the party has issued some sporadic statements on the war and abstained from a vote in the Bulgarian parliament on a resolution to condemn the October 7 attacks.⁸⁵ Kostadinov said that the resolution "had not been written in Bulgaria," and while he acknowledged that Hamas had carried out a terrorist attack, he also stated that Israel was waging a full-fledged war, rather than responding to a terrorist cell, and was conducting ethnic cleansing of Gaza's Arab population.⁸⁶

Against this backdrop, it is worth noting that Revival is notorious for its anti-Semitic rhetoric and has been repeatedly condemned by the Israeli embassy in Bulgaria for its anti-Semitic statements.⁸⁷

CHAPTER 3

Estonia: A Vocal Dissenter With Limited Policymaking Influence

Merili Arjakas

The Conservative People's Party of Estonia: Evolution and Profile

The Conservative People's Party of Estonia (EKRE) was founded in 2012 as a successor to the People's Union of Estonia, an agrarian-populist party active from 1994 to 2012, and the Estonian Patriotic Movement, a small political pressure group established in 2006 to advocate for the interests of ethnic Estonians. From 2008 to 2011, the latter group was headed by Martin Helme, who now leads EKRE. He took over the reins from his father, Mart Helme, and the father-and-son duo has formed the party's core leadership.

EKRE gained momentum in the mid-2010s thanks to the growing popularity of its opposition to Estonia's polarizing Registered Partnership Act, which introduced civil unions for same-sex couples, and its strong criticism of the European Union (EU) and its migration policies.⁸⁸ The party came third in the 2019 Estonian parliamentary election, receiving 17.8 percent of the vote and nineteen out of 101 seats.⁸⁹ It was then invited to join a governing coalition with the center-left Estonian Center Party and the conservative Fatherland party. However, two years of continuous scandals, driven mostly by the EKRE leadership's inflammatory rhetoric, curbed the Estonian Center Party's appetite for keeping the coalition together, and in January 2021, that government collapsed. This stint marked the only time that EKRE has had seats in the cabinet.

The 2019 election also confirmed that the most important new divide in Estonian politics is between those parties that enforce a cordon sanitaire around EKRE and those that see cooperation as viable in some circumstances. The former group currently includes the liberal Estonian Reform Party, led by Prime Minister Kaja Kallas, the center-left Social Democratic

Party, and the centrist newcomer Estonia 200. These parties hold socially progressive values and are in the ruling coalition as of this writing. The latter group comprises the Estonian Center Party and Fatherland, but both realized before the 2023 parliamentary election that their proximity to EKRE had started to hurt their electoral chances and tried to put some distance between themselves and the party.

In that election, EKRE received 16.1 percent of the vote and lost two seats in the parliament. The party came second overall, losing only to the Estonian Reform Party.⁹⁰ However, Martin Helme had built his campaign on the promise of a credible alternative to the Estonian Reform Party and Kallas. Therefore, observers saw EKRE's election result as a defeat that shattered the party's hopes of climbing back into the government.

EKRE is a populist-right party whose positions are based on Euroskepticism, nativism, and an anti-elite sentiment. The party declares the “people” and the “nation” to be its highest values, yet its understanding of who belongs to this group is restrictive.⁹¹ EKRE has been present in the European Parliament since 2019, where it has one parliamentarian, Jaak Madison, and is a member of the Identity and Democracy group.

Relationship With the EU

EKRE has continuously campaigned for less Europe, emphasizing that the EU should be a union of independent nation-states. The party's antifederalist stance distinguishes it from Estonia's other mainstream parties, which are more pro-EU or ambiguous on the matter. EKRE is generally against any measures that would strengthen the union over the member states. Additionally, the party has argued that Estonia should endorse the supremacy of its constitution and refuse to comply with any EU legislation that might imperil Estonia's existence as a nation-state.⁹²

In the early 2000s, during his first prominent political endeavor, Martin Helme campaigned against Estonia's accession to the EU. He has since opined that Estonia should have stayed outside the union but accepted the result of the referendum that endorsed membership. Yet, he has criticized the EU for becoming more aggressive and misusing its power. During their time in the government, both Mart and Martin Helme expressed the possibility of Estonia leaving the EU yet stopped short of taking any concrete action in this direction.

One analysis has argued that EKRE's approach to EU membership is conditional: the party is willing to cooperate with the EU institutions to the extent that doing so does not jeopardize Estonia's sovereignty.⁹³ Additionally, EKRE has taken a pragmatic stance toward EU funds, for example by referencing them several times in the party's 2015 manifesto as a tool for regional economic development.⁹⁴

Foreign Policy Positions

Because EKRE's 2019–2021 stint in the government was rather short and largely dominated by the coronavirus pandemic, and due to the moderating effect of coalition politics, the party's actual influence on foreign policy making has been limited. However, as a vocal dissenting opposition party, EKRE has shaped debates by representing one extreme viewpoint. This is especially salient when it comes to Euroskepticism, the promotion of so-called traditional values, and opposition to minority rights, immigration, and the EU's European Green Deal, a package of policy initiatives for the union's green transition.

Foreign policy statements are often intermingled with domestic politics. This behavior is not unique to EKRE. However, as Estonia's foreign and security policy is usually characterized by a strong domestic political consensus, it is much easier for EKRE to distinguish itself from other parties on these questions than on other issues and thus provide an alternative option for voters. Despite this, EKRE matches the widespread view in Estonian mainstream politics with its anti-Russia stance.

EKRE is generally in favor of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and supports good relations with the United States, especially in security matters; this stance was even more pronounced during the administration of former U.S. president Donald Trump. EKRE disapproves of strengthening EU defense policy, which the party sees as a path toward downgrading Estonia's security relations with the United States. EKRE has been sympathetic to Hungary's Fidesz and Poland's Law and Justice parties, especially praising their family policies and firm positions against the EU institutions. In other foreign policy matters, EKRE either does not hold a strong consolidated view or does not play it up in debates.

Minority Rights

Most often, EKRE's criticism of the EU is lumped together with a wide range of other issues on which the party wants to show its strong stances. A quote from Martin Helme's speech at the 2023 party congress exemplifies this tendency well:

As long as I lead [EKRE], we will not support the homorevolution, the green revolution, forced vaccinations, [or] the physical and mental ritual sacrifice of children to the cult of transsexuality. We will not accept the Russification of Estonia or the disarmament of Estonia, even if it is done while shouting "Slava Ukraina" [Glory to Ukraine]. We will not be eager instigators of the Third World War, nor will we willingly offer ourselves as the battleground for that war. We will not accept the imposition of European Union supremacy over our sovereignty, nor will we follow . . . the World Economic Forum's recommendation to eat insects instead of meat and to travel on foot or by bicycle instead of using cars.⁹⁵

The culture war issues that draw Helme's ire in the first sentence are all topics that EKRE has often blamed on Estonia's liberal governments kowtowing to globalists in Brussels. The EU is not mentioned explicitly, but name-dropping these issues follows the usual narrative of protecting the values of the so-called pure people from the morally corrupt, multicultural, and liberal West.

The party sees the protection of LGBTQ rights as a tool to subject the majority to rule by the minority. While in the government, EKRE campaigned for a national referendum to stipulate that marriage can only be between a man and a woman. This push ticked the boxes for two of EKRE's favorite topics: presenting itself as the safeguard of the silent majority and expanding the tools of direct democracy. In the end, the coalition collapsed, so support for the referendum bill dissolved. At the same time, Estonian diplomats were told to refrain from publicly supporting LGBTQ rights.

Similarly, EKRE strongly opposes any initiatives to regulate hate speech, as it sees such measures as another oppressive mechanism by the liberal parties⁹⁶ and the EU institutions to curtail the freedom of speech and discriminate against conservative views. On both promoting LGBTQ rights and curbing hate speech, EKRE sees the EU not as a defender of liberal values and democracy but as an organization that uses these issues to chip away at the well-being of the majority by presenting itself as concerned with the rights of minorities.

Russia and Ukraine

The next two sentences in Helme's quote consider the effects of Russia's aggression in Ukraine and reveal EKRE's balancing act. First, he presents a strong anti-Russia sentiment, objecting to the Russification of Estonia. This line runs counter to all demographic, societal, and cultural trends in the country, unless it is to be taken as a code for the arrival of mostly Russian-speaking Ukrainian refugees from Russia's war. Next, however, Helme refers to the military aid Estonia has provided for Ukraine as the disarmament of Estonia. In contrast, General Martin Herem, the commander of the Estonian Defense Forces, has asserted that Estonia's armed forces have become stronger by increasing their ammunition stocks, modernizing their weapons systems, and growing the country's voluntary paramilitary force, the Estonian Defense League.⁹⁷ Then, Helme states that EKRE will not eagerly instigate the Third World War—but leaves his audience wondering whom exactly he sees as fanning the flames.

Russia's war has put EKRE in an uncomfortable position: stuck between nativist and anti-elite discourse. Statements from both the party leadership and its grassroots supporters have, over the years, often been anti-Russia. They have called out the Russian ethnicity of some Estonian politicians, berated the use of the Russian language in Estonia, and depicted EKRE's political opponents, the mainstream media, and the security police as parts of Russia's propaganda machinery.

At the same time, EKRE has been trying to boost its appeal among Russian speakers in Estonia, based on their shared support for traditional family values. A 2023 report by the European Center for Populism Studies speculated that this move might be the reason for the increased ambiguity in EKRE’s foreign policy narrative.⁹⁸ This approach could also be a matter of party politics: EKRE’s main opponent, the Estonian Reform Party, and its next of kin, Fatherland, have already established themselves as the most vocal hawks on Russia. A more fleeting position allows EKRE room for maneuver in debates.

EKRE’s standing in official resolutions is much clearer. The party joined Estonia’s other parliamentary parties in condemning Russia’s February 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Furthermore, the parliament voted unanimously to recognize Russia’s actions as genocide against the Ukrainian people and declare Russia a terrorist state. When a similar resolution was put on the agenda in the European Parliament, Madison voted in favor.

Immigration and Asylum

In addition to the risk of Estonian disarmament, EKRE often focuses on the perceived threat of the Russian-speaking or other Slavic minorities and the danger this threat may pose to the Estonian ethnic majority and use of the Estonian language. Like other populist right-wing parties, especially in Central and Eastern Europe, EKRE has been hostile to immigrants. Unlike Hungary and Poland, though, Estonia has a considerable population with foreign origins: close to 30 percent in 2023.⁹⁹ With over 40,000 Ukrainian refugees who have applied for protection in Estonia, Ukrainians now make up more than 3 percent of the population.¹⁰⁰

Finding fault with Ukrainians is not as easy for EKRE as it would be with non-European, non-Christian refugees—but that has not stopped the party from trying. EKRE politicians have described the Ukrainians fleeing the war as “a massive influx” and a threat to Estonia’s social welfare system.¹⁰¹ EKRE’s ideological arguments against immigration and the acceptance of refugees range from those based on ethnicity (that Slavic speakers weaken the position of the Estonian language) and demographics (that Tallinn has ceased to be an Estonian-majority city) to economic arguments (that using immigration to cover worker shortages will cause problems down the road) as well as security reasons (that the police is unable to check all new arrivals) and health concerns (that immigrants even carry diseases).¹⁰²

EKRE has claimed that the number of Ukrainians staying in Estonia is twice as large as the official figure and that they constitute an unsustainable burden on the country’s social welfare system while strengthening the position of the Russian language.¹⁰³ EKRE wants Estonia to stop accepting war refugees into the country, preferring to support them in Ukraine and neighboring states. Furthermore, the party has demanded clear residence and employment requirements for those who receive temporary protection.

These views align with EKRE's historical stance of seeing immigration as a potential threat to the Estonian nation, language, and culture and, thus, to Estonia's constitution. The country already has a restrictive immigration policy, but EKRE has been trying to tighten it even further. The 2019 coalition agreement declared its opposition to mandatory refugee quotas and promised to pay special attention to checking illegal residents in Estonia and fighting illegal immigration at the borders of the EU's passport-free Schengen Area.¹⁰⁴ During its time in opposition, EKRE has presented various bills to curb immigration into Estonia by targeting low-skilled and short-term workers, start-up employees, and foreign students. The party opposes any EU legislation or international agreement that, in its eyes, limits the state's sovereignty in setting immigration policy.

Climate Change and Energy

Returning to Helme's quoted statement, he uses standard right-wing rhetoric to suggest that sustainability is just another tool to restrict state sovereignty and people's autonomy. Rhetoric and policies against attempts to mitigate climate change are a new addition to EKRE's agenda. These positions have emerged in response to the EU's and the Estonian government's recent actions; before the late 2010s, climate change issues were not a priority in either domestic politics or foreign policy.

The situation changed with the European Green Deal in July 2019, when EKRE was still part of the government. Although EKRE dismissed the initiative, the domestic and international criticism that followed when Estonia and three other EU member states blocked the union's collective commitment to climate neutrality by 2050 resulted in the government making a U-turn and endorsing the plan.¹⁰⁵ In the Helmes' father-and-son weekly radio show, Martin Helme explained that since other EU countries had already decided on the union's political course, it made more sense for Estonia to tag along and receive benefits than to be punished for lagging behind. Yet, Mart Helme stated that EKRE would never agree to trans-European climate taxes.¹⁰⁶

EKRE's arguments against climate change action are long and diverse. Madison finds the EU's climate goals unrealistic and harmful to efforts to win the war in Ukraine. Rain Epler, an EKRE member of parliament and a former environment minister, has argued that the green transition is a tool for a global "corporation" to earn exorbitant profits, often at the expense of vulnerable members of society and the environment itself.¹⁰⁷

Climate change topics are closely connected to the question of energy independence and Estonia's use of shale oil, a fossil fuel. EKRE believes that Estonia's energy security must always come first, even if that means increased use of shale oil. In addition, the party supports nuclear energy and has promised to start preparing for its safe introduction. The party's position on renewable sources is more ambiguous, ranging from "nice if possible" to "unreliable and part of the new climate hysteria."¹⁰⁸ EKRE wants Estonia to stop paying renewable energy subsidies and remove the carbon dioxide quota from its electricity production costs—steps that the party sees as simple ways to reduce energy prices.

The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

Following Hamas's October 7, 2023, attacks on Israel, EKRE reinforced its firm pro-Israel stance. Mart Helme affirmed that supporting Israel is in Estonia's vital interest, as "the terrorists of Hamas and Hezbollah are direct proxies of Iran and indirect proxies of Russia."¹⁰⁹ He warned of severe consequences for the West if Israel fails to eradicate Hamas. Similarly, Madison equated support for Israel with backing for Ukraine as necessary actions against considerable security threats. Although he acknowledged that not all Muslims in Europe are radicalized, he also warned that alleged widespread support for Hamas in migrant camps and among asylum seekers indicated further security threats for Europe.¹¹⁰

In October 2023, EKRE Deputy Chairman Henn Põlluaas participated on behalf of the party in a pro-Israel rally in front of the Estonian parliament. Põlluaas affirmed that Hamas was the personification of evil and denounced Estonian activists who attempted to raise awareness of Palestinian civilian deaths.¹¹¹ This stance is in line with the previous pro-Israel rhetoric of the party, which has emphasized that it would be in favor of moving the Estonian embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem.¹¹²

CHAPTER 4

Finland: A Radicalization of Views, a Broadening Foreign Policy Palette

Tuomas Iso-Markku and Timo R. Stewart

The Finns Party: Evolution and Profile

The Finns Party has its roots in Finnish agrarian populism. The party was established in 1995 as the successor to the Finnish Rural Party (SMP), a small populist party that was active between 1959 and 1995.¹¹³ The SMP claimed to defend the “forgotten people,” above all Finland’s rural population and entrepreneurs, and displayed a strongly anticomunist stance.¹¹⁴

Like the SMP, the Finns Party initially mixed center-left-leaning socioeconomic attitudes with populism, cultural conservatism, and nationalism. The weight of sociocultural authoritarianism and ethnonationalism in the Finns Party’s platform grew gradually over the 2000s as the party became increasingly attractive—and welcoming—for nationalist and anti-immigration activists. By the early 2010s, many scholars duly defined the Finns Party as a populist radical-right party.¹¹⁵

The Finns Party won its first seat in the Finnish parliament in 1999 but remained a marginal political actor until the late 2000s. The party’s first major success was in the 2009 European Parliament elections, when it gained 9.8 percent of the vote.¹¹⁶ Two years later, at the height of the eurozone crisis, the Finns Party achieved its real breakthrough. Campaigning against bailouts for struggling eurozone members, the party finished third in Finland’s 2011 parliamentary election with 19.1 percent of the vote, almost quintupling its vote share compared with the previous national election.¹¹⁷

The SMP's legacy provided a reputational shield for the Finns Party, facilitating its 2015 entry into the national government as part of a three-party right-of-center coalition. However, participation in the government seriously dented the party's popularity. In 2017, the Finns Party's long-time chair, Timo Soini, stepped down and was replaced by member of the European Parliament and anti-immigration blogger Jussi Halla-aho.

After Halla-aho's election, his associates, who represented the Finns Party's nativist wing, occupied all of the key positions in the party leadership, sealing its radicalization. Meanwhile, the party's coalition partners announced that they would end their cooperation with it. This provoked a split, with all of the party's government ministers and their allies forming a separate group called Blue Reform. The remainder of the Finns Party under Halla-aho was forced into opposition, where it gradually rebuilt its support.

In June 2021, Halla-aho declared that he would not seek another term as party leader, which led to the election of Halla-aho's disciple Riikka Purra as the new chair. In the 2023 national parliamentary election, Purra led the Finns Party to yet another electoral success, as the party achieved its best-ever result of 20.1 percent of the vote.¹¹⁸ After the election, the Finns Party was included in a four-party right-of-center government led by the National Coalition Party.

The Finns Party's programmatic evolution and changing domestic ambitions have led to shifting affiliations in the European Parliament. In its first term in 2009–2014, the party was a member of the staunchly Euroskeptic Europe of Freedom and Democracy group, before switching to the somewhat more moderate European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) group. After Halla-aho's election, the party left the ECR and allied itself with the newly formed radical-right Identity and Democracy (ID) group. However, in 2023, the Finns Party rejoined the ECR, arguing that Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine compelled the party to rethink its cooperation networks and join a group with an uncompromising commitment to defending "Western civilization and the European security policy architecture."¹¹⁹

Relationship With the EU

Euroskepticism has been a central part of the Finns Party's political platform since the beginning. This position reflects deeply held beliefs in the party, but it is also a strategic choice that sets the Finns Party apart from Finland's other political parties, most of which are traditionally in favor of the European Union (EU). The Finns Party's general attitude toward the EU is well summed up by the slogan "Wherever the EU is, there's a problem," which was coined and extensively used by Soini.¹²⁰

Writing in 2012, Finnish political scientist Tapio Raunio identified three issues that form the core of the Finns Party's Euroskepticism, all of which continue to be present in the

party's programs and rhetoric.¹²¹ First, like some left-wing populist parties, the Finns Party portrays the EU as an elitist bureaucracy that undermines national democracy and serves the interests of big business or the large member states. Second, the Finns Party consistently criticizes Finnish decisionmakers for failing to defend Finland's national interests in Brussels, including on issues such as the EU budget or the Common Agricultural Policy. Third, the Finns Party depicts the EU as a bridge to increased immigration, which the party views as a threat to the country's social security system and a cause of societal problems.

As for the EU's external policies, the Finns Party has vocally opposed EU enlargement. Moreover, the party has emphasized the EU's weakness as a foreign and security policy actor and argued that Finland's membership in the union does not provide the country with any kind of protection.

While the Finns Party's Euroskepticism has been constant, there has been some variation in the way the party has approached EU issues over time. Euroskepticism and, more specifically, criticism of bailouts for eurozone members during the eurozone crisis were key to the Finns Party's 2011 electoral success. However, in the following years, the party moderated its rhetoric somewhat to become an acceptable coalition partner. As a member of the Finnish government in 2015–2017, the Finns Party was forced to accept a third bailout package for Greece—a bitter pill for the party considering its earlier stance.

After the 2016 Brexit vote in the United Kingdom, the party briefly toyed with the idea of a referendum on Finland's EU membership but refrained from explicitly demanding such a vote. When Halla-aho took over as party chair in 2017, the relative importance of Euroskepticism in the Finns Party's political platform decreased, as the party focused more on promoting its hardline stance on immigration and criticizing other parties' climate change policies. However, heated debates about the EU's post-pandemic recovery fund provided the Finns Party with another opportunity to highlight its Euroskeptic credentials.

Foreign Policy Positions

The Finns Party published its first foreign and security policy program in 2022. Before this, the party's manifestos had dealt extensively with the EU, immigration and asylum, energy, development aid, and defense and security. However, the party had developed very few foreign policy positions beyond these matters. With its 2022 program, the party introduced a somewhat broader palette of foreign policy positions. Nevertheless, the Finns Party's views on immigration and asylum, energy and climate change, development aid, the EU, and defense continue to form the core of its foreign policy agenda, in many cases shaping the way the party approaches other international issues.

Immigration and Asylum

During the first half of Soini's 1997–2017 chairmanship, immigration and asylum policies were not particularly prominent in the Finns Party's platform. However, from the 2010s, these issues took on a more significant role. Calls for foreigners to integrate into the Finnish population and find work gradually gave way to more categorical rejections of “harmful immigration” and skepticism of the economic benefits of any kind of immigration.¹²²

After Halla-aho took over as party chair in 2017, the shift toward more overtly anti-immigration and anti-multiculturalist views gathered pace. By 2019 at the latest, immigration and asylum had become by far the most prominent policy area for the Finns Party. The party stressed that this was not just another issue but rather a “cross-cutting theme” that “influenced many sectors of society and politics as well as every Finnish person.”¹²³ In recent years, immigration and asylum policies have featured in all Finns Party campaigns for local, national, and European Parliament elections and in the party's positions in most other policy areas.

This change is exemplified in the party's attitude toward the quota refugee system through which the United Nations high commissioner for refugees suggests to Finland a predetermined number of refugees for resettlement each year. In 2011, the Finns Party characterized the scheme as less problematic than asylum applications submitted at the border. Ten years later, the party was calling for the whole system to be abolished and proclaiming zero asylum applications as an ideal goal.

The Finns Party has proposed many policy options to make Finland an unappealing destination for refugees, cut immigration expenses, limit the number of humanitarian immigrants in the country, and deport or encourage the emigration of refugees already in Finland. The main rationales offered by the party for these measures are the cost of humanitarian migrants and foreign workers in low-wage employment, their perceived inability and unwillingness to integrate, a loss of social cohesion, an increase in crime, and a risk of terrorism. The party views Finland's immigration policies as having created such profound problems that the situation cannot be fixed without stopping or at least drastically limiting further immigration.

The Finns Party stresses nativist rhetoric and self-interest. The party sees Finland as the country of Finns that should look out for the interests of Finns first. As long as there are Finns in need, the party argues, money should not be wasted on what it calls “asylum tourists” looking for a better life.¹²⁴ Instead, people in need of asylum should be assisted near to where they came from in countries closer in culture to their own, and with a view to repatriation at the earliest opportunity. The party points to Ukrainians as an example of deserving European refugees who should be welcomed, but even they should expect fixed-term asylum and eventual repatriation, according to the party.

The Finns Party and its politicians have used Islamophobic and racist themes in their election campaigns.¹²⁵ Several prominent party members, including Halla-aho, have been convicted of hate speech related to incitement against an ethnic group.¹²⁶ However, the party has repeatedly denied the charge of racism. Instead, it has attempted to portray its position as simply defending Finnish people, society, and culture.¹²⁷ The party labels pro-immigration policies as harmful moral posturing by a liberal elite, which threatens Finland's economy and social fabric. Workers from EU countries are deemed more than sufficient to meet any foreign labor needs, with no need for immigration from farther afield.

Climate Change and Energy

The Finns Party's attitude toward climate change and energy policy has undergone significant shifts over time. Protecting Finland's clean natural landscapes and maintaining a balanced relationship with nature have been parts of the party's platform since its founding. The party has portrayed nature as a patrimony to be passed on to future generations in an improved condition. Initially, the party also viewed renewable energy as a preferred energy source because it is generated domestically. However, the party has interpreted the concept rather expansively to include peat burning.

The Finns Party's support for peat burning and wood-based fuels has remained consistent, as it sees them as "genuinely domestic energy sources."¹²⁸ However, attitudes toward wind power have changed. After initially welcoming wind as another form of domestic renewable energy, from 2016 onward the party drew attention to alleged negative health impacts of wind turbines and criticized their inability to produce energy consistently. Later, the party called for a cut in government subsidies for wind-power production.

At the same time, the Finns Party has adopted a more positive attitude toward nuclear energy. This attitude is reflected in the way the party views other European countries' policies in this area. For example, the party has criticized Germany's decision to close its nuclear power plants for adversely impacting peak-consumption energy prices in Finland. Instead of a single European electricity market, as promoted by the EU, the party proposes a Nordic or possibly a Nordic-Baltic market, or even full self-sufficiency, as a more nationally beneficial alternative.

Self-sufficiency, lower energy prices, and Finland's economic interests have been key concerns in the Finns Party's energy policy. According to the party, energy and climate change policies should support employment and economic growth instead of hindering them. While the party is in favor of moving toward lower carbon emissions, it views the whole process from the perspective of national interests. Finland is a small country that has already done its share, the party believes, and doing more will not have a global impact. In fact, lowering carbon emissions can be harmful, the party warns. Handicapping the Finnish economy through climate change policies will only put it at a competitive disadvantage compared

with countries like China that pollute more. Doing more than one's minimum share is ridiculed by the party's politicians as moral posturing at the public's expense.

In the same vein, the Finns Party resents any EU interference in Finland's climate change and energy policy choices. Even when the party agrees with EU policies, such as the goal of eliminating all Russian fossil-fuel imports, it tends not to trust the efficacy of EU mechanisms. There is also a pervasive suspicion that EU climate change policy and international treaties are forcing Finland to pay for mistakes made by others. Nevertheless, the Finns Party has tended more toward maximizing Finland's national interests and avoiding being a front-runner on climate issues than toward rejecting a joint climate change policy.

The Finns Party leadership has, at least in recent years, affirmed that climate change is real and that it is "likely that humans have something to do with it."¹²⁹ However, there are plenty of climate change skeptics of varying degrees in the party. Where there is a broad consensus is that even if the phenomenon is real, Finland should not take it upon itself to try to change the world.

Development Aid

The Finns Party's attitude toward development aid has attempted to balance two contradictory views. On the one hand, the party's "Finland first" policies have cast development aid as something fundamentally undesirable. The party has portrayed such aid as wasteful spending of Finnish taxpayers' money for the benefit of corrupt foreign regimes instead of needy Finns. This line of argument has emphasized the alleged ineffectiveness or even counterproductive nature of development aid and used problematic tropes of African leaders. The policy implication of this standpoint has been to demand significant cuts to development aid allocations, increased monitoring and evaluation of aid effectiveness, a concentration on fewer countries, and tighter anticorruption measures that can lead to funding being cut off.

On the other hand, the Finns Party has seen development aid as a potentially useful tool to reduce migration pressures—or at least as a justification for promoting a harsher asylum policy in favor of helping people closer to their home countries. In this sense, the party's development aid policy is inextricably linked to its immigration and asylum policies. In line with this immigration-related goal, the party has called for a focus on the rights of women and girls, as this can have an impact on reducing population growth. The party also views conflict resolution, humanitarian aid, and assistance for catastrophes as good uses of development aid funds. Likewise, the party sees assisting Ukraine after Russia's 2022 invasion as an exception to its fundamental objection to development aid.

Russia and Ukraine

The Finns Party's position on Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine does not differ from that of Finland's other parliamentary parties. The Finns Party condemns the Russian aggression in unequivocal terms, supports sanctions against Russia, and is in favor of aiding Ukraine. Halla-aho, in particular, has been very vocal about the threat posed by Russia and expressed strong sympathy with Ukraine, even opening several of his statements in the Finnish parliament in Ukrainian.

In the past, the Finns Party's views on Russia and Ukraine have not been as clear-cut. After Russia's March 2014 annexation of Crimea, then party leader Soini argued that the crisis in Ukraine was an example of how EU membership meant that Finland "gets drawn into all those international situations and conflicts in which the EU decides to become involved." Moreover, he stressed that his party wanted Finland to "invest in good relations with Russia" and that harmful sanctions should be avoided for as long as possible.¹³⁰ Individual Finns Party members of parliament (MPs) have put forward similar arguments since. By contrast, Halla-aho has consistently denounced Moscow's actions in Ukraine, calling for stronger sanctions against Russia as early as September 2014.

Defense and NATO

While there has been some ambiguity over the Finns Party's views on Russia and Ukraine, the party has invariably advocated a strong national defense, for example by urging Finland to withdraw from the Ottawa Treaty on antipersonnel mines to better protect its eastern border.¹³¹

In response to Russia's war in Ukraine, the Finns Party—like most of Finland's parties—changed its views on the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and supported Finland's May 2022 decision to seek membership in the alliance. Before that, the party's attitude toward NATO had been predominantly critical. Its 2007 and 2015 electoral programs argued that membership would have detrimental consequences for Finland's defense; expose the country to new threats, such as terrorism; and limit its international room for maneuver. Both manifestos also blamed Finland's political and media elites for allegedly trying to push Finland toward NATO. However, after February 2022, most Finns Party MPs quickly expressed strong support for joining the organization.

China

While the Finns Party had hardly mentioned China in previous programs and manifestos, the party's 2022 foreign and security policy program articulated a highly critical view of the country's "increasingly aggressive foreign policy" and "ever starker despotism." The document painted China as posing "this century's greatest economic, political, and military challenge to the West" and portrayed China's relations with Russia as close.¹³²

In response, the Finns Party called on Finland to support the forging of a united Western front against China and urged the EU to stand in solidarity with countries targeted by "hostile Chinese policies" and deepen ties with Japan, which the party saw as Finland's natural ally in East Asia. As in several other policy fields, the Finns Party also found a way to link China to immigration policy. The 2022 program mentioned Chinese students at Finnish universities and warned of Chinese industrial espionage and innovation theft.

The Finns Party's tough 2022 China policy can be seen as a new development and a departure from previous leanings. The policy was articulated just six months after Mika Niikko, a Finns Party MP, was forced to step down from his role as chair of the Finnish parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee. Although his resignation followed a controversial tweet about Ukraine's NATO ambitions, Niikko had also been criticized during his time as committee chair for having too close relations with China. Beyond his 2015–2018 tenure as vice chair of the parliament's China Friendship Group, investigative journalists revealed in 2020 that his ties to China were much more extensive.¹³³

CHAPTER 5

France: Attempts to De-demonize the Radical Right

Elena Ventura

National Rally: Evolution and Profile

National Rally (RN), formerly known as the National Front, was founded in 1972 by members of New Order, a French neofascist group known for its violent demonstrations and recurrent clashes with the Revolutionary Communist League. One of RN's founders, Jean-Marie Le Pen, swiftly took over the party leadership and became well known for his extreme right-wing views and remarks steeped in hate speech. He notably made several statements in which he described the gas chambers used in the Holocaust as a "detail of history" and the Nazi occupation of France as "not particularly inhumane."¹³⁴

Having previously remained on the fringes of France's political scene, RN has gained a more prominent role since the 1980s as the party has started performing more consistently in European Parliament, national, and local elections. Le Pen's first electoral milestone came in 1988, when he secured 14 percent of the vote in the French presidential election.¹³⁵ At the height of his career, in 2002, he achieved an electoral earthquake by coming second in the first round of the presidential election and therefore succeeding to the second-round runoff. Even though his opponent, Jacques Chirac, won by a landslide in the second round, Le Pen's result was a catalytic moment in French politics that shed light on RN's appeal among disillusioned citizens and projected the party onto the international stage.¹³⁶

RN has consolidated its standing in the French political landscape since Le Pen's daughter, Marine, took over the party leadership in 2011. Marine Le Pen recognized the limitations of her father's politics, including the controversy of some of his statements, and adopted a broader approach. As such, she conducted a so-called de-demonization or normalization

process, which aimed at attracting a more diverse audience and softening her party's image. She distanced RN from its neofascist origins and even expelled her father from the party after he made racist and anti-Semitic comments, stating that he should no longer speak in the name of the party.¹³⁷ Despite this normalization process, however, RN undoubtedly remains a radical-right party with strong anti-immigration, protectionist, and antiglobalization rhetoric.

As part of RN's transformation under Le Pen, the party also asserted its popular character and tried to appeal to the entire French nation.¹³⁸ And indeed, this reform succeeded in ensuring RN's broader success. In both the 2017 and the 2022 presidential elections, Le Pen led her party to the second round, achieving a historic 41 percent of the vote in the 2022 runoff.¹³⁹ While the party lost both elections to President Emmanuel Macron, it proved its ability to leverage citizens' disenchantment with France's political leadership.

In November 2022, RN named Jordan Bardella as its new president, replacing Le Pen for the 2024 European Parliament election campaign. However, Le Pen remains at the party's reins and is expected to be its candidate in the 2027 French presidential election. Bardella, widely perceived as loyal to Le Pen, has also distanced himself from RN's racist and anti-Semitic roots, although such sentiments remain considerable in the party.¹⁴⁰

Le Pen founded the Identity and Democracy (ID) group in the European Parliament to unite like-minded radical-right and Euroskeptic parties, such as Italy's Northern League and the Alternative for Germany. ID is currently the sixth-largest group in the parliament, so it does not have the power to significantly block or hinder legislation. Nonetheless, it provides an effective platform for Euroskeptic parties to coordinate on shared priorities, such as returning power to EU member states, curbing immigration, and preventing the spread of Islam in Europe.¹⁴¹

Relationship With the EU

RN has historically held a strong Euroskeptic position. After the 1992 signing of the Maastricht Treaty, the party started to advocate France's exit from the European Union (EU)—also known as Frexit—and the eurozone. RN's electoral programs have consistently envisioned France's withdrawal from the EU's passport-free Schengen Area and the reestablishment of national borders to limit illegal migration.¹⁴² RN rejects the EU's free-market orientation and upholds protectionism, especially in agriculture.

As part of the normalization process, and after recognizing that RN's anti-EU perspective alienated a significant section of the French public, Le Pen softened the party's Euroskepticism. RN omitted any perspective of leaving the EU from its official statements during the 2022 presidential election campaign, and Le Pen stated that she would rather reform the EU from within.

Even though RN's Euroskeptic stance has changed significantly over time, some elements remain, including the issue of sovereignty. In his political manifesto for the 2004 European Parliament elections, Jean-Marie Le Pen described the EU as a “faceless technocracy . . . suppressing our jobs and destroying our businesses, attacking the sovereignty of our nations and the soul of our peoples.”¹⁴³ Similarly, in her 2017 presidential election manifesto, Marine Le Pen pledged to return sovereignty and decisionmaking to the French people.

Some of the foundations laid by Jean-Marie Le Pen also remain. For instance, since its inception, RN has made a clear distinction between Europe and the EU. In his 1984 book *Les Français d'abord* (French People First), Le Pen recognized the existence of a European civilization with a historical, spiritual, and intellectual character.¹⁴⁴ RN continues to present itself as the defender of Europe from the EU, which, the party claims, threatens to weaken each country's individual strength by taking power away from citizens.¹⁴⁵

Further Euroskeptic sentiments persist in RN's positions. The party's 2022 presidential election program still envisioned the creation of a European alliance of nations that would gradually replace the EU.¹⁴⁶ Marine Le Pen announced her intention to call for a referendum to modify the French constitution in an attempt to fight the primacy of EU law over national legislation.¹⁴⁷ However, as this proposal itself did not comply with EU law, at best it would have caused significant disputes with the EU, while at worst it would have directly jeopardized France's membership in the union.

Similarly, Le Pen has affirmed her commitments to reestablish border controls with the aim of safeguarding French products and to prioritize French citizens in the allocation of social housing and employment. Yet, these proposals also contradict EU law.

Foreign Policy Positions

RN maintains an overall focus on domestic priorities, and most of the party's manifestos have concentrated on social and economic issues. On foreign policy, the party has a long-standing aim to preserve France's sovereignty and push back against globalization.

Immigration and Asylum

Opposition to immigration is the cornerstone of RN's foreign policy. Since its early days, the party has identified migration as the cause of most of France's troubles, including unemployment and terrorism.¹⁴⁸ Speaking in 2006, Jean-Marie Le Pen asserted that “failing to deal with the problem of immigration . . . will destabilize the old Europe and finally submerge it.”¹⁴⁹

RN's discourse on migration remained almost unchanged after Marine Le Pen's normalization process. This was partly due to the 2015 migration crisis, in which a record number of asylum seekers arrived at the EU's borders, most of them fleeing war in Syria and other countries in the Middle East.¹⁵⁰ The crisis increased political support for antimigration policies and prompted mainstream parties to adopt a tougher stance on arrivals. In a 2015 interview, Le Pen demonstrated the party's strong anti-immigration line by responding to a picture of Alan Kurdi, a Syrian toddler found dead on a Turkish beach, by saying, "Do you know if he was a refugee or an illegal immigrant? I don't know . . . all I know is that each year, French authorities award asylum only to a minority of those applying for it. I wonder if this tragedy is not [being] used for political purposes."¹⁵¹

In her 2022 presidential election manifesto, Le Pen outlined clear proposals to "regain full control of immigration."¹⁵² These included abolishing the right to reunification for separated members of migrant families and immediately repatriating migrants who are undocumented or have a criminal record. In previous political programs, she pledged to close all "extremist" mosques and promised to deport all dual nationals associated with a jihadist movement and withdraw their French citizenship.¹⁵³

RN's anti-immigration policies are strongly linked to Islamophobia. Le Pen stated in her 2022 program that she would introduce a bill aimed at "combating Islamist ideologies, which are incompatible with our values, our history, and our culture," with the overall ambition of implementing "specific legislation targeting only Islamist ideologies, which are the real totalitarian threat of modern times."¹⁵⁴

Russia and Ukraine

RN has historically been a proponent of closer ties with Russia. This perspective is in line with the party's opposition to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), whose eastward expansion it has routinely criticized. In 2017, Le Pen asserted that the United States had been provoking Moscow by arming countries that border Russia and fall under its sphere of influence. These provocations, she argued, posed a threat to Russia and might result in a "natural reaction" from the Kremlin.¹⁵⁵

In 2014, Jean-Marie Le Pen visited Moscow and stated that "Crimea has always been a Russian province . . . [Russian President Vladimir] Putin has democratically accepted the decision of the people of Crimea to join the motherland."¹⁵⁶ Marine Le Pen described Russia's 2014 annexation of the peninsula as a "reattachment" and affirmed her strong belief in the Russophilia of Crimea's inhabitants. She also repeatedly asserted her admiration for Putin and commended Russia's military interventions in Syria by saying, "France should have done what Russia is doing."¹⁵⁷ In 2017, Le Pen said that "Russia does not pose a military threat to European countries . . . and it is going in the right direction." She further stated that Putin's policies, like those of then U.S. president Donald Trump, were similar to her own and those of her party.¹⁵⁸

Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine prompted a change in RN's rhetoric. In response to the invasion, Le Pen said, "Everyone has a form of admiration for Vladimir Putin. But I consider that what he did is eminently reprehensible, [and] it partly changes the vision I can have of him." She rejected having had prior strong relations with Putin, maintaining that she had only met him once before.¹⁵⁹

Still, in her 2022 manifesto, Le Pen advocated closer ties with Russia on issues of common concern, such as the fight against terrorism.¹⁶⁰ She openly called for the lifting of sanctions against Russia because they "serve absolutely no purpose [except] to make the European people suffer and, incidentally, the French people."¹⁶¹ RN also criticized Macron's decision to send long-range missiles to Ukraine, describing the move as an "irresponsible choice" that might expose France to reprisals.¹⁶² As the war moves toward a stalemate, a return to Le Pen's previous pro-Russia stance remains a possibility.

In May 2023, the RN leader was summoned to a parliamentary inquiry into foreign interference to justify the party's links to Russia, including a 2014 loan from a Russian bank and her visits to the country. Le Pen responded by denouncing "an absolutely inadmissible defamation campaign" and rejecting any kind of Russian interference in RN's internal dynamics. The hearing did not produce clear evidence of a political service rendered in exchange for the loan nor of any other direct impact on the party's policies and activities.¹⁶³

Security and Relations With the United States

RN has historically adopted an anti-NATO stance and advocated France's exit from the alliance. In 2017, Le Pen stated that NATO was obsolete, as the threat that had led to its creation, the Soviet Union, was no longer present.¹⁶⁴ In her 2022 program, Le Pen reiterated her willingness to pull France out of NATO's integrated military command, as former president Charles de Gaulle had done in 1966; France reentered the military command in 2009.

Le Pen further pledged to renegotiate France-U.S. military relations. According to Le Pen, the United States has often failed to provide support for France, which should therefore halt its military dependence on the United States and overhaul existing agreements on intelligence sharing and the interoperability of defense systems. National interests should then be the sole guide for France's security and defense policy.

RN envisions strengthening France's military capabilities, terminating all industrial co-operation with Germany in the field of armaments, and engaging in dialogue with Russia on issues of relevance for the two countries. Against this backdrop, RN viewed Macron's suggestion to create a so-called European army as "treason" against the French constitution.¹⁶⁵

Trade

RN maintains a protectionist outlook on trade while promoting state intervention in the industrial sector.¹⁶⁶ In 2017, Le Pen introduced the idea of “intelligent protectionism” to counter “unfair international competition” and control “foreign investments that harm our national interests.”¹⁶⁷ This plan would entail the imposition of taxes on foreign imports, although Le Pen did not detail how this arrangement would be implemented in practice.

Le Pen presents herself as the champion of French workers, protecting them from so-called anarchic globalization.¹⁶⁸ In this regard, RN has pledged to exclude agriculture from international trade agreements. As such, the party would prevent the ratification of the EU-Canada Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement and halt its provisional application. This approach would also entail the end of trade talks with Australia and New Zealand and the blocking of the EU-Mercosur trade deal. RN has expressed a preference for replacing such multilateral agreements with bilateral ones.

EU Enlargement

RN has been vocal in its opposition to EU enlargement. The party’s leaders have repeatedly described enlargement as a significant threat to the member states’ sovereignty and committed to “continue to tirelessly remind people of the need to reject any further EU enlargement, in accordance with the will and interests of the peoples of Europe.”¹⁶⁹ Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine had no impact on Le Pen’s perspective on enlargement, and she remains opposed both to enlargement itself and to the granting of candidate country status to the six nations in the EU’s Eastern Partnership.¹⁷⁰

RN has often associated EU enlargement with a significant influx of migrants into France, feeding the narrative that increased immigration poses a threat to French citizens on issues such as unemployment. When the EU opened accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia in 2022, Bardella issued a statement expressing RN’s strong opposition.¹⁷¹ He affirmed that the integration of countries with large Muslim populations would act as a “gateway to illegal immigration in Europe.”

Climate Change and Energy

RN strongly opposes the European Green Deal, a package of initiatives to set the EU on the path to a green transition, describing it as a policy “imposed” by the EU, and aims to “free the French people from these unreasonable commitments.”¹⁷² The party advocates the use of nuclear energy and the establishment of new national environmental policies to protect France’s autonomy. Le Pen has promised to undo many of the measures approved by Macron’s administration, in the name of localism. Among these, she has suggested restoring the previous higher speed limit of 90 kilometers per hour (56 miles per hour) on

all secondary roads and abolishing the low-emission zones created to reduce air pollution in urban areas.¹⁷³

While Le Pen has promised to adhere to the 2015 Paris Agreement on climate change, she has also committed to abolish subsidies for solar and wind energy and establish a moratorium on new wind- and solar-power projects, which would allegedly save €5 million (\$5.5 million) for the French administration.¹⁷⁴ This proposal was strongly criticized by groups including the French Renewable Energy Trade Association, which said that the move would be “a major step backwards for our country and for the climate.”¹⁷⁵

CHAPTER 6

Germany: The AfD—a Blip or a Fixture?

Judy Dempsey

The Alternative for Germany: Evolution and Profile

The Alternative for Germany (AfD) was founded in 2013 as a Euroskeptic party opposed to the bailouts provided by the European Union (EU) to indebted eurozone members after the 2007–2008 financial crisis.¹⁷⁶ Although the AfD initially had little popular appeal, that changed in 2015 when former chancellor Angela Merkel threw open Germany’s borders and allowed in over 1 million refugees from Syria and Iraq.¹⁷⁷ The AfD quickly married its Euroskeptic outlook with a strong anti-immigration platform that was primarily anti-Muslim and anti-Islam. The party’s geographic focus also shifted, as its anti-immigration stance won increasing support from the eastern German states, particularly Saxony and Thuringia.¹⁷⁸

In 2014, the AfD won seven seats in the then 751-member European Parliament, where it joined the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) group.¹⁷⁹ In 2016, the party unveiled a cooperation pact with the radical-right Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ), which was a member of the Europe of Nations and Freedom group, leading the ECR caucus to expel the AfD.¹⁸⁰ One of the AfD’s leaders, Beatrix von Storch, then joined the Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy group. In 2019, Jörg Meuthen, another prominent AfD leader—flanked by Matteo Salvini, Italy’s Northern League leader; Marine Le Pen, leader of France’s National Rally; and leaders of the Danish People’s Party and the FPÖ—announced a new European Parliament group, Identity and Democracy.¹⁸¹ The AfD cultivated ties with Hungary’s Our Homeland Movement, the Serbian Movement Dveri, and Slovakia’s Republic party, all radical-right nationalist groups.

The AfD’s appeal has been consistently increasing, and the party’s domestic agenda resonates with voters. Opinion polls in March 2024 showed that AfD was Germany’s second most popular party, polling at 20 percent, after the opposition center-right Christian Democratic Union

(CDU), at 31 percent.¹⁸² In third place was the governing center-left Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD), led by Chancellor Olaf Scholz, at 15 percent, followed by one of its coalition partners, the Greens, at 13 percent. The other coalition partner, the liberal Free Democratic Party (FDP), had fallen below 5 percent, which means that if the polls are confirmed at the 2025 Bundestag (German parliament) election, the party will not enter the parliament.

A look at the AfD's electoral performance at the federal and regional levels shows how it is chiseling away at the established parties, taking votes from the CDU, the SPD, and the FDP. In 2013, when the party was founded, it won no seats in the Bundestag. It received only 1.9 percent of the vote and came eighth among all of the parties that took part in that election.¹⁸³ A notable transformation occurred in the 2017 election, when the party achieved a substantial increase, obtaining 11.5 percent of the constituency vote and 12.6 percent of the party-list vote.¹⁸⁴ (In German federal elections, each voter has two votes, the first for a constituency candidate and the second for a regional party list.) In total, the AfD acquired ninety-four of the 709 Bundestag seats and joined the ranks of the opposition.¹⁸⁵ In the 2021 election, the party's vote share dropped, but not sharply, to 10.3 percent. The AfD became the fifth-biggest party in the parliament and currently has eighty-three seats in the expanded 735-member Bundestag.¹⁸⁶

Regional elections are good indicators of how the electorate sees the performances of both the incumbent regional governments and the federal government. Recent regional polls show that the AfD is making inroads in most of the sixteen regions. With the exceptions of Bremen, where the party did not run, and Schleswig-Holstein, where it did not reach the 5 percent vote share required to enter the regional legislature, the AfD is represented in all of the state legislatures. Across Germany, the party's membership more than doubled from just over 17,500 in 2013 to 40,000 by the end of 2023.¹⁸⁷

The AfD's popularity is sustained by two factors. First, the party taps into growing public unease about Berlin's lack of a coherent migration and asylum policy at a time when the number of refugees and migrants arriving in Germany has significantly increased. The party further leverages growing anti-Islam and anti-Semitic sentiments, which the established parties rarely, if ever, raise.

Second, Scholz has failed to clearly communicate his policies on Ukraine, climate change, and Germany's relations with the EU, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and China. All of these issues involve strategic planning, money, and conviction. Scholz, who leads a party that is divided, particularly over Russia, has yet to take a robust and unambiguous attitude toward the AfD.

Relationship With the EU

The AfD's stance on the EU is transactional: the party uses the union as much as possible but also criticizes it as much as possible to promote its program. When the AfD was founded, its leaders, several of whom were academics, prominent economists, and former members

of the CDU with solid bourgeois backgrounds, were critical of the EU bailouts for indebted eurozone countries.¹⁸⁸ The AfD leaders were not against the EU as such. Instead, they promoted an agenda of economic liberalism or what was called at the time a soft Euroskeptic philosophy. However, that stance had little traction in terms of broader public appeal. Rather, the party's aim was to create some dissent inside Merkel's CDU and try to change the narrative about why indebted eurozone countries should be bailed out.

The party then shifted—radically—in 2015. With open dissent in the AfD about its direction and resignations by the original founders, the party moved to the radical right in opposition to Merkel's open-door policy toward the refugees fleeing the wars in Syria and Iraq.¹⁸⁹ There was another element that sharpened the AfD's profile: a section of the party embraced some of the Islamophobic policies of Pegida, an extreme radical-right pan-European movement.¹⁹⁰ It was founded in 2014 and held weekly demonstrations, mostly in the eastern Germany city of Dresden. Pegida's appeal was direct: it was anti-Islam, anti-immigration, and nationalist.

The AfD's move to the radical right was confirmed during the 2016 party congress. Under the slogan “Islam is not a part of Germany,” the party called for a ban on Islamic symbols, such as minarets, burkas, and the Muslim call to prayer.¹⁹¹ At the same time, amid bitter disagreements in the AfD over its policies toward the EU, Islam, migration, and Russia, the AfD's program became more focused on controlling migration but remained ambiguous toward the EU.¹⁹² At the party congress, delegates agreed to demand the closure of Germany's borders to asylum seekers. The party also stated that Germany should leave the EU if it could not retrieve its national sovereignty. As regards other aspects of foreign policy, the party delegates wanted an end to EU sanctions on Russia.¹⁹³

On the domestic front, the AfD proposed a change to the German constitution to revoke German citizenship for individuals born to non-German parents if they committed serious crimes.¹⁹⁴

The AfD's increasingly xenophobic rhetoric has had repercussions for its policy toward the EU. For example, during its August 2023 party congress in the eastern city of Magdeburg, the AfD called the EU a “failed project.”¹⁹⁵ The party congress text described how the EU had failed on climate change and immigration. On the former, the AfD accepts that the climate is changing—but argues that it is because of natural factors, not human interference.¹⁹⁶

Back in 2019, the AfD had advocated Germany leaving the eurozone and, potentially, the EU.¹⁹⁷ Yet, the 2023 party congress text called neither for Germany to leave the EU nor for the EU to be dissolved. What it did propose was a “federation of European nations, a new European economic and interest community that preserves the sovereignty of member states.”¹⁹⁸ That sounds similar to Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's view of the EU. In short, the AfD, like other Euroskeptic parties, is prepared to remain inside the EU: the financial benefits are a sufficient incentive to do so, and the economic and political costs of withdrawing from the EU would be so big that the AfD now believes it might try to influence change from within.

The AfD would have influence at the European level only if it were in power at the national level, and the likelihood of the AfD ever attaining power in Berlin is remote in the short term. Even if the party is running in second place in the opinion polls, none of the established parties would consider teaming up with the AfD to form a coalition; the party is too toxic. It is even watched by the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution. In March 2020, the office classified Der Flügel (The Wing), a nationalist faction inside the AfD, as a right-wing extremist threat to democracy order that was incompatible with the German constitution.¹⁹⁹

Despite the popular support for the AfD's stances on the EU, immigration, and climate change, the party does not seem to have influenced the policies of established German political parties. "For most policy stances formulated in the AfD's 2024 [European Parliament election] manifesto, I would expect little to no contagion on the CDU's agenda or that of the other parties," said Denis Cohen, a senior research fellow at the Mannheim Center for European Social Research who has carried out extensive research on the AfD.²⁰⁰

"There are no strategic incentives for the CDU [and its Bavarian sister party, the Christian Social Union, CSU] or other parties to copycat the AfD's Euroskeptic stances," he told this author. "There is one exception, which will likely spill over from the domestic to the European arena in the upcoming [European Parliament] election campaign: the AfD's core issues of immigration, asylum, and border security."

Foreign Policy Positions

The AfD's overall approach to foreign policy is ideological and unstrategic, and its outlook is nationalist, rather inward looking, and Euroskeptic. As a result, the AfD resents what it sees as the EU's interference in German domestic affairs. The party sees the EU as a threat to Germany's sovereignty, and some voices in the AfD suggest that the country should abandon the euro. Yet, for all its criticism of the EU, the party continues to field candidates for European Parliament elections. There is a certain amount of inconsistency in this aspect of the AfD's foreign policy, not only because of divisions in the party, but also because of the leadership's need to gauge how much public support exists in Germany for pulling out of the eurozone—or, indeed, for leaving the EU altogether.

Immigration and Asylum

The AfD aims to radically curb the influx of refugees and migrants into Germany. The party seeks to expedite the processing of asylum applications, with a preference for establishing a system to handle such claims in migrants' countries of origin.²⁰¹ In other words, the AfD is making no compromises on refugee, migration, or asylum issues. These views are part of its ideological outlook.²⁰² Indeed, addressing the Bundestag in 2018, AfD Leader Alice Weidel

spoke about “headscarf girls” and “knife-wielding men.”²⁰³ The party’s co-chairman, Tino Chrupalla, spoke of “*Umwölkung*”—a process of ethnicity inversion that emanates from Nazi ideology.²⁰⁴

The AfD is also marked by anti-Semitic views. Speaking at the 2018 national conference of the party’s youth section, Junge Alternative (Young Alternative), former AfD chairman Alexander Gauland said, “Hitler and the Nazis are just a speck of bird shit in over 1,000 years of successful German history.”²⁰⁵ Björn Höcke, who is the AfD chairman in the eastern German state of Thuringia, said in 2017, “We Germans – and I am not talking about you patriots who have gathered here today. We Germans, our people, are the only people in the world to place a monument of shame in the heart of our capital city,” in a reference to the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin.²⁰⁶ He also criticized the “laughable policy of coming to terms with the past.”

Trade

The AfD has a neoliberal policy that calls for more deregulation and less state intervention.²⁰⁷ The party is in theory favorable to trade agreements if they do not undermine German safety standards.²⁰⁸ Yet, the AfD also believes that Germany must retain control over the negotiation of trade agreements through the involvement of the Bundestag. As such, in practice, the party rejects the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership, the Plurilateral Trade in Services Agreement, and the EU-Canada Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement. Similarly, the AfD strongly opposes the EU-Mercosur agreement, as “it does not guarantee fair competitive conditions for European and German agriculture.”²⁰⁹ Essentially, the AfD supports a trade policy that does not undermine German interests. Yet, since Germany is a leading export-driven economy, it relies on global economic ties.

China

Although the AfD initially opposed Beijing’s economic espionage and the purchase by COSCO Shipping, a Chinese state-owned shipping company, of a stake in the port of Hamburg, the party has more recently changed tack.²¹⁰ The AfD criticized German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock and Economic Affairs and Climate Action Minister Robert Habeck for launching what it called an economic war against China.²¹¹ The AfD is also opposed to restrictions on fifth-generation (5G) technology. The party has supported Beijing’s failed efforts to mediate between Russia and Ukraine in the ongoing war.

Russia and Ukraine

The AfD opposes the EU sanctions imposed on Russia for its February 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine and Germany’s decision to send military assistance to Ukraine.²¹² The party has called for negotiations with Russia to end the war but does not spell out under

what conditions the war could be ended. In short, the AfD shows little strategic analysis of how Russia's invasion of Ukraine affects the stability and security of Eastern Europe and the EU. According to numerous reports, the party is indirectly receiving funds from Russia.²¹³

Relations With the United States

Overall, the AfD wants Germany to have more distance from the United States—although the party's position highly depends on the specific U.S. leadership. The AfD supported former U.S. president Donald Trump, whose nativist agenda and views on Russia, NATO, climate change, and migration won plaudits from the party.²¹⁴ The AfD has also picked up social media chatter that the United States was behind the September 2022 explosions that sabotaged the Nord Stream pipelines, which bring natural gas from Russia to Europe under the Baltic Sea.²¹⁵

Energy

The AfD opposes Germany's energy transition, which puts an emphasis on expanding renewable energy and ending nuclear power.²¹⁶ The party wants to overturn the German Renewable Energy Sources Act, end bioenergy subsidies, and restrict the expansion of wind energy. It believes Germany's energy security is being undermined, or even threatened, by the switch to renewable energy.²¹⁷ To avoid shortfalls, the AfD supports the use of lignite, or brown coal. This position has some appeal among the party's supporters in the former East Germany, who have opposed the closure of lignite mines in that part of the country.

Democratic Values

The AfD argues for family values, is against same-sex marriage, and has campaigned for traditional roles for women.²¹⁸

The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

Despite the AfD's considerable anti-Semitic views, the party describes itself as pro-Israel and has long supported Trump's 2017 decision to formally recognize Jerusalem as Israel's capital.²¹⁹ Following Hamas's October 7, 2023, attacks on Israel, the party has called for a cut in aid and funding for the Palestinians. The AfD submitted parliamentary proposals to halt financial donations to the United Nations agency for Palestinian refugees, which were rejected by the SPD government.²²⁰ Through these initiatives, the AfD is trying to make the SPD look weak on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

CHAPTER 7

Hungary: Transactional, Competitive, Confrontational

Zsuzsanna Szelényi

Fidesz: Evolution and Profile

Since it was founded in 1988, Hungary's Fidesz party has varied in its ideological positioning, starting out as a liberal party and then transitioning through liberal-conservative and conservative phases before becoming a radical-right party in 2010. Fidesz led the Hungarian government from 1998 to 2002 and from 2010 onward, with Viktor Orbán as prime minister. In 2022, Fidesz again won a parliamentary election, securing 54 percent of the vote and 135 seats in Hungary's 199-member parliament.²²¹

Because of Hungary's electoral system of majoritarian representation, Fidesz has been able to win a so-called constitutional majority in the parliament four times since 2010. This means that Fidesz can appoint its members to positions including the president and the judges of the Constitutional Court, thereby neutralizing the country's system of checks and balances. Hungary has no federal structure, and its administration is centralized. The prime minister has authority over foreign policy matters, while the competencies of the parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee are limited. Foreign policy takes a secondary position to economic policy and internal political considerations.

Relationship With the EU

Originally, Orbán's party had a pro-European stance, regarding Hungary's membership in the European Union (EU) as crucial for the country's long-term stability, economic

modernization, and cultural reintegration into Western Europe. Conservative politicians, such as Orbán, emphasized that a united Europe offered the best structure for Hungarians both in Hungary and in neighboring countries to live together.²²² Consequently, Hungarian governments supported and promoted EU enlargement, particularly toward Southeastern Europe.

Despite this position, in 2002 Orbán began to express his frustration that after twelve years of intensive preparations by Hungary and other candidate countries, the EU members had yet to open their doors to their Eastern European neighbors. Although Hungary finally joined the EU two years later, Orbán's pro-European stance was tinged with resentment, setting the scene for a Euroskeptic sentiment among Hungary's conservative voters.

Since 2010, Fidesz's stance has become more ambivalent. The party's current position recognizes that EU membership is in Hungary's national interest, especially when it comes to the European single market, the EU's financial transfers, and access to state-of-the-art technologies, which help Hungary in overcoming the challenges of transitioning from a middle-income country to a highly developed one.²²³

However, as a sovereignist government, Fidesz vigorously advocates the prioritization of nation-states in EU decisionmaking processes. Fidesz has put forward the idea of a looser grouping of the nations of Europe in opposition to the concept of a federal Europe, which the party views as an ideological construct that is detrimental to the EU's future. Consequently, Fidesz opposes every new EU policy that seeks to increase the competencies of the union's institutions at the expense of national governments, such as the EU's banking union, taxation policies, fiscal union, and migration policy.

The Fidesz government has clashed with EU bodies on multiple occasions since 2010.²²⁴ In 2021, the EU launched a mechanism against Orbán's government that led to the partial withdrawal of EU financial transfers to Hungary.²²⁵ Amid the party's repeated disputes with the EU institutions, it started to use the veto power that each member state has over certain EU Council decisions to enforce its political objectives. Since 2016, Fidesz has threatened to block eighteen out of thirty EU foreign policy decisions with its veto.²²⁶ The conflict-driven political attitude of Orbán's government resulted in its relative isolation by 2020.

Foreign Policy Positions

In 2010, Orbán's government initiated a shift in foreign policy that placed national interests at the forefront of decisionmaking. The government prioritized economic interests, with a focus on diversifying Hungary's economic ties and seeking new, non-Western sources of foreign direct investment (FDI), to which classical diplomacy became a subsidiary tool. Fidesz introduced a new policy called Opening to the East, based on the belief that neoliberal capitalism and the U.S.-led global order were facing a crisis, while Eastern powers were

on the rise.²²⁷ By repositioning Hungary among its Western allies and forging new relations with countries in the East, Orbán sought to maneuver among various partners and gain influence in Central Europe and beyond.

The Opening to the East policy resulted in several new economic and political initiatives toward China, Russia, and Turkey as well as East Asia and Central Asia. As a political gesture, the Orbán government in 2018 requested and received observer status in the Organization of Turkic States, which brings together Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkey, and Uzbekistan. Hungary also witnessed an influx of FDI, primarily from East Asian countries, including China and South Korea. Despite these developments, Hungary's trade relations remain closest with its Western partners, with 85 percent of the country's trade conducted with European countries and the United States in 2023.²²⁸

Orbán considers international relations a global competition for resources.²²⁹ His political approach is transactional, competitive, and confrontational. Fidesz prioritizes bilateral engagements over participation in international structures and dismisses ideological or democratic considerations in international politics.

NATO

Fidesz supports Hungary's membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). This position reflects Hungarian public opinion, which is broadly pro-NATO.²³⁰ Hungarian defense forces participate in NATO missions and operations as requested by the organization and often go beyond their necessary remit by taking on additional responsibilities, such as in Kosovo, where Hungary is one of the largest troop contributors.²³¹

At NATO's 2014 summit in Wales, the Orbán government committed to meet the alliance's requirement for members to spend the equivalent of 2 percent of their gross domestic product on defense by 2024.²³² In 2016, the government launched the Zrínyi 2026 National Defense and Armed Forces Development Program.²³³ As part of this program, the government adopted a national defense strategy in 2020 and launched a large-scale military reform in 2022.²³⁴ The latter transformed Hungary's entire military establishment, its procurement of defense equipment, and its investment in the defense industry, all in accordance with NATO standards.²³⁵ Hungary's budget allocation for defense in 2023 was €4.6 billion (\$5.0 billion), representing a 40 percent increase on the previous year and an almost fivefold rise compared with 2014.²³⁶

Despite this position, which has served as the basis for a satisfactory relationship between Hungary and the United States, Orbán has employed an unconventional approach to leverage NATO for political pressure. Since 2014, Orbán's government has obstructed the establishment of a NATO-Ukraine joint committee in protest at what Fidesz sees as the suppression of the rights of the ethnic Hungarian minority in Ukraine.²³⁷ Furthermore, in 2022, the Fidesz government delayed the accessions of Finland and Sweden to NATO to exert pressure on these countries in various EU matters.

Security and Relations With the United States

In Central and Eastern Europe, Hungary holds secondary significance in U.S. security politics compared with Poland or Romania, where the United States has strategic interests toward the Baltics and Ukraine and toward the Black Sea region, respectively. Hungary's small economy also means the country is not the object of any special focus from the United States. This relatively low level of interest allows Orbán to adopt more of an outlier position in its policy toward the United States. Orbán supported the presidency of Donald Trump and the Republican party, but relations with Democratic administrations have been more problematic, with Fidesz even listing U.S. President Joe Biden among its opponents.²³⁸

Orbán contends that the West, led by the United States, is supporting Ukraine as a way to pursue Western economic interests and reorganize the balance of power in Europe.²³⁹ He argues that the United States and Europe have different geopolitical dependencies and priorities, and as a result, his party strongly supports a common European defense policy. Orbán has been advocating a common European army since 2016, calling for joint forces and a shared structure to protect Europe against perceived threats from the South and East, like terrorism and migration.²⁴⁰

As such, Orbán's sovereigntist government is positioning itself to actively engage in debates about a supranational European defense force. Fidesz's ambitious military reforms and capacity-building efforts indicate the government's interest in developing and streamlining the European defense industry, advocating the integration of European armies, and promoting interoperability and complementarity between NATO and EU defense capabilities.

Russia and Ukraine

Fidesz's position on Russia's war against Ukraine is contradictory, but it leans toward a pro-Russia stance. The party's key actors condemned the Russian aggression and acknowledged Ukraine's right to protect its territory.²⁴¹ Although Orbán's government has formally approved all EU sanctions against Russia in connection with the war, it has always questioned the punitive measures and has met repeatedly with Russian leaders. On October 17, 2023, on the sidelines of the Belt and Road Forum in Beijing, Orbán met Russian President Vladimir Putin to reinforce energy cooperation between the two countries.²⁴² The Hungarian government has been actively seeking to limit the scope of the sanctions and has even blocked certain elements of them.²⁴³

Hungary provides only humanitarian aid and military medical training to Ukraine and refuses to supply military equipment. Orbán's government supports Kyiv's bid for EU membership in principle, on the condition that Ukraine restore the rights of the Hungarian ethnic minority there. This argument provides the Orbán government with a narrative for blocking the start of Ukraine's EU accession negotiations. Hungary's government does not endorse Ukraine's potential NATO membership.

Orbán's government recognizes that Europe's prewar relationship with Russia is over and that the EU will change significantly as the result of the war.²⁴⁴ Hungary is largely dependent on Russian energy resources, and although the Hungarian government aims to reduce this dependence, it plans to do so as slowly as possible. The government has engaged in bilateral negotiations with Russia to secure new, favorable agreements on gas supplies.

Orbán has expressed the view that Ukraine is a failed state that lacks the capability to win the war on the battlefield and is overreliant on Western, particularly U.S., resources.²⁴⁵ Consequently, he believes that the United States should pursue peace with Russia rather than provide arms to Ukraine. According to Orbán, it is not in Europe's interest to humiliate and isolate Russia, as "there will [still] be a Russia after the war."²⁴⁶ Hungarian public media and Fidesz-controlled social media platforms are dominated by pro-Russia narratives that often discredit Western and Ukrainian efforts in the conflict.²⁴⁷

Relations With China

Through its Opening to the East policy, the Fidesz government seeks to foster long-term political, cultural, diplomatic, and extensive trade relationships with China. To lubricate these relationships, Orbán's government has vetoed several EU declarations to shield the Chinese regime from criticism.

The Fidesz government played a leading role in the 16+1 format between sixteen Central and Eastern European countries and China (later 14+1) and is a major contributor to Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative in the region. This role is exemplified by the development of a €4 billion (\$4.3 billion) Belgrade–Budapest high-speed rail link, part of a larger plan to connect the China-run Piraeus port in Greece to Central Europe.²⁴⁸ Hungary was also one of Europe's biggest recipients of Chinese FDI in 2022, with €7.6 billion (\$8.2 billion) flowing into the country for the construction of a new factory by Chinese battery maker CATL.²⁴⁹ This investment positions Hungary to potentially develop into a key battery-manufacturing hub for Europe at a time when most EU member states are growing more cautious about their dependence on China.²⁵⁰

The threat of direct Chinese influence on Hungarian or EU foreign policy is minimal, although the China-Hungary relationship poses several challenges for the EU. First, it emboldens Orbán and sows ideological and policy divisions in the EU, making a united approach to Beijing more difficult. Second, the strong presence of the Belt and Road Initiative in Central Europe may undermine Western technology leadership there. Third, Orbán seeks to reap his own gains from Chinese investments in Hungary, whether or not they benefit his country.²⁵¹ This creates an indirect influence for Beijing over Hungary's foreign policy.

Immigration and Asylum

Before 2015, Fidesz largely adhered to the regulations on refugees and migration that were typical in Central Europe, and Hungary had well-established infrastructure in place to deal with new arrivals—although it is true that Hungary was not a major destination for migrants. In 2015, Hungary became the entry point into the EU’s passport-free Schengen Area for large numbers of migrants from the Middle East and Central Asia, and Orbán’s government introduced draconian rules on refugees and migration.²⁵² The government’s anti-immigration policies became an ideological cornerstone of Orbán’s system.

Orbán questions the feasibility of integrating non-Europeans, especially those of Muslim origin, into what he sees as a Christian Europe. He claims that the idea of a multicultural society is an “ideological travesty of the internationalist left.”²⁵³ During EU Council debates in 2023, Orbán’s government advocated a zero-tolerance approach to migrants, rejecting a system of so-called mandatory solidarity and opposing any EU policy that might represent a pull factor for migrants into Hungary.²⁵⁴ In December 2023, Orbán’s government rejected a comprehensive EU deal on migration.²⁵⁵

EU Enlargement

Hungary has a long-standing tradition of supporting EU enlargement, a stance shared by all major political parties in the country. An interesting factor in this policy is the presence of significant ethnic Hungarian populations in all of Hungary’s neighbors. The Fidesz government has been proactive in leveraging these ethnic groups to enhance its economic and cultural influence, particularly in Serbia and Ukraine, which are not yet EU member states.

Orbán’s government has achieved notable political, ideological, and economic influence in the Western Balkans, and the position of European commissioner for enlargement is currently held by a Hungarian.²⁵⁶ Hungary’s influence-building efforts, however, largely serve to push Orbán’s own agenda, which is based on an ideological affinity with individual Western Balkan leaders and on Hungary’s economic interests, which sometimes diverge from the EU’s approach.

Climate Change and Energy

Fidesz’s stance on the environment and climate change is not easily defined, as the issue does not align well with the party’s nationalist and opportunistic agenda. Since 2010, Hungary has had no dedicated ministry for the environment and climate change, and the competencies of the authorities responsible for environmental protection have been weakened. Furthermore, investments in renewable energy have been systematically disincentivized, resulting in renewable energy contributing only 15 percent of the country’s total energy supply in 2021.²⁵⁷

Public opinion in Hungary reflects a higher level of climate change consciousness than the EU average, with 87 percent of Hungarians seeing the climate crisis as a very serious problem and 48 percent holding the national government responsible for addressing the issue.²⁵⁸ Consequently, Fidesz cannot advocate an agenda that denies climate change.

Fidesz's approach to climate change is therefore opportunistic rather than climate change skeptical. Orbán has criticized the EU's plans to tackle climate change as a "utopian fantasy" and expressed concerns about the impact of green measures on energy costs in Europe.²⁵⁹ In 2019, alongside his Estonian, Czech, and Polish counterparts, Orbán blocked an agreement on the EU's plan to become carbon neutral by 2050, citing concerns about its potential impact. The prime ministers demanded information on the funding that the EU would provide for industrial modernization.

Fidesz also rejected the EU's Fit for 55 climate package, which seeks to lower the union's greenhouse gas emissions by at least 55 percent by 2030 from 1990 levels. The party asserted that the European Commission's proposal lacked common sense, offered limited climate benefits, would raise energy prices, and failed to recognize the varying circumstances of member states.²⁶⁰ Fidesz's strategy is focused on delaying the implementation of climate-related regulations until the party perceives that the EU adequately covers the transition costs for poorer member states. In November 2022, the commission issued a document listing a set of conditions that the Hungarian government must fulfill to gain access to the €5.8 billion (\$6.2 billion) Recovery and Resilience Facility.²⁶¹

Finally, energy security is a top priority for Fidesz, especially since Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine. The government believes that Hungary, as a landlocked country heavily dependent on Russian energy sources, has limited opportunities for rapid change. Hungary's 2023 National Climate and Energy Plan indicates the government's focus on building new gas-fired power plants to meet the country's growing energy needs, rather than investing in renewable energy.²⁶²

CHAPTER 8

Italy: The Radical Right Becomes More Pragmatic in Government

Elena Ventura

Brothers of Italy: Evolution and Profile

Brothers of Italy (FdI) was founded in 2012 by Giorgia Meloni, the current party leader and Italian prime minister, along with Ignazio La Russa and Guido Crosetto. It has its origins in the Italian Social Movement, a neofascist political party, which, until the 1990s, acted as “the guardian of Italy’s Fascist legacy.”²⁶³ The movement’s successor, the National Alliance, counted most future FdI leaders among its members. These parties were particularly successful in mobilizing local populations while remaining on the margins of the political spectrum.

FdI has strong ideological roots in Italy’s fascist movement. The actions and words of the party’s political leaders show a continued appreciation for the former fascist regime. For instance, La Russa, who is the current president of the Italian Senate, does not shy away from expressing his sympathy for fascism. Speaking in 2022, he affirmed that “we are all heirs of the Duce” and said that he collects memorabilia from the fascist movement, including a bust of Benito Mussolini.²⁶⁴

In the Italian general election in 2013, the year of FdI’s electoral debut, the party obtained only 1.9 percent of the vote.²⁶⁵ Until 2017, FdI remained a marginal actor in Italy’s national political arena but performed well at the local level. At the 2016 municipal elections, FdI fielded candidates in more than 55 percent of municipalities.²⁶⁶ In 2018, the first FdI members were elected to the Senate and the Chamber of Deputies after the party won 4.4 percent of the vote.²⁶⁷

Since then, FdI's political base has grown consistently and significantly. This growth was linked, among other factors, to the decline of the right-wing League, which lost a large number of voters because it was willing to join the governing coalition led by former prime minister Mario Draghi alongside the populist Five Star Movement and the center-left Democratic Party. Meloni, as the leader of the only major party in opposition, was able to leverage voters' disillusion with rising inflation and energy prices in the aftermath of the coronavirus pandemic.

In the 2022 parliamentary election, FdI became the leading political party in Italy, achieving 26.1 percent of the vote.²⁶⁸ Subsequently, FdI entered a ruling coalition with its longtime center-right partners, the League and Forza Italia, and Meloni was nominated to be Italy's prime minister. This accomplishment underscored the remarkable ascent of radical-right parties in Europe and their dramatic increase in influence over national politics. FdI has been present in the European Parliament since 2019 and is part of the European Conservatives and Reformists group.

Relationship With the EU

FdI is a Euroskeptic party. However, unlike other radical-right parties, it does not advocate Italy's exit from the European Union (EU). Similarly, while remaining skeptical of the common currency, FdI does not currently envision Italy's withdrawal from the eurozone, although the party has repeatedly voiced its disappointment with the currency. In its 2019 European Parliament election program, FdI requested compensation for countries that had suffered repercussions from adopting the euro.²⁶⁹

Although Meloni has expressed her backing for the EU, the FdI's vision of the union differs substantially from its existing structure. Meloni has often affirmed the importance of an EU founded on traditional and Christian values, in line with FdI's motto of "God, Fatherland, and Family."²⁷⁰ In the party's 2022 general election program, Meloni reaffirmed her intention to establish an EU in line with, and in defense of, Europe's Judeo-Christian roots.²⁷¹

Another buzzword in FdI's approach to the EU is sovereignty. Meloni has often envisioned the union as a confederation of peoples, based on the safeguarding of national sovereignty and opposed to a Europe of bureaucrats. FdI rejects any further strengthening of the EU's powers and any perspective of a federalized union. In its 2018 general election program, FdI highlighted the need to reform the EU's treaties to achieve a confederal Europe of "free and sovereign states that cooperate on some strategic issues, namely security, immigration, and foreign policy."²⁷²

In her first speech as prime minister, Meloni adopted a softer Euroskeptic stance by stating that FdI does not aim to halt or sabotage European integration. Instead, she maintained

that FdI's objective was to contribute to the European project by ensuring that the union becomes more prepared and efficient when responding to crises such as Russia's invasion of Ukraine and Europe's energy dependence. Nonetheless, FdI continues to criticize key EU priorities and what the party calls the EU's "globalist, ultra-environmentalist, and rainbow political agenda."²⁷³ FdI argues that the EU has attempted to meddle in issues that should remain the exclusive responsibility of member states, such as the family unit.

Foreign Policy Positions

FdI maintains a strong focus on domestic politics, with the aim of "defending and loving the homeland" by upholding Italy's national interests and preventing the "economic, social, cultural, and political decline of the nation."²⁷⁴ As evidence of this, twenty-three of the twenty-five priorities in the party's 2022 electoral program had a clear domestic focus.²⁷⁵ Yet, the program also outlined a vision for Italy's role at the international level: "After too many years of marginality under leftist governments, Italy must once again become a major player in Europe, in the Mediterranean, and on the international chessboard."²⁷⁶

Immigration and Asylum

Antimigration policies are a cornerstone of FdI's political agenda, as they enjoy widespread support among Italian voters, especially since Europe's 2015 migration crisis. Meloni has developed a dangerous rhetoric in which Italians, who have allegedly been neglected by the government and left to deal with the consequences of the economic crisis, are juxtaposed with illegal migrants, who supposedly receive benefits and are often prioritized by the state. This narrative resonated with more and more voters during the coronavirus pandemic, when illegal migrants were portrayed as spreading the virus by evading health controls.²⁷⁷

FdI has made several references to a so-called process of ethnic replacement, allegedly enacted by the EU, in which one national community replaces another as a result of massive immigration into a country with a low birth rate.²⁷⁸ This narrative contains strong Islamophobic elements, as FdI denounces what it calls a process of Islamification across Europe following an "invasion of Muslims" through mass illegal migration.²⁷⁹ FdI argues that such a process directly threatens the EU's Judeo-Christian roots and causes insecurity on the continent by promoting extremism and Islamist terrorism.

FdI affirms that immigration is not a right but a "concession of the state according to its necessity."²⁸⁰ It follows that every government has the right to curtail migration and defend the country's borders based on national interests and needs. In this light, FdI argues, the immigration system should be reformed and citizenship rights granted only to those who formally accept and respect Italian legislation, culture, traditions, and religion.

Against this backdrop, Meloni has often called for a European naval blockade in Libyan waters to prevent the arrival of migrants onto Italian shores. She was in favor of the original proposal for the EU's naval mission Operation Sophia, which foresaw the blocking of departures from North Africa by allowing naval forces to adopt "all necessary measures" against vessels suspected of human smuggling or trafficking, "including through disposing of them or rendering them inoperable."²⁸¹ This plan was eventually abandoned and the operation focused instead on "boarding, searching, seizing, and diverting vessels believed to be illegally transporting migrants."²⁸² Under FdI's plans, a full naval blockade would be implemented alongside agreements with North African states to screen asylum requests in migrants' countries of origin.²⁸³

In a strategic move to outsource the processing of migrants, Meloni negotiated and signed an agreement with Albania whose specific terms remain undisclosed, but the initiative appears to involve the establishment of two facilities in Albania to accommodate up to 3,000 migrants, subject to Italian jurisdiction.²⁸⁴ This agreement was widely criticized at both the national and the EU level as a "human rights disaster waiting to happen," as it involved the removal of asylum seekers to a non-EU country with no guarantee of the protection of their fundamental rights.²⁸⁵

Italy and the Mediterranean

Closely linked with its outlook on migration, FdI has pledged to strengthen Italy's role in the Mediterranean. In her first speech as prime minister, Meloni introduced the so-called Mattei Plan, in the name of Enrico Mattei, a former Italian public administrator under whose leadership the Italian energy company Eni negotiated important trade agreements with the Soviet Union and secured significant oil concessions in the Middle East. This plan would establish Italy's leadership in the Mediterranean by ensuring collaboration among the EU, its member states, and African countries with the objectives of countering Islamist extremism and halting illegal migration.²⁸⁶ In doing so, the plan would strengthen Italy's strategic role in its Southern neighborhood in defense of national interests.

FdI has followed up on this policy priority with practical steps. Meloni visited Tunis twice in July 2023 and, together with Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, engaged in talks with Tunisian President Kais Saied. These talks led to the signing of an EU-Tunisia memorandum of understanding (MoU) on several areas, including migration. Under the MoU, Tunisia will receive significant financial assistance from the EU at a time when Saied is curtailing fundamental freedoms and guiding the country in an authoritarian direction. Additionally, the MoU enables the return of Tunisians and third-country nationals from the EU to Tunisia, where they may be subjected to inhumane conditions and face human rights violations.²⁸⁷

It is worth noting that Tunisia returned the first €60 million (\$66 million) it received from the EU, accusing the commission of breaking its promises under the agreement. Nonetheless, this engagement by Meloni signals the importance of the Mediterranean in FdI's foreign policy—albeit with a focus on the fight against immigration and at the expense of support for democratic values and human rights.

Russia and Ukraine

Unlike its coalition partners, the League and Forza Italia, both of which have openly justified, if not supported, Russian President Vladimir Putin and his foreign policy, FdI has adopted a more anti-Russia stance. However, this stance is rather new and remains ambiguous. As recently as 2017, FdI affirmed that only the easing of relations between Europe and Russia, including the lifting of sanctions, could ensure long-term stability and peace on the continent.²⁸⁸ Meloni celebrated Putin's victory in the 2018 Russian presidential election by noting that the will of the Russian people was unequivocal, while other political figures in FdI have expressed their support for Putin.²⁸⁹ For example, in 2016, Maurizio Marrone, a pro-Putin local official, established an informal consulate in Turin for the Moscow-backed breakaway Donetsk People's Republic.

However, after Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Meloni expressed firm support for Kyiv and categorically condemned Putin's "neo-imperialist" campaign.²⁹⁰ In her first speech as prime minister, Meloni clearly rejected Russia's war of aggression and the violation of a sovereign nation's territorial integrity. During a visit to Kyiv in February 2023, Meloni reaffirmed her steadfast commitment to support Ukraine through all necessary means, including by backing Ukraine's European aspirations and bid for EU membership.

FdI is in favor of providing military aid to Ukraine. Even during its time in opposition, the party routinely voted to support sending weapons and other military assistance to the war-torn country.²⁹¹ Meloni opposes any compromise with Russia on energy, stating that "giving in to Putin's blackmail on energy would not solve the problem; it would exacerbate it by opening the door to further demands."²⁹² FdI also supports the use of sanctions against Russia, claiming that they are working and citing a considerable decline in Russia's gross domestic product (GDP) growth prospects.²⁹³

Despite Rome having supplied military aid to Ukraine, Crosetto, who is Italy's minister of defense, has argued that Italy's capacities are limited. Speaking in October 2023, he said that while resources were currently available, this might not be the case beyond the foreseeable future.²⁹⁴ He further stated that Italy, with other Western countries, was experiencing war fatigue as domestic public opinion was slowly losing interest in the war in Ukraine and worrying instead about rising prices.²⁹⁵ These sentiments may signal a gradual shift in mindset across the Italian leadership.

NATO

FdI is a steadfast supporter of the transatlantic alliance and aims to give Italy a stronger leadership role in this structure. At the 2023 North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) summit in Vilnius, Meloni said that “in this increasingly uncertain world, this summit managed to reaffirm one of the certainties, which is the unity of the Atlantic alliance,” placing Italy’s role in NATO at the core of the country’s foreign policy.²⁹⁶ Similarly, in response to a message of congratulation from NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg after her party’s 2022 election victory, Meloni confirmed FdI’s readiness to work with NATO, which she described as “more than a military alliance: a bulwark of common values we’ll never stop standing for.”²⁹⁷

FdI’s 2022 electoral program advocated an increase in Italy’s national spending on security and defense, in line with each NATO member’s commitment to spend the equivalent of 2 percent of its GDP on defense. Meloni further acknowledged Italy’s full contribution to NATO as one of the country’s key duties; this contribution would take a variety of forms, including not only increased defense spending but also the participation of more Italian troops in NATO missions.

Energy

Energy is a key priority for FdI and routinely figures in speeches and statements by Meloni and other party leaders. FdI unequivocally rejects any compromise with Putin to ensure cheap energy imports. Instead, in line with the previous government, Meloni has reduced Italy’s energy dependence on Russia and prioritized the diversification of energy sources by signing agreements with countries such as Algeria, Azerbaijan, and Libya. It is worth noting that these countries have poor human rights records and are ranked as authoritarian in several democracy indexes.²⁹⁸

Additionally, FdI aims to consolidate Italy’s leadership role in the energy field through the Mattei Plan. Meloni aims to leverage Italy’s location as a bridge between EU member states and energy-rich countries in the Southern Mediterranean, such as Algeria and Libya. However, these are not entirely new ideas, as pipelines have already been constructed to connect Italy with gas fields in Europe’s neighbors.²⁹⁹

The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

While Meloni affirmed her steadfast support for Israel after the October 7, 2023, Hamas terrorist attacks, this position represents a considerable change in outlook compared with FdI’s ideological roots. The Italian Social Movement was strongly pro-Palestine and advocated for the Palestinians’ right to a homeland.³⁰⁰ The National Alliance took some initial steps to support Israel and distance itself from accusations of anti-Semitism. Most notably,

Gianfranco Fini, the alliance's former leader, visited Yad Vashem, Israel's official memorial to the victims of the Holocaust, and defined fascism as "the ultimate evil."³⁰¹ Yet, it remains the case that the Italian radical right's stance on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has historically been ambiguous, with significant shifts in policies.

In pursuit of her goal to bolster Italy's geopolitical influence in the Mediterranean and serve as a bridge between Europe and the Middle East, Meloni has actively engaged in addressing the Israel-Hamas conflict. Notably, she was the only head of government in the Group of Seven (G7) to participate in the October 2023 peace summit in Cairo held to discuss the crisis in Israel and Gaza.³⁰²

Meloni's objectives in navigating this conflict are twofold: first, to prevent an escalation of hostilities; and second, to mitigate a potential surge in irregular migration into the EU. Emphasizing the latter goal, Meloni contends that an influx of irregular migrants onto Italy's shores could pose an elevated terrorist threat, as some of the migrants might be jihadists and promote radicalization across the EU member states.³⁰³ This stance aligns seamlessly with FdI's foreign policy priority of curtailing illegal immigration.

Beyond attending the Cairo peace summit, which did not yield a breakthrough in peace talks, Meloni held separate meetings with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. She strongly condemned the October 7 attacks, stating that they were aimed at driving a wedge between the West and the Muslim world, exacerbating the challenges of achieving peace in the region.³⁰⁴ Additionally, when speaking with Netanyahu, Meloni underlined that Hamas's attacks reflected the group's willingness to erase Jewish people from the region.³⁰⁵ She therefore emphasized Italy's support for Israel's right to defend itself—although she cautioned that this has to be done within the boundaries of international law and not driven by the pursuit of vengeance.³⁰⁶

CHAPTER 9

The Netherlands: An Outlook Grounded in Anti-Islam Alarmism

Koen Vossen

The Party for Freedom: Evolution and Profile

The Party for Freedom (PVV) was officially founded on February 22, 2006, but its history dates back to September 2, 2004. On that day, Geert Wilders left the group of the conservative-liberal People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD) in the Dutch parliament. Unlike the rest of the VVD, Wilders was strongly opposed to Turkey's possible accession to the European Union (EU). A Muslim-majority country like Turkey should never be allowed to become a member of the EU, Wilders asserted.³⁰⁷

Wilders remained in the parliament under the name Group Wilders and made plans to establish a U.S.-style neoconservative party. In the end, however, he and his new PVV adopted a program whose cornerstones were anti-Islam alarmism (or Islamophobia), nativism, populism, and authoritarianism. With this program, the PVV has achieved varying degrees of success in national, provincial, local, and European Parliament elections since 2006.

In the 2023 Dutch parliamentary election, the PVV unexpectedly became the largest party in the parliament, having won 23.5 percent of the vote.³⁰⁸ At the time of writing, the PVV is involved in negotiations for a new governing coalition. Should the party join such a coalition, it would be the first time that the PVV has been in government. So far, the party has had only limited influence as a supporting partner of a minority coalition between 2010 and 2012.

From 2012 to 2023, the party was isolated as the mainstream Dutch political parties ruled out a possible coalition with the PVV. In a desperate attempt to attract right-wing voters, the new leader of the VVD, Dilan Yeşilgöz, publicly made clear that for her, the PVV was an acceptable coalition partner, thus lifting the informal cordon sanitaire that had existed around the party. Many Dutch voters interpreted this message as a sign that voting for the PVV had become socially acceptable.³⁰⁹

Relationship With the EU

At the European level, the PVV in 2015 formed the Europe of Nations and Freedom group in the European Parliament with France's National Front and Italy's Northern League. In 2019, the group was succeeded by the Identity and Democracy group, but the PVV is no longer represented in it as its only member defected to another group.

Splits and defections are common in the PVV as a result of weak and amateurish party organization. After its inception, Wilders closed the party's doors to new members as he feared the infiltration of extreme right-wing activists and troublemakers. This means that the dozens of members of the Dutch parliament elected on behalf of the PVV are not formally members of the party. In fact, its only member is Wilders himself, who can set the PVV's course and strategy almost single-handedly.³¹⁰

Unlike almost all other Dutch political parties, the PVV does not consider the Netherlands' EU membership to be in the nation's best interest and even advocates a withdrawal from both the EU and the eurozone. According to the PVV, the EU is a tightening snare, into which the "proud people of the Netherlands" have been "lured by the progressive elite." Brussels technocrats are supposedly bent on "forcing the country into line within a great European superstate," in which the Dutch would be "tied to countries with completely different cultures by a rope around [their] necks."³¹¹

Like Norway and Switzerland, the PVV argues, the Netherlands should limit its involvement in the EU to an arrangement based mainly on trade. In its latest election manifesto, the party changed its plea for a Dutch exit from the EU to a proposal for a referendum on the issue.³¹² Until that happens, the PVV wants the Netherlands to oppose further EU enlargement and opt out of EU policies on immigration and asylum. In doing so, the party wants the country to regain more control of its borders—a key campaign promise of the PVV in all elections.

Foreign Policy Positions

The PVV's view that Islam constitutes a global danger largely determines the party's foreign policy positions. On the one hand, this means that the party more or less ignores some international themes, such as the need to combat climate change—the PVV wants the Netherlands to withdraw from the 2015 Paris Agreement—or risks related to artificial intelligence or cybersecurity.³¹³ Countries such as Brazil, China, India, and North Korea fall out of the scope of the party's attention completely.

On the other hand, the PVV monitors Muslim-majority countries very carefully as potential threats. The party wants to put diplomatic relations with these countries on hold, ban arms sales to them, and stop immigration from them into the Netherlands altogether. If it were up to the PVV, Turkey would be expelled from the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), which, according to Wilders, is above all the protector of Western Judeo-Christian civilization.

In its party programs, parliamentary contributions, and election campaigns, the PVV always emphasizes that the Netherlands and the Dutch people should come first. Hence, the party believes that Dutch foreign policy should put Dutch national interests first. This means rejecting more idealistic foreign and trade policies: the PVV promotes development aid, human rights, and international rule of law only if they benefit the Netherlands.³¹⁴

Anti-Islam Views

Despite its “Netherlands first” approach, the PVV has been a very internationally oriented party since the outset. This orientation is linked to Wilders’s views on what he sees as the malicious and dangerous nature of Islam. “My focus has always been on Islam,” he stated in a 2015 interview. “In the Netherlands and abroad, it’s an existential problem. That’s what I wake up to in the morning and what I take to bed at night, it’s what I think about every second.”³¹⁵

In his view, Islam is not a religion with different currents and subcurrents but a totalitarian ideology bent on world domination. “That is the crux of Islam: it is an ideology of global war,” he wrote in his 2012 book *Marked for Death*. “Since Islam has global ambitions, we are all in danger, and we should stand with every nation and every people that is threatened by jihad.”³¹⁶ This alarmist analysis of Islam as a totalitarian ideology of conquest can be considered a radical interpretation of the theory of American political scientist Samuel Huntington, who predicted in 1996 that the world would become the scene of a clash of different cultures.³¹⁷

Wilders refuses to see any contradiction between the isolationist implications of his “Netherlands first” position and the internationalist implications of his radical version of a clash of civilizations. In *Marked for Death*, Wilders considered national pride the best means

of protecting Western liberties against Islam. “The people of the free world can defend their liberties only if they can rally around a flag with which they identify,” he wrote.³¹⁸

In short, Wilders argues, being proud of one’s nation and community is a necessity of life. In the battle against Islam, Wilders puts his faith not so much in international organizations but in strong nationalist leaders who stand up for their own people and against multicultural cosmopolitan elites.

In Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, Wilders sees the most outspoken example of such a leader. Despite criticism from the EU, Orbán refused to admit Syrian refugees in 2015–2016 on the ground that their Muslim background would endanger Hungary’s Christian character. In addition, Orbán has shown how within the margins of a democracy, the cosmopolitan domestic elites of courts, the media, and universities can be silenced. More than once, Wilders has visited his “great hero” in Budapest, a city he knows well through his marriage to a Hungarian.³¹⁹

Immigration and Asylum

To counter immigration, Wilders argues that the United Nations Refugee Convention should be scrapped, border controls restored, and countries allowed to push back migrants.³²⁰ In addition, the PVV is in favor of limiting the influx into the Netherlands of those who migrate for work or study by introducing work permits for EU migrants and capping the number of foreign students.

In its 2023 party manifesto, the PVV made clear: “We must also take back our national sovereignty. Be in charge again of our own borders, money, and laws. We don’t want any more diktats from unelected European commissioners about climate or nitrogen, about hatred of farmers, or admitting asylum seekers. We choose Dutch interests. And no more Dutch euros [should] go to Brussels, Italy, Africa, or any other redistribution fund.”³²¹

Relations With the United States

Former U.S. president Donald Trump is another example of the type of powerful, realistic leader Wilders feels is needed. Wilders supported Trump’s presidential candidacy from the moment he started advocating a stop to immigration from Muslim-majority countries. For Wilders, then, Trump’s 2016 presidential election victory was a glorious moment that offered entirely new prospects for a different world order. Wilders even attended the 2016 Republican National Convention, at which Trump was officially nominated as a presidential candidate.

Although Wilders has never met Trump in person, there were many people in Trump’s circle who do know Wilders personally, such as former U.S. national security advisers John

Bolton and Michael Flynn, former White House chief strategist Steve Bannon, and former U.S. attorney general Jeff Sessions. However, Trump's chaotic presidency and the January 6, 2021, storming of the U.S. Capitol seem to have dampened Wilders's enthusiasm somewhat.³²²

Russia and Ukraine

Wilders's belief in the need for strong leaders is even truer in his appreciation of Russian President Vladimir Putin. In early 2018, Wilders traveled to Russia to meet several parliamentarians from Putin's party, such as Leonid Slutsky and former chess grandmaster Anatoly Karpov. On that occasion, Wilders hailed the Russian president as the type of powerful, patriotic leader who is lacking in so many countries.

The rapprochement with Russia was striking, as in previous years the PVV—unlike the National Front and the Northern League—had always been critical of Putin. Especially after pro-Russia Ukrainian rebels shot down Malaysian Airlines flight MH17 in July 2014, killing almost 200 Dutch passengers, a pro-Putin stance was unwise in the Netherlands for electoral reasons alone. But in 2018, Wilders called Russia an important ally in the fight against mass immigration from Muslim-majority countries and Islamist terrorism, and he criticized the “hysterical Russophobia” among established parties in the Netherlands.³²³

More recently, however, although the PVV has opposed sanctions on Russia, the party has taken a more distant stance toward Putin than have like-minded parties; these include France's National Rally, the Freedom Party of Austria, Italy's League, and the PVV's competitor national-populist party, Forum for Democracy, which is led by Putin fan Thierry Baudet.

This shift made it easier for Wilders to distance himself from Putin after Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Without much hesitation, Wilders condemned the invasion while at the same time lambasting the expansion plans of NATO and the EU as irresponsible provocations toward Russia. After the invasion, the PVV was still against Ukraine's possible NATO membership and opposed large-scale arms deliveries to the country. “Our national security is seriously weakened because the government considers foreign countries more important than our own country,” the PVV stated. In the party's vision, the Netherlands should remain aloof from the war in Ukraine as much as possible.³²⁴

This attitude seems to have changed since the PVV entered coalition negotiations in December 2023. In January 2024, Wilders visited the Ukrainian embassy in the Netherlands and, writing on X (formerly Twitter), expressed his “respect for the brave Ukrainian people in their fight for freedom and the regaining of total national sovereignty.”³²⁵ On February 24, 2024, Wilders even stated that the PVV was willing to talk about any support for Ukraine. However, the party opposes the ten-year security agreement that the Dutch cabinet wants to conclude with the country.³²⁶

This remarkable change of direction with regard to Ukraine shows that Wilders is willing to soften or even alter some of his foreign policy positions in the coalition negotiations. Even before the 2023 election, he announced that he was prepared to put some of his strident views on Islam in the freezer to govern. The same seems to apply to his plea for a Dutch exit from the EU, which appears to be a step too far even for his own constituents. In the ongoing negotiations, Wilders's focus is on stricter regulations to reduce the number of immigrants, whether or not this involves opting out of EU rules.

The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

To warn of the West's impending demise, Wilders released an English-language film and book, sought cooperation with similar parties elsewhere in the West, and traveled around the world giving lectures. In the United States in particular, the anti-Islam alarmism espoused by Wilders corresponded strongly with a fear for the future of the state of Israel. This alarmist messaging was attractive to some audiences because it gave the Israeli-Palestinian conflict a new significance and made support for Israel seem more urgent. According to Wilders's narrative, after all, this was not a battle between Israel and the Palestinians striving for their own state, but a clash between Western Judeo-Christian and Islamic civilizations.

Wilders strongly identifies with Israel as he worked in a kibbutz as a young man.³²⁷ He has often visited the country, has an extensive network there, and has ended up in ever more radical circles. He has maintained close contacts with the former ultranationalist Hatikva party, the nationalist Yisrael Beiteinu party, and the Ariel Center for Policy Research, a think tank set up by colonists in the West Bank.

For this reason, PVV manifestos include pledges such as supporting the construction of Jewish villages in the West Bank, moving the Dutch embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, closing the Dutch representative office in Ramallah, and recognizing Jordan as the only Palestinian state.³²⁸ Needless to say, in the current war in Gaza, the PVV stands squarely behind Israel and fiercely opposes those who criticize the Israeli military response to the October 7, 2023, Hamas attacks.³²⁹

CHAPTER 10

Poland: A Foreign Policy of Chaotic Hypocrisy in 2015–2023

Wojciech Przybylski

Law and Justice: Evolution and Profile

Established in 2001, Poland's right-wing Law and Justice (PiS) party emerged from the Center Agreement, a Christian-democratic party founded in 1990. PiS is a member of the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) group in the European Parliament, where it has the highest number of seats in the group. Jarosław Kaczyński, the party's founding leader, launched PiS with his late twin brother, Lech Kaczyński, who acted as the party's official front man and served as Polish president until his death in a 2010 plane crash in Smolensk, Russia.

From 2005 to 2007, PiS formed a coalition government, initially with Kazimierz Marcinkiewicz as prime minister, followed by Jarosław Kaczyński. The coalition also included the populist-left Self-Defense of the Republic of Poland party and the nationalist League of Polish Families. For most of 2007, PiS ruled as a minority government in anticipation of that October's snap election. The government's main priorities were foreign and domestic security as well as energy security to counter Poland's dependence on Russia. Other issues that the PiS emphasized were reducing perceptions of corruption and addressing the country's communist legacy in the public sphere.

From 2015 to 2019, PiS had the largest parliamentary faction of any Polish political party since 1989, with 239 out of 460 members of parliament (MPs) by the end of the parliamentary term.³³⁰ The party led the governments of prime ministers Beata Szydło (2015–2017) and Mateusz Morawiecki (2017–2023), which included coalition partners such as Sovereign Poland and the Republican Party. During the 2015–2019 term, PiS did not preside over the

parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee: this role was held by Grzegorz Schetyna, the then opposition leader.

In the 2019 election, PiS won an overall majority of seats in the parliament. Although the party contested the election in a coalition with two junior partners, all candidates were registered on behalf of PiS and joined the PiS parliamentary caucus. By the end of the term, because of internal divisions, the party officially controlled only 227 seats and technically no longer held a majority.³³¹

In the 2023 election, PiS was unable to win back its majority and had to step down because no other parties were willing to enter a governing coalition with it. The extreme right-wing Confederation party also distanced itself from PiS on grounds of nationalist ideology. Confederation accused the outgoing government of having betrayed Poland's right-wing electorate by admitting migrants from Africa and accepting the European Union's (EU's) Recovery and Resilience Facility, its rule-of-law conditionality mechanism, and a new system of EU financial resources.³³²

PiS's ideology combines a strong Atlanticist outlook with a Euroskeptic stance. Szydło stated in 2015 that on matters of security and foreign policy, the party "attaches particular importance . . . to relations with the United States."³³³ PiS takes a firm sovereigntist stance against further European integration and cooperation with Poland's neighbors, particularly Germany and Russia. The party emphasizes hard security, energy independence, and the primacy of national law over the EU's regulatory framework.

PiS's foreign policy is characterized by the cherry-picking of issues that are important domestically and lacks any ambitions to expand Poland's international position. PiS's primary concern has always been to maintain power over the country, and the party considers the EU integration process a notable handicap to this goal. While PiS does not oppose the EU outright, it has expressed concerns about a possible conspiracy by Europe's early-twentieth-century aggressors, namely Russia and Germany, to covertly control Poland's agenda and, hence, undermine the country's national interests.³³⁴

The primary factor that determines PiS's foreign policy is the party's vague language of sovereignty, which is dictated by the party leader and results in what this author has called "chaotic hypocrisy."³³⁵ Such hypocrisy allows for fluid political positions. For example, PiS once supported women's right to choose whether to have an abortion. Yet, in 2020, the party succumbed to internal pressure from its radical faction and restricted abortion. Against a public outcry, Kaczyński said that abortion was still legal and that "women are free to travel abroad [in the EU] to have it"—undermining the moral integrity of PiS's position on the question while accepting the role of EU integration in providing individual freedoms.³³⁶

PiS also demonstrated its chaotic hypocrisy through the party leader's positions on Russia and Ukraine. After allowing an increase in Poland's coal imports from Russia against Warsaw's declared energy security interests, the PiS government pursued better relations

with Ukraine after Russia's 2022 invasion. In December 2021, Warsaw hosted pro-Russia politicians from across the EU to help them increase their influence in the EU Council and the European Parliament. The summit brought together actors like Hungary's Viktor Orbán and France's Marine Le Pen, among others.³³⁷ Yet, only a few months later, Kaczyński and Morawiecki traveled to Kyiv and distanced themselves from Orbán's pro-Russia electoral campaign, showing that Polish voters' demand for security against Russia had prevailed over PiS's cherry-picking. Building on this approach, PiS tried to frame Poland's opposition parties as a pro-Russia, pro-Germany, and, hence, anti-Poland political force.³³⁸

Relationship With the EU

In the run-up to Poland's 2003 referendum on EU accession, PiS focused its campaign on the concept of "A Strong Poland in Europe."³³⁹ The party embraced the idea of EU integration, highlighting its potential to give Poland a voice in matters that directly affected the nation. PiS argued that rejecting EU membership would mean giving up control over national affairs, which, the party believed, would be a mistake. However, although PiS supported EU integration, the party opposed the 2007 Lisbon Treaty, preferring the provisions of the 2001 Nice Treaty, which promised a more favorable position for Poland in the EU.

PiS emphasizes the importance of preserving Poland's sovereignty—which the party sees as rooted in the country's deep Christian culture and traditions—as the most effective means of achieving Poland's political, economic, social, and cultural aspirations. PiS believes that a sovereign Polish state would ensure Poles' full enjoyment of civil rights, freedoms, and the benefits of democracy. As a result, PiS is against any transformation of the EU into a federation that would diminish the role of the member states.³⁴⁰ The party unequivocally supports Poland's continued participation in the EU but points out that the bloc's treaties allow the country to leave the EU if necessary.³⁴¹

On foreign policy, Lech Kaczyński sought to engage the EU on matters concerning the bloc's Eastern flank, especially during the 2008 Russia-Georgia War. The former president led the formation of a coalition of Central European countries that supported Georgia and other states in their approach to Russia. PiS's policy aimed to strengthen Poland's ties with historically significant countries, driven by shared concerns of protecting energy security, preventing the expansion of the EU and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and countering neighboring countries' imperial aspirations.

By 2022, the PiS leadership had hardened its narrative again in an effort to boost its support ahead of the following year's election. In the words of Jarosław Kaczyński, "If we win, we will have to rework relations with the European Union. It cannot—and will not—be the case that the union does not recognize treaties, agreements, or contracts toward us."³⁴² Krzysztof Sobolewski, the PiS secretary general, added, "All possibilities also include [each

EU member state's] right of veto, which can be used broadly [or] narrowly, and this applies to important issues as well. . . . The European Commission is going beyond the [EU] treaties anyway.”³⁴³

It is also worth noting that under the last PiS government, Poland became the subject of an infringement procedure launched by the commission that resulted in fines worth €557 million (\$604 million).³⁴⁴ The party had undermined Poland’s judicial independence through changes to the Constitutional Tribunal, the National Council of the Judiciary, and the Supreme Court and assaulted the country’s media freedom, including by using Poland’s public broadcaster for partisan objectives.

Foreign Policy Positions

Poland’s constitution officially declares the country to have a parliamentary system, but most political analyses recognize it as a de facto semipresidential system.³⁴⁵ Article 133 of the constitution authorizes the president to ratify and sever international agreements. Yet, this article is not very specific, leading to conflicts over competencies. One such instance occurred in 2008 during a dispute between Prime Minister Donald Tusk and then president Kaczyński over the latter’s role at an EU summit. The president wanted to use his constitutional prerogative to represent the country’s foreign policy, while the prime minister opposed the idea.

In preparation for the 2023 election, PiS introduced a law that requires the president’s formal approval for governmental positions toward the EU. This move indicates the significance of foreign policy and the president’s role in shaping it.

PiS’s foreign policy is similar to that of Hungary’s right-wing Fidesz party: a projection of the party leader’s political will, rather than a coherent strategy. This approach often refers to sound moral arguments but is contradicted by the actions of the leader, who seems more inclined to gamble rather than strategize for success.³⁴⁶

Immigration and Asylum

PiS has proved unable to produce a coherent immigration policy. Despite Poland recording the EU’s highest number of third-country entrants for the past six years, including refugees from Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, PiS has not developed a clear position on immigration.³⁴⁷ Since 2021, the party has been pushing back against asylum seekers who attempt to cross the border from Belarus into Poland outside legal border crossings. Notably, PiS aimed to restrict access to asylum for those already on Polish territory, even though a Polish court deemed this policy to be unlawful.³⁴⁸

PiS has routinely rejected any solidarity mechanism that would envision a redistribution of migrants among EU member states and require Poland to share the responsibility for dealing with them. PiS representatives have been vocal about their opposition to EU asylum mechanisms, arguing that “forced relocation” would violate the sovereignty of the member states.³⁴⁹ This position led to several legal actions, including a 2020 ruling by the European Court of Justice that Poland had not fulfilled its obligations under EU law.

To further strengthen its antimigration narrative, PiS organized a referendum, held alongside the 2023 election, to ask citizens whether they were in favor admitting “thousands of illegal immigrants from the Middle East and Africa.”³⁵⁰ Most political parties boycotted the referendum, and the turnout did not meet the necessary threshold for the vote to be binding.

More broadly, PiS does not promote the integration of immigrants and refugees, except those it considers culturally similar in terms of their national—and, in effect, racial—profile. Therefore, when in government, PiS granted Ukrainian refugees access to public services, such as education and healthcare.

Russia and Ukraine

PiS supports Kyiv in the Russia-Ukraine war, despite a strong internal drive in the party before the 2022 invasion to ally with pro-Russia parties in other EU member states. This support for Kyiv aligns with the backing of the overwhelming majority of Polish society for Ukraine’s fight for freedom.³⁵¹ Poland has welcomed Ukrainian refugees, provided military supplies to Kyiv, and granted access to Poland’s logistics for all NATO and EU allies that have requested it.

For logistical reasons to do with transportation connections between Poland and Ukraine, the European Commission coordinated its response to the invasion with the former PiS government, despite an ongoing conflict with Poland over the rule of law. In mid-March 2022, Morawiecki and Kaczyński joined Czech Prime Minister Petr Fiala and former Slovenian prime minister Janez Janša on the first foreign leaders’ trip to Kyiv after the invasion. At the same time, Orbán was campaigning for unilateral peace—widely understood to mean that Ukraine needed to succumb to Russian pressure.

PiS has criticized not only Russia but also Poland’s Western partners, especially Germany, for actions or inactions that, in the party’s view, allowed Russia to invade Ukraine. In 2022, Morawiecki addressed France’s President Emmanuel Macron and past and present German governments by saying, “You have debated so much with [Russian President Vladimir] Putin. What did you achieve? You don’t negotiate with criminals. Would you have negotiated with Hitler? . . . Germany’s policy over the previous dozen years has led to the fact that Russia today has the power, resulting from its monopoly on the sale of raw materials.”³⁵²

PiS advocated sanctions against Russia but was slow to implement its own sanctions policy, especially in the energy sector, where Poland continued to import Russian fossil fuels.³⁵³ The party also adopted a strong protectionist policy by introducing an import ban on Ukrainian grain to protect Polish farmers. Morawiecki stated that “Poland will not allow itself to be flooded by Ukrainian grain. . . . No matter what the Brussels bureaucrats decide, we will not be opening our borders.”³⁵⁴ Similarly, truckers from Poland and other Central and Eastern European countries, such as the Czech Republic, blocked border crossings with Ukraine to protest against cheap competition from their Ukrainian counterparts.

NATO

PiS has a firmly Atlanticist approach to foreign and security policy. The party emphasizes the importance of NATO for the European security system and the role of the United States in delivering credibility for the alliance. The party has advocated closer cooperation between the EU and NATO, considering them essential pillars of Poland’s national security. PiS has supported and engaged in all NATO operations since the party’s founding.

Along with other Polish parties, PiS approved of NATO’s strategy to reinforce its Eastern flank and has often endorsed the Bucharest Nine format, which brings together nine allies in Eastern Europe. The PiS government also committed to NATO’s target for each ally to spend the equivalent of 2 percent of its gross domestic product on defense and nearly doubled Poland’s defense expenditure after Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022.

EU Enlargement

PiS advocates EU enlargement and endorses EU assistance for the democratic transformations of the countries closest to accession. Speaking in 2023, Poland’s then minister of foreign affairs Zbigniew Rau affirmed that “Poland’s tradition of resisting the dictatorship of political powers and our attachment to the principle of sovereign freedom and equality of states . . . requires that we oppose determining [the] final borders of the European Union and NATO by consistently promoting the open door policy and supporting the membership aspirations of both the Eastern European countries and [those in] the Western Balkans.”³⁵⁵ PiS considers future EU enlargement to be an element of Poland’s national security strategy to counter Russia and increase regional stability.

Energy and Climate Change

PiS has been a strong proponent of energy diversification and of a gradual transition from coal and lignite to natural gas, renewable energy, and nuclear power. The party has aligned with other Central and Eastern European countries in favor of including nuclear power in the EU’s green energy policy. However, as Poland is heavily dependent on coal, the party

was initially reluctant, and sometimes even hostile, toward the EU's European Green Deal, a series of initiatives that aims to set the union on the path to a green transition. PiS was especially critical of the Fit for 55 package, which seeks to reduce net greenhouse gas emissions in the EU by at least 55 percent by 2030, because of concerns about the economic costs of an urgent transition.³⁵⁶

At the same time, PiS tried to communicate the EU's green policy goals to key interest groups, including coal miners, by informing them about upcoming shutdowns of coal mines. The party went back and forth on this issue but was unable to communicate the new objectives without facing a severe social backlash.

Democracy and Minority Rights

PiS endorses democracy as an expression of the majority in a given nation-state. Therefore, the party's narrative has suppressed, or even been hostile toward, rule-of-law checks by supranational authorities like the EU as well as minority rights. While in government, the party claimed to have a democratic mandate to replace Poland's post-1990 elite, reestablish the rule of law, and protect selected minorities.

At the same time, PiS supported the police's repression of civil society through the targeting of protests by women, LGBTQ individuals, and small and medium-sized enterprises. PiS-sponsored political action limited citizens' access to public institutions, including entry into the Polish parliament, and the ability of independent nongovernmental organizations and the press to operate freely. PiS undermined access to fair trials by systematically derailing the judicial system and gradually taking control of the media.

Ministers appointed by PiS's former coalition partner, Sovereign Poland, also initiated several policies that put Poland at odds with the EU, including the promotion of so-called LGBTQ-free zones. Other senior party officials have often claimed that the EU's values have been hijacked by oppressive and nondemocratic forces that are hostile to Poland's sovereignty and cultural identity.

CHAPTER 11

Romania: The Radical Right Punching Above Its Weight

Rufin Zamfir and Oana Popescu-Zamfir

The Alliance for the Unity of Romanians: Evolution and Profile

Romania's radical populist and radical-right political scene is dominated by the Alliance for the Unity of Romanians (AUR).³⁵⁷ The party was founded in 2019 out of Unionist Platform Action 2012, a coalition of nongovernmental organizations and civic associations that militantly advocated Romania's unification with neighboring Moldova.

Just a year after its founding, AUR entered the parliament with a result well above the expectations of most political analysts and the Romanian media: 9.1 percent of the vote in Romania's December 2020 parliamentary election, giving the party forty-seven out of 330 members of parliament (MPs).³⁵⁸ As of this writing, AUR has thirty-two MPs after a series of dismissals and exclusions, most of them because parliamentarians diverged from the party line.³⁵⁹ The party's unexpectedly strong performance in the 2020 election also came as a surprise to AUR leaders themselves, who had had trouble recruiting members eligible for parliamentary office. Indeed, many of those later expelled from the party had joined it shortly before the election without going through any real vetting or due diligence.

The political performance of AUR's main leaders since the party entered the parliament is a classic example of punching above one's weight. AUR has not made any meaningful contribution to political debates; this may be due to the lack of political experience of the party's members or because AUR is in opposition to a government that brings together Romania's two major parties. Yet, AUR's populist speeches and actions have given a significant part of the electorate an impression of efficiency in what the party sees as the fight against domestic and international elites.

According to opinion polls conducted in November 2023, AUR has become the second most popular party in Romania, polling at 20.2 percent, surpassing the ruling center-right National Liberal Party (PNL).³⁶⁰

AUR's official website summarizes its political credo in four essential values: Christian faith, liberty, family, and the nation. Nevertheless, cognitive dissonance permeates the party's manifesto, for example in the inherent contradiction between Christianity as the only faith accepted and promoted by the party and the "liberty to choose one's faith."³⁶¹

AUR is an eclectic conglomerate of smaller political groupings that range from radical populist to unequivocally radical right. The ideas and doctrine of the latter are closely aligned with fascist views and are often explicitly affirmed as such. Some of the party's senior leaders have a background directly linked to Romania's neofascist movement and to the glorification of leaders of the Iron Guard, the fascist political movement active in the country in the 1930s and early 1940s.³⁶² From 2013 to 2020, Claudiu Tărziu, a former AUR co-president and a current senator, led the ultraconservative and ultranationalist online publication *Rost*, which often features articles praising Romanian fascists. Sorin Lavric, an AUR senator known as the party's ideologue, has undisguised admiration for the Iron Guard fascists and has repeatedly expressed racial hatred.³⁶³

Dan Tanasă, an AUR MP, is one of the most virulent purveyors of the party's radical-right messaging. His Facebook page abounds not only in anti-European Union (EU) posts but also in extreme right-wing messages, and the MP does not shy away from using the vocabulary of Romanian fascists, for example through frequent use of the fascist greeting "Present!"

Most AUR leaders and prominent members have made racist, chauvinist, and xenophobic statements over time, including denying the Holocaust.³⁶⁴ As a result of the extreme right bringing its favorite topics to the forefront of political debates, the mainstream political discourse in Romania has openly challenged minority rights and called into question decisions made in Brussels on protecting these rights. An unintended but immediate consequence of this shift has been the generation of a wave of political sympathy among the Romanian population for radical-right politicians and parties. Unlike mainstream populists, who are rather agnostic about these issues and simply seek to capitalize on them for votes, radical-right politicians are ideological and offer a full package of solutions and their own vision of a white, Christian, heterosexual world.

AUR is affiliated to the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) group in the European Parliament and cultivates close relations with Poland's Law and Justice (PiS) party and the Brothers of Italy. Over the years, AUR has sought to forge links with Vox in Spain, with which it intends to launch a "European Conservative Reconquista" to "reclaim Europe from the Moors and Muslims."³⁶⁵

Relationship With the EU

Romanian populists have transformed the EU into public enemy number one by drawing on significant popular resentment of elite-driven processes, including Romania's accession to and integration into the union. The EU's anticorruption drive, which led to prominent figures in the center-left Social Democratic Party (PSD) being investigated and convicted, was met with furious anti-EU rhetoric by former PSD president Liviu Dragnea.³⁶⁶ This set the tone in the party and legitimized the anti-European rants of second-order political leaders and growing nationalism in the PNL.

The radical populist discourse in Romania accuses the EU of dictatorial conduct, challenges the union's protection of individual freedoms, objects to the EU's migration policy and European Green Deal, and expresses skepticism toward the EU's response to Russia's aggression against Ukraine. Beyond rhetoric, however, Romanian government policy has remained in line with the consensus achieved in Brussels, and no party would define its position as Euroskeptic.

Nevertheless, 2024 is likely to offer multiple opportunities for the radical right and radical populists in Romania to promote their agendas. That will happen first and foremost in June's European Parliament elections, for which AUR presented its lineup of candidates in July 2023. Some of these figures are well known for their anti-EU positions, such as regaining sovereignty for the member states and creating a Europe of nations. These positions have been expressed, for instance, by Cristian Terhes, an ultraconservative member of the European Parliament (MEP), and Gheorghe Piperea, a radical populist attorney.³⁶⁷ Other candidates include charismatic figures with significant traction, especially in rural areas, such as the comedian Mugur Mihaescu, whose raw humor has made him very popular.

The 2024 European Parliament elections offer the first EU-level electoral test for AUR. The statements made by the party's politicians at the launch of their candidate list indicate the main lines of the party's election strategy and the positions of its future MEPs.³⁶⁸ The structure of AUR's political messages also indicates the synchronization that has taken place between the party and other European protest parties, especially PiS, for which AUR Leader George Simion has undisguised admiration. AUR has positioned itself firmly against the EU's green deal, which it says "will make the national energy system vulnerable, including through the closure of thermal power plants," and against ethnic and religious diversity and sexual freedoms.³⁶⁹ The statements of AUR candidates for the European Parliament also reveal their antiabortion, antirefugee, and antimigration stances.³⁷⁰

Foreign Policy Positions

AUR articulated its foreign and European policy manifesto in November 2021 at an international conference in Bucharest, which featured the participation of several conservative and radical-right political forces and personalities from across Europe and beyond. The central manifesto positions were support for a Europe of sovereign states and opposition to Brussels-based globalism and centralization.

Although according to its official political program, AUR does not promote an anti-European agenda, the party frequently challenges decisions made in Brussels and the EU institutions. It accuses the latter of forcibly imposing a “neo-Marxist and secularist” ideology, which, the party alleges, is aimed at banning the traditions and conservatism that characterize especially Eastern European societies.³⁷¹ This position puts AUR firmly in the same camp as the other European political forces that have coalesced in the European Parliament into the ECR as a disruptive and challenging bloc.

AUR also promotes the development of bilateral relations with countries that are home to ethnic Romanians and supports the unification of Romania with Moldova, which it considers part of Romanian territory.

Russia and Ukraine

Officially and repeatedly, AUR has declared itself to be against the regime of Russian President Vladimir Putin while steering clear of extending that criticism to anyone else in Russia. The party considers Putin’s regime guilty of launching the war in Ukraine and has expressed support for sanctions on Russia. At the same time, AUR believes that Romanian aid to Ukraine should be strictly conditional on two elements: first, Kyiv’s prompt compliance with Bucharest’s requests regarding the rights of the Romanian minority in Ukraine; and, second, Kyiv’s commitments to respect mutual agreements on managing the Romania-Ukraine border on the Danube river and in the Danube Delta.³⁷² AUR also alleges that support for Ukrainian refugees exceeds the normal provisions of Romanian law.

AUR is critical of what it sees as the EU imposing the burden of the consequences of support for Ukraine on the population of Romania—and of Eastern Europe more widely. The party believes that EU member states should have more freedom in deciding on their levels of alignment with the union’s approach to Ukraine.

Trade

AUR’s guidelines on economic policies are quite simple and center on protectionism and economic nationalism.³⁷³ In its program and public statements, the party has expressed a belief that Romania should conserve its economic reserves and exploit its natural wealth

for the exclusive benefit of Romanians. AUR also believes that Romania is disadvantaged in international trade by what it sees as the dictatorial attitude of the major international economic powers.

This rhetoric exploits communist nostalgia, which plays into Cold War-era narratives of industrial development. According to those who embrace this nostalgia, former Romanian leader Nicolae Ceaușescu's policy of nonalignment and economic self-sufficiency, which defied Moscow's influence and opened avenues for Bucharest's engagement with Washington and London, was an extraordinarily successful balancing act. Today, this position stands at the core of AUR's anti-Western narrative.

Energy

AUR argues that Romania can and should become energy independent immediately by restoring all fossil-fuel production capacities and nationalizing the natural gas reserves that have been discovered under the Black Sea.³⁷⁴ In fact, as the party's constant preoccupation with this subject shows, energy independence is the second most important item on AUR's agenda, after unification with Moldova, which was the party's founding credo.³⁷⁵

Natural resources were at the core of communist-era nationalism, which has shaped the beliefs of many Romanians today as well as AUR's sovereigntist messaging. The party presents natural resources as God's gift to Romania; as a result, the country is said to be a great nation that has attracted the envy of many other states and the EU. According to AUR, the union now seeks to deny Romanians ownership of these resources and the prosperity that would come with them were it not for predatory foreign capital.³⁷⁶

The party argues that the EU should not play a role in member states' decisions on their energy sources and that states with fossil-fuel reserves, such as Romania, should use these supplies for energy production. AUR considers the EU's green deal a dictatorial measure directed in particular against Central and Eastern European states, whose fossil fuel-reliant industrial bases make them the main losers of the green transition. As such, these countries see the green deal as a threat to their coal-based energy independence.³⁷⁷

Democracy and Minority Rights

In its programmatic documents, AUR subordinates democratic rights and freedoms to the sole discretion of the Christian, white, native majority.³⁷⁸ The only occasion when the party refers to the need to protect and respect minority rights is in the case of Romanian minorities living outside Romania. The party firmly rejects EU initiatives on respect for the rights of sexual minorities or the freedom of religion.

Immigration and Asylum

AUR positions itself vehemently against the 2018 United Nations (UN) Global Compact for Migration, arguing that ethical and religious grounds—the party claims that Europe is white, Christian, and heterosexual—warrant the renationalization of decisionmaking on this issue.³⁷⁹ Based on its protectionist stance when it comes to trade, investment, and the economy in general, the party rejects the idea of attracting foreign labor. The party opposes the integration of Ukrainian refugees, except those who belong to the Romanian minority in Ukraine.

That said, immigration is less of a contentious issue in Romania than in other European countries, and radical political positions tend to be reactive, taking center stage only occasionally. The reason is that Romania has not yet been a transit route or a recipient state for large numbers of migrants. Migrant workers and Ukrainian refugees in Romania are largely invisible to the indigenous population, as language differences limit communication and interaction. It is easy for populist parties to politicize migration, though, in the absence of public awareness or debate on the issue.

NATO

AUR openly supports Romania's membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and believes that the Romanian military must continue to maintain a high level of readiness. The party considers NATO the only international guarantor of Romania's—and Europe's—security, in contrast to the EU, which is seen as weak and in need of reform. At the same time, AUR argues that Romania should renegotiate its role and position in the alliance to extract more benefits.³⁸⁰ This call typically reflects the populist idea that Romania is never assertive enough and never gets its fair share from its memberships in Euro-Atlantic structures and alliances.

EU Enlargement

AUR supports the integration of Moldova into a reformed EU in which member states regain their sovereignty. As with other foreign policy issues, however, the party's ideas are rather vague and it is not clear whether AUR supports EU enlargement to other states.

As for Ukraine, AUR supporters brand the country an aggressor for retaining part of the historical Romanian territory of Bessarabia and for discriminating against the Romanian minority there.³⁸¹ Given the often tense relations between Bucharest and Kyiv, it can be assumed that AUR will treat EU enlargement to Ukraine opportunistically, with the party's support hinging on what it means in practical terms and what political benefits the radical populists can extract from it.

The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

AUR is officially boycotted by Israel because of the party's history of anti-Semitism. Although two meetings took place between AUR's leader and Israel's ambassador to Romania in November 2022 and August 2023, an official source in Bucharest described the latter meeting as a “blunder” because it validated a radical-right party with anti-Semites among its leadership as a legitimate, responsible political actor.³⁸² The meetings consequently drew outrage from some of the most important local organizations that represent Romanian Jews as well as members of the Diaspora.³⁸³

CHAPTER 12

Slovakia: An Established Pro-Russia Party With a Disparate Caucus

Alena Kudzko

The Slovak National Party: Evolution and Profile

The Slovak National Party (SNS) positions itself as a right-wing, conservative, nationalist, Christian party and has maintained a constant presence on the Slovak political scene over the past three decades. While there is a dynamic range of parties and movements on the Slovak radical right, SNS is the most electorally established and integrated of these parties in mainstream politics. The oldest party in Slovakia, SNS was registered in 1990 but declares itself to be the successor to an earlier Slovak National Party founded in 1871.

In the 1990s, SNS stood out as one of the most radical parties on the Slovak political spectrum.³⁸⁴ However, over the past decade, the party has gradually lost its dominance over the radical-right agenda because of internal disputes and corruption scandals as well as its struggles in continuing to position itself as the principal embodiment of Slovak nationalist sentiment. Several more radical and extreme political rivals have emerged, for example the ultranationalist, radical far-right Kotleba–People's Party Our Slovakia (LSNS) and Republic. At the same time, some agenda items, such as migration, have been co-opted by more mainstream parties, like the left-wing Direction—Social Democracy (SMER-SD, or SMER).

Although SNS has invested in conventional political-party infrastructure, the party's agenda and decisionmaking processes have been driven largely by its leader.³⁸⁵ Andrej Danko has been the chair of SNS since 2012.

After the September 2023 parliamentary election, SNS entered a government coalition for the fifth time, partnering with Prime Minister Robert Fico's SMER and Peter Pellegrini's

left-wing Voice–Social Democracy (HLAS). Apart from stints in the government in 1992–1994 and 1994–1998, SNS also served in SMER-led governing coalitions in 2006–2010 and 2016–2020.

The ten-seat haul in Slovakia’s 150-member parliament that SNS took in 2023 represents a drop from the twenty seats it had secured in 2006 and the fifteen it had won in 2016.³⁸⁶ But SNS’s presence in the parliament and the government is still seen as a sign of the party’s resurgence after 2020, when it plummeted below the threshold of 5 percent of the national vote required to be awarded seats.

Yet, of the ten individuals who secured seats on behalf of SNS, only Danko is a member of the party. The others joined the SNS list as independent candidates or via partnerships between SNS and three smaller radical-right parties.³⁸⁷ The list also included former members of LSNS. This patchwork representation has raised doubts over whether Danko will be able to maintain the allegiance of the entire group throughout the current government term and cling on to his role as party leader.

By far the smallest member of the government coalition, SNS boasts three ministers in the cabinet—those for the environment, culture, and tourism and sport—along with several deputy ministers and other high-profile posts. Danko was the parliament speaker in 2016–2020 and is now one of several deputy speakers.

Relationship With the EU

While SNS has generally backed Slovakia’s membership in the European Union (EU), the party has frequently disparaged the bloc and insisted that reforms are necessary. This criticism has often focused on SNS’s perception that the Brussels-based institutions exert an excessive influence to the detriment of nation-states, contributing to a loss of autonomy, security, and cultural identity and putting Slovakia in a “subservient” position in its relations with its Western peers in the EU.³⁸⁸

Throughout the eurozone crisis that started in 2009, SNS called for Slovakia to draw up plans for an option to exit the EU, with SNS’s then chair Ján Slota calling the EU “a millstone that can sink us very deeply.”³⁸⁹ In his view, bailouts for struggling members of the single currency wasted common resources and brought home the message that Slovakia should think of itself first.³⁹⁰

SNS’s 2023 electoral campaign, meanwhile, adopted an approach of staying in the EU but reforming it.³⁹¹ Furthermore, SNS has endorsed a government coalition program that asserts that Slovakia will preserve its foreign policy and geopolitical orientation, including its obligations in the EU and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Nonetheless, these

moves are happening against a backdrop of heightening criticism of the EU by the party and occasional stray statements by members of its unruly and disparate caucus.

For SNS, key conditions for Slovakia's continued EU membership include resisting attempts at "unreasonable centralization" by the EU, including on issues pertaining to the rule of law and refugee relocation quotas.³⁹² The party is also adamant about safeguarding Slovakia's veto rights and furthering the country's negotiating power in relation to big member states.³⁹³

SNS insists that Slovakia should pursue its own interests, and hence the current government has declared that it "will not be as obliging" to the EU's wishes as the previous government was.³⁹⁴ The party aims to reinvigorate the Visegrád Four format, which also includes the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland, to exert more sway in the EU. According to SNS, Brussels and Western countries are imposing high energy prices and inflation on Slovakia and effectively aiming to destroy the country's economy and even turn Slovaks into slaves.³⁹⁵ Danko has also warned against France and Germany engaging in foul play by banning Slovakia from buying cheap energy from Russia, arguing that they are attempting to favor their own businesses in a ploy to take over the market.³⁹⁶

While an immediate exit from the EU is not possible or desirable because of Slovakia's embeddedness in the EU economy, if the union cannot be reformed, SNS is amenable to the idea of "responsibly opening the question of a potential exit."³⁹⁷ Rudolf Huliak, the chair of the small, radical-right National Coalition party and a member of parliament elected via the SNS list, went even further. During his unsuccessful nomination process to become environment minister, he said that SNS would strive to initiate a referendum for Slovakia to quit both the EU and NATO.³⁹⁸

In accordance with its strategy of seeking to impact EU institutions and decisionmaking processes from within, SNS announced that Danko would lead the party list in the 2024 European Parliament elections.³⁹⁹ The party failed to gain seats in the last elections in 2019. However, a current member of the European Parliament (MEP), Miroslav Radačovský, who ran on the LSNS list, has since participated in national parliamentary elections on the SNS ballot. Nevertheless, he ultimately decided not to assume his seat in the national parliament and remains an MEP.⁴⁰⁰

Foreign Policy Positions

SNS's overall approach to foreign policy derives from the group's positioning as an antiestablishment nationalist party. It is an approach characterized by skepticism toward foreign policy elites and Slovakia's established mainstream foreign policy agenda. Predominantly inward looking, SNS is suspicious of the EU and NATO because of their alleged undue interference in Slovakia's domestic affairs and their imposition of global problems, such as

migration and conflict, onto the country. Meanwhile, the party sees good relations with Russia as the pathway to economic stability and affordable energy security.

Immigration and Asylum

SNS has consistently espoused vehement anti-immigration views, although the party has no monopoly in that regard. Since 2015, SMER has also pursued a vocally anti-immigration agenda that has only hardened over time. As a result, SNS representatives are by no means the only or even the primary drivers of the current government's anti-immigration posture. All the same, immigration has been a particularly salient issue in SNS campaigns since 2015, with migrants repeatedly portrayed as a security threat. SNS has also strongly opposed refugee distribution quotas.⁴⁰¹

The party's most prevalent antimigration narratives are grounded in religious and ethnic biases but also draw on anti-U.S. and antiliberal sentiment. Danko has routinely promised to prevent the "Islamization" of Slovakia.⁴⁰² The party has fanned the flames by singling out male migrants and portraying them as undeserving, arguing that they left their female family members behind in their home countries and fled instead of fighting in the wars there.⁴⁰³ According to SNS representatives, Afghans, Iraqis, and Syrians who come to Europe were funded and armed by the United States to fight against their "brothers" at home and lost. Hence, the United States, not Slovakia, should deal with the consequences of their "export of liberal ideas."⁴⁰⁴

Speaking in September 2023, Danko asserted that current migration flows were the product of a secret agreement between the EU and Ankara to permit Turkey to send migrants from its territory to the EU in exchange for Turkey's backing of Sweden's application to join NATO.⁴⁰⁵

Ukrainians, for their part, have received more favorable treatment and significantly less animosity, underpinned by the cultural affinity between Slovaks and Ukrainians and the fact that most temporarily displaced people from Ukraine are women, children, or seniors. Ukrainians have also demonstrated an ability to quickly pick up the Slovak language and integrate well into the labor market. SNS has largely refrained from making Ukrainian refugees the targets of its campaigns. At times, however, SNS has exploited rare and isolated episodes of violence and crimes committed by Ukrainians to claim that while Slovaks should help Ukrainians who genuinely need assistance, specifically families, they should be cautious and stern toward those who pose security risks.⁴⁰⁶

Russia and Ukraine

Since its inception, SNS has consistently positioned itself as a Russia-friendly party. This ideological orientation has been shaped by the party's adherence to pan-Slavism, its

celebration of the Soviet Union’s role in Slovakia’s liberation during World War II, and a conviction that Slovakia should serve as a bridge between West and East.

As parliament speaker, Danko regularly engaged in meetings with high-level Russian government officials, backed the restoration of Moscow’s voting rights in the Council of Europe “as a promising beginning to mending relations,” and criticized EU sanctions against Russia.⁴⁰⁷ He also stalled the adoption of Slovakia’s new national security strategy, which elaborated on threats and risks emanating from Russia.⁴⁰⁸

Immediately after Russia’s February 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Danko commented that “Ukraine has been divided for eight years. We cannot unequivocally assess this situation as an attack by Russia.” He also shifted blame for the war onto Ukraine and Western countries: “For a long time, Russia was warning that there was a genocide happening [in Ukraine] and that it did not want the presence of U.S. troops in Europe. Russia has decided to help the Russian population in Ukraine. Ukraine is being robbed and is falling apart because of the incompetence of its leaders.”⁴⁰⁹ Danko later condemned the war and called for an end to it, adding that “each side has its own truth.”⁴¹⁰ He is yet to condemn Russia as an aggressor.

Danko has repeatedly stated that because Ukraine is not a member of the EU or NATO, these organizations—and, by extension, Slovakia—should not be involved in the war there, apart from by sending humanitarian aid.⁴¹¹ In his view, Russia and Ukraine should solve their problems between themselves. SNS has consistently promulgated the narrative that if Slovakia provides weapons to Ukraine, the war will spread to Slovakia.⁴¹²

In the run-up to the 2023 election, SNS campaigned on the promise to discontinue weapons supplies to Ukraine. The party’s reasoning for this pledge included a conviction that Ukraine cannot win the war: “Nobody will be able to push Russia out of these territories. There is definitely no return to the prewar situation. These territories were not Ukrainian.”⁴¹³ During the election campaign, Danko claimed that he would be ready to go to Moscow to negotiate cheap energy imports for Slovakia.⁴¹⁴ He also asserts that Russian President Vladimir Putin is still a friend of Slovakia.⁴¹⁵

Similarly, Huliak previously said that if he were in charge of the country, his first trip would be to Moscow to apologize to Putin for “those fools who started the conflict” and for the military support Slovakia has provided to Ukraine.⁴¹⁶

These views appear to have had an impact on the government’s agenda. The new governing coalition has declared that Slovakia will no longer provide military assistance to Ukraine, a position that SNS supports. Danko has gone further, saying that he would prefer Slovak firms not to produce any “offensive weapons” for Ukraine on a commercial basis either.⁴¹⁷ But as this stance contradicts the official government position, SNS is ready to find a way to continue commercial contracts in a manner that will “not provoke either side.”⁴¹⁸

Danko is also convinced that Western countries still engage in various forms of economic cooperation with Russia and will be lining up to talk to Moscow the moment the war in Ukraine is over. Indeed, Danko perceives Russia to be a great power and believes that it would therefore be foolish for Slovakia not to work with the country.⁴¹⁹

SNS further argues that sanctions on Russia are against Slovakia's interests.⁴²⁰ The party has, moreover, supported a temporary ban on grain imports from Ukraine to Slovakia and advocated restrictions on a much wider range of agricultural products from Ukraine to protect Slovak consumers and markets.⁴²¹

NATO

Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, SNS generally opposed Slovakia's NATO membership.⁴²² This stance was grounded in the narrative that membership would entail a loss of Slovak sovereignty and "sell Slovakia out to big capitals from the West."⁴²³ Additionally, SNS had a deep distrust of Hungary and a conviction that Budapest held irredentist ambitions and was preparing to attack Slovakia. Hungary, consequently, could not serve as an ally or a trusted partner for Slovakia in a defense alliance.

Under Danko's leadership, however, SNS has dropped its opposition to Slovakia's NATO membership. The party has committed to fulfill Slovakia's obligations in the alliance while calling for improvements in the way NATO works. That said, Danko has regularly objected to Slovakia's purported "servility" to the organization and opposed the presence of NATO bases and logistics centers in Slovakia.⁴²⁴ SNS has also called for a revision of the rules for NATO missions. According to the party, "small states help with [these missions] and pay for them but do not gain anything from [them]"—contrary to big countries, whose businesses allegedly make a lot of money in Afghanistan and elsewhere.⁴²⁵

Over the past year, Danko has called on the EU to play a bigger role in European security. The EU, he claims, enjoys a major advantage over NATO: "Turkey and the United States are members of NATO, and the local interests of these two countries differ from those of the EU."⁴²⁶

Energy

Before 2022, Slovakia was highly reliant on Russian energy. Although Slovakia has sought to diversify its energy supplies, it is still one of the European countries most dependent on Russian gas.⁴²⁷ SNS believes that energy should not be part of geopolitical considerations and has advocated the removal of sanctions on Russia's energy sector.⁴²⁸

While the party does not hold a strong position on solar or wind energy, it supports nuclear power, on which Slovakia also relies heavily. SNS justifies its openness to Moscow in part based on Slovakia's dependence on nuclear fuel from Russia. Contrary to the view of the former government, Danko believes this fuel cannot be replaced by an equivalent from French or U.S. suppliers.⁴²⁹ Nonetheless, the new government has announced that projects to replace this energy source will continue.⁴³⁰

Climate Change

Climate change is not a priority topic for SNS, and the party has not extensively laid out its positions on environmental issues—apart from ambitions to renew cheap supplies of fossil fuels from Russia, loosen the rules on the designation of national parks, and provide hunters more freedom to hunt bears.⁴³¹

As part of the current coalition deal, SNS gained the environment minister portfolio. During the 2023 election campaign, SNS's initial nominee for the post, Huliak, insisted that climate change was a “megafraud.”⁴³² His nomination was rejected by the Slovak president, who believed that Huliak’s climate change denialism and rejection of Slovakia’s international obligations made him unfit for the role.⁴³³

Tomáš Taraba, a former member of LSNS, was subsequently appointed environment minister. He stated that he would abide by EU environmental regulations but believes that nongovernmental organizations exerted undue influence on the previous government, leading to considerably stricter regulations than international norms require. He has also asserted that environmental regulations should be rebalanced in favor of greater economic growth and employment.⁴³⁴

Democracy and Minority Rights

At various periods, SNS has used strong anti-Hungarian, anti-Roma, and anti-LGBTQ rhetoric to galvanize voter turnout.

The party’s mobilization strategy in the 1990s and 2000s relied on stirring up anti-Hungarian sentiment in Slovak society.⁴³⁵ Building on historical grievances against the Hungarian state, SNS aimed to problematize Hungary-Slovakia relations, kindle suspicions of Hungarian irredentism, portray ethnic Hungarians as disloyal members of the Slovak state, and assert the primacy of Slovak national interests over those of the Hungarian minority in Slovakia.⁴³⁶

Especially in the 1990s and 2000s, SNS also focused extensively on the Roma minority in Slovakia, labeling its members “parasites who do not work but get state benefits.”⁴³⁷ With this rhetoric, SNS aimed to generate feelings of fear toward the Roma community, which the party depicted as representing a threat and having a lifestyle incompatible with that of others.⁴³⁸

Since Danko assumed control of the party, the Hungarian minority has been relegated as a focus of the party’s campaign strategy. He has said that Slovakia has demonstrated its maturity by ensuring the rights of Hungarians and Roma in Slovakia while protecting the Slovak nation. Moreover, he believes that Slovaks and Hungarians are now fighting the same battle and that the priority should be to unite with Czechs, Hungarians, and Poles to counter Brussels.⁴³⁹

CHAPTER 13

Spain: The Radical Right No Longer a Marginal Force

Elena Ventura

Vox: Evolution and Profile

Until recent years, Spain was one of the few countries in the European Union (EU) that lacked a significant radical-right party. This situation contrasted with the prevailing trend in Europe, where the radical right has been gaining prominence.⁴⁴⁰ However, the 2018 regional election in Andalusia halted Spain's exceptionalism, as the radical-right party Vox obtained 11 percent of the vote and twelve out of 109 seats in the regional parliament.⁴⁴¹

Vox was founded in December 2013 by former members of the People's Party (PP), the mainstream right-wing voice in Spain. These members criticized PP's moderate stances on key issues, such as family values, and the party's ambiguity over Catalonia's political status. Additionally, they aimed to distance themselves from the corruption scandals that were engulfing PP at the time. Santiago Abascal, who has been Vox's leader since 2014, has routinely referred to PP as the "cowardly right."⁴⁴²

Until 2018, Vox was a marginal party in Spanish politics. The party's electoral debut came in the 2014 European Parliament elections, when it achieved only 1.6 percent of the vote and did not gain any seats. Vox further underperformed at the 2015 and 2016 Spanish parliamentary elections, obtaining 0.2 percent of the vote in each.⁴⁴³ The 2018 Andalusian regional election marked Vox's first electoral breakthrough, propelling the party to the forefront of the Spanish political arena. Vox capitalized on the aftermath of the 2014 Catalan independence referendum by adopting a strong nationalist policy in opposition to separatist movements in Catalonia and the Basque Country. This stance was evident in the party's 2018 political manifesto, "Vox's One Hundred Urgent Measures for Spain," whose first ten priorities were grouped under the heading "Spain, Unity, and Sovereignty."⁴⁴⁴

In the November 2019 Spanish parliamentary election, Vox won 15 percent of the vote and became the third-largest party in the Congress of Deputies. In the European Parliament elections held the same year, Vox gained 6.2 percent of the vote and won its first four seats in the then 751-member parliament, where the party is a member of the European Conservatives and Reformists group.

Ahead of the 2023 Spanish parliamentary election, polls predicted that PP would win the most votes but would require a coalition with Vox to form a government.⁴⁴⁵ Many news outlets and analysts therefore projected a shift to the right, which would have meant Spain's first radical-right coalition since the 1975 death of dictator Francisco Franco.⁴⁴⁶ However, the election results defied expectations, as Vox obtained only thirty-three out of 350 seats, down from the fifty-two it had won in 2019, dismissing any possibility of a coalition government with PP.

Abascal spoke out after the election and blamed Vox's poor performance on reasons that included "manipulated polls."⁴⁴⁷ However, the defeat can also be explained by two other, more realistic factors. First, Vox's rise had been driven mainly by its tough stance on Catalonia's push for independence. As Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez succeeded in defusing this issue by pardoning nine Catalan separatists and paving the way for a multi-party dialogue, Vox lost momentum and failed to maintain its strong political base in the election. Second, Vox was unwilling to reform itself through a process of normalization like that carried out by Marine Le Pen's National Rally in France or Giorgia Meloni's Brothers of Italy (FdI). Instead, Vox remained strongly radicalized: in the run-up to the election, it censored books and movies and took down LGBT flags from town halls.⁴⁴⁸

Relationship With the EU

A 2020 speech by Abascal summarized Vox's vision of the EU: "In the face of a federal non-Europe, a globalist non-Europe, a totalitarian non-Europe of elites and bureaucracies, we want and defend, like the vast majority of Europeans, the Europe of nations [and] of freedom."⁴⁴⁹ This statement reaffirms Vox's narrative against globalization and what it sees as Spain's loss of sovereignty to Brussels-based bureaucrats.

In a country where citizens have traditionally strongly supported the EU, Vox holds Euroskeptic views. However, the party has never advocated Spain's exit from the union or the eurozone. Yet, in its 2023 electoral program, Vox articulated its clear opposition to many of the EU's characteristics and policies. The party further stated that Spain's previous government had been unable to defend the country's interests, as shown by the decision of former Catalan president Carles Puigdemont to seek refuge in Brussels to avoid arrest on charges of rebellion and sedition for organizing a disputed Catalan independence referendum in 2017.⁴⁵⁰

Vox presents itself as the defender of Spain's national interests and sovereignty and advocates a new EU treaty that would keep the member states at the forefront of decisionmaking.

Such a setup would prevent the concentration of power in the hands of “the European Commission bureaucracy that nobody elects and that nobody can control,” in the words of the party.⁴⁵¹ Vox unequivocally rejects any moves toward EU federalism and continues to support the primacy of Spanish law over EU law. Vox further calls for the establishment of a coalition of Southern European countries to act in defense of common interests and in light of shared challenges, including the migration crisis.

It is worth noting that many proposals advanced by Vox are in clear opposition to EU law and the essence of the union itself. For instance, the party’s ambition to establish “border controls on all third-country products coming into our market” does not comply with the terms of the European single market, which all EU member states are legally obliged to follow.⁴⁵² Thus, while Vox does not demand Spain’s exit from the EU, the party’s measures could subject Spain to legal proceedings similar to those brought against Hungary and Poland.

Foreign Policy Positions

Vox’s key priorities relate to domestic politics, insofar as the party’s main objective is to safeguard Spain’s territorial unity and sovereignty. Vox’s approach to foreign policy derives from this domestic emphasis and is therefore anchored in a firm anti-immigration stance, strong defense of Spain’s national interests, and opposition to EU policies, which the party perceives as violating the country’s sovereignty.

Immigration and Asylum

Vox has identified certain actors who, it believes, threaten Spain from outside: immigrants. The party has explicitly highlighted migrants as a threat by linking immigration to problems of law and order. In its 2023 electoral program, Vox called for the immediate repatriation of all unaccompanied foreign minors (known in Spanish as *menores extranjeros no acompañados*, or MENAs), whom the party accuses of being responsible for an increase in criminal activity in Madrid.

A hate campaign toward MENAs is also visible on Vox’s social media. The party’s supporters adopted the hashtag #StopMenas to strengthen the narrative of unaccompanied foreign minors as a social and political problem.⁴⁵³ Using this hashtag, voters and political figures shared unverified videos of violence and aggression allegedly committed by MENAs. This rhetoric was also exploited during the 2021 Madrid regional election, when Vox displayed a poster showing an elderly white woman opposite a hooded dark-skinned young man, with a caption that falsely stated, “A MENA [gets] €4,700 a month. Your grandmother [gets] a pension of €426 a month.”⁴⁵⁴

It follows that Vox adopts an extremely harsh stance against migration. The party is against illegal immigration and advocates the prompt expulsion of all migrants who have entered

Spain illegally. Vox has affirmed that “Spain can only be entered [by those who do so] legally, orderly, and with the will to integrate and contribute to the development of the nation.”⁴⁵⁵ Additionally, the party maintains, migration should ultimately benefit Spain as the influx of migrants should be controlled in a way that is based on the needs of the Spanish economy.⁴⁵⁶

Vox also advocates a strong role for national defense through the establishment of military deployments at the borders of the Canary Islands and Spain’s North African exclaves of Ceuta and Melilla. Like FdI, Vox is in favor of a naval blockade to “protect our coasts from the massive arrival of migrants.”⁴⁵⁷ Yet, Vox’s rhetoric on migration is also inconsistent, varying according to the ethnic origins of the migrants in question. The party clearly favors those who arrive from Latin America, as it has called for the creation of origin quotas that would prioritize those nationalities that share a common language with Spain.⁴⁵⁸

Finally, Vox’s anti-immigration campaigns incorporate a strong Islamophobic component and demand the “closure of mosques or centers of worship that propagate ideas contrary to our culture and identity.”⁴⁵⁹ Among other statements, Vox Secretary General Ignacio Garriga has denounced the “unstoppable Islamization of Catalonia” and argued that the promotion of multiculturalism by the Spanish government and European elites has turned neighborhoods into areas of “occupied buildings [with] machetes in the streets.”⁴⁶⁰

Russia and Ukraine

While Vox does not have a direct link with Russia and its president, Vladimir Putin, the party is connected indirectly through its international alliances with groups including Hungary’s radical-right Fidesz party. Additionally, some of Vox’s partner organizations, like CitizenGO, have obtained financial backing from Russian oligarchs with strong ties to the Kremlin.⁴⁶¹

Certain Vox representatives appear sympathetic to Putin. For instance, while most radical-right leaders remained silent after the 2022 murder of Darya Dugina, the daughter of Putin supporter Aleksandr Dugin, the deputy secretary of Vox in Barcelona, Jordi de la Fuente, tweeted “Rest in Peace, Warrior.”⁴⁶² The tweet was swiftly deleted, but not before it was reported by several media outlets. Similarly, Fernando Sánchez Dragó, a former close adviser to Abascal, was an open admirer of Putin and supported Russia’s 2014 annexation of Crimea.⁴⁶³

Nonetheless, in official declarations, Vox has taken a clear stance against Russia. The party supported a statement in the Congress of Deputies condemning Russia’s February 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine and has regularly backed the provision of military aid to Kyiv. Abascal welcomed the arrival of refugees from Ukraine, stating that “anyone can now understand . . . the difference . . . between [Ukrainian refugees] and the invasions of young men of military age of Muslim origin that have launched against different borders of Europe in an attempt to destabilize and to colonize it.”⁴⁶⁴ The Vox leader further accused the Spanish government of having close relations with Russia, stating that “Putin allies are in the government.”⁴⁶⁵

Climate Change

Observers generally describe Vox as skeptical or indifferent toward climate change.⁴⁶⁶ While some party manifestos acknowledge climate change, most of the party's narrative about it is inconsistent, alternating between questioning the scientific evidence and considering climate change a substantiated fact. For instance, Rocío de Meer Méndez, a Vox member of the Congress of Deputies, has unequivocally stated that Vox is not a climate change denier but that it believes "there is no scientific unanimity that climate change is caused by mankind."⁴⁶⁷

Yet, the core of Vox's narrative on climate change focuses not on the phenomenon itself but on the strategies adopted by entities such as the United Nations (UN) and the EU to tackle it. Party figures have referred to climate action as "climate terror," "climate fanaticism," and "energy suicide."⁴⁶⁸ Vox has also portrayed measures adopted by multilateral actors as a threat to the Spanish nation, its culture, and its identity.

Vox has repeatedly stressed its opposition to climate change policies adopted at the EU level. De Meer has stated that policies that "nobody has voted for and are imposed by third institutions such as [those in] Brussels will have harmful consequences for our primary sector."⁴⁶⁹ Vox presents itself as the defender of Spanish agriculture against elites in Brussels, arguing that "Spain cannot remain exclusively subject to the interests of third countries or to the ideological prejudices of the lobbies that currently direct Brussels policy."⁴⁷⁰ At the EU level, Vox therefore advocates a revised Common Agricultural Policy that safeguards Spain's national interests over the "ideological delusions of the environmentalists."⁴⁷¹

Energy

Vox's outlook on energy dependence is in line with its commitment to preserve Spanish sovereignty and national interests. In its 2023 electoral program, Vox denounced the globalist agenda adopted by Sánchez, accusing it of weakening Spain's sovereignty "through the demolition of energy plants and the prohibition of the exploration and exploitation of our own natural resources."⁴⁷²

Vox further condemns EU energy policies, which, the party says, have "suffocated" Spain's industry while favoring countries such as Morocco and China that have benefited from the offshoring of factories and power plants. Additionally, the party describes the current European model as "alien to the national interest and designed to please the globalist elites."⁴⁷³

Vox has called for the urgent establishment of a national plan for energy sovereignty that is not limited by the climate requirements of supranational bodies. The party does not foresee a diversification of Spain's energy sources, as it favors an approach based solely on strengthening capacity through the use of renewable energy and nuclear power to meet the country's national targets.⁴⁷⁴ Notably, Vox has never addressed the issue of Europe's energy dependence on Russia, even though Spain's imports of Russian liquefied natural gas increased by 84 percent in the year following the 2022 invasion of Ukraine.⁴⁷⁵

Democracy and Minority Rights

Vox's emphasis on guaranteeing and defending Spain's national unity entails several measures that are by nature antidemocratic, including the banning of political parties that are perceived as a threat to national unity.

Vox is a champion of traditional and highly conservative values, which jeopardize the rights of minorities. The party is unequivocally antifeminist and rejects all "gender ideologies."⁴⁷⁶ For instance, in response to the July 2023 murder of a woman in the Catalan town of Salou, Vox representatives said that statements referring to gender-based violence only strengthened a separatist and antidemocratic discourse.⁴⁷⁷ In 2019, Vox blocked an all-party declaration condemning violence against women, asserting that the statement addressed only one side of gender-based violence.⁴⁷⁸ Similarly, José María Llanos, a Vox member of the Valencian regional parliament, has maintained that "gender-based violence [and] sexist violence do not exist."⁴⁷⁹ Vox therefore aims to repeal Spain's legislation on gender-based violence and replace it with a law that "protects every possible victim of violence in a domestic setting."⁴⁸⁰

Vox adopted a similarly tough stance on LGBTQ communities and aims to repeal all legislation that upholds these communities' rights. Under the party's proposals, same-sex couples would no longer be able to marry or adopt children. Vox argues that children need "female and male role models simultaneously for their personal development."⁴⁸¹ The party would also remove the provision of gender-affirming surgery from public healthcare services and allow patients to access such procedures only at private institutions.⁴⁸²

The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

In response to Hamas's October 7, 2023, attacks on Israel and the following war, Vox adopted a robust pro-Israel stance. In the immediate aftermath of the attacks, the party proposed a declaration in support of Israel in the Andalusian regional parliament.⁴⁸³ The text expressed unequivocal backing for Israel and condemned jihadist terrorism, which it described as an ongoing threat to the entire West.⁴⁸⁴

Finally, like other radical-right parties, Vox has established a clear connection between the Israel-Hamas war and the issue of migration. The party went as far as to issue a proposal urging the Sánchez government to halt the granting of Spanish nationality to people from "Islamic cultures" in an effort to prevent potential terrorist attacks on Spanish soil. Pepa Millán, a Vox spokesperson in the Congress of Deputies, defended this proposal by arguing that Europe's open-door policies had "turned European capitals into ghettos" where Islamic law prevails.⁴⁸⁵

CHAPTER 14

Sweden: Gradual Alignment With a Conservative Bloc

Naman Habtom

The Sweden Democrats: Evolution and Profile

The Sweden Democrats (SD) are a right-wing political party that emerged in the late 1980s. The party in its current form was founded in 1988, but it has an ambiguous and complicated background, with roots that can be traced back to radical-right groups like Keep Sweden Swedish, which was ethnonationalist in orientation.⁴⁸⁶ Compared with other Swedish political parties, the SD is more socially conservative, populist, and outspoken in its opposition to multiculturalism. At the same time, the party has moderated some of its socially conservative views, for example by supporting same-sex marriage, while still advocating traditional nuclear families.

Economically, the SD has an unorthodox outlook, being somewhat welfare chauvinistic—generally supporting welfare programs for citizens but simultaneously pushing for significant benefit cuts for noncitizens, such as asylum seekers. At the same time, the party has no fixed ideological position when it comes to privatization or the role of profit in fields like education and healthcare. That said, in recent years, the party has begun to converge with center-right parties in favor of a lower-tax economy. The party is arguably best known for its anti-immigration positions, especially in regard to immigration from Muslim-majority countries.⁴⁸⁷

The SD entered the Swedish parliament in 2010 after winning 5.7 percent of the vote in that year's general election, becoming the first right-wing populist party to be represented in the legislature since 1991.⁴⁸⁸ The other seven parliamentary parties avoided any cooperation with the SD. Nevertheless, in the January 2014 general election, the party more than doubled its

share of the vote, winning 12.9 percent.⁴⁸⁹ Yet, the other parties' continued insistence on a political cordon sanitaire around the SD made it hard to establish a working majority in the parliament.⁴⁹⁰ In December 2014, facing the risk of a snap election and difficulties in passing a budget, six parties—all but the SD and the Left Party—concluded an agreement that enabled the center-left Social Democrats and the Greens to form a minority government.⁴⁹¹

A similar situation arose in 2018, when the SD again increased its share of the seats in the parliament. Under another cross-party agreement, the Social Democrats and the Greens reached a deal with the Center Party and the Liberals that again marginalized the SD and the Left Party.⁴⁹²

Between 2019 and 2022, the SD rose in the polls and became more accepted in parliamentary politics. The right-of-center Christian Democrats and, later, the center-right Moderates became willing to work with the SD on an issue-by-issue basis and accept the party's support in parliamentary votes while still refusing to govern with it.⁴⁹³ At the same time, the Liberals, known for their pro-European and generally pro-immigration attitudes, suffered a schism between those open to working with the SD and those opposed to the idea. As a result, support for the Liberals hovered around the 4 percent threshold required for a party to enter the parliament in a general election, with voters from both wings of the Liberals moving to other parties.⁴⁹⁴

At the 2022 general election, the SD grew once again, winning 20.2 percent of the vote and becoming the second-biggest party in the parliament.⁴⁹⁵ After the election, the SD signed an agreement that resulted in a Moderates-led minority government that would advance a policy agenda influenced by the SD in exchange for its support.

This arrangement marked the culmination of a dozen years of the SD seeking normalization in the Swedish political system. After initially not fitting neatly into a left-right divide, the party began a process of internal reform to become more aligned with a new conservative parliamentary bloc. Especially during the second half of the 2010s, the SD also started expanding its focus, shifting away from a narrow emphasis on migration to a more comprehensive right-wing political program.

Relationship With the EU

The SD has historically been a Euroskeptic party that supported Sweden's withdrawal from the European Union (EU) and consistently opposed the adoption of the euro.⁴⁹⁶ In recent years, the party has relaxed its position on the EU and become more of a soft Euroskeptic party—although still the most Euroskeptic in the Swedish parliament.

This shift has entailed the party abandoning its call for a withdrawal from the EU but still largely opposing further European integration and supporting the return of some decision-making to national governments.⁴⁹⁷ This evolving position has resulted in support for certain policies at the European level, such as strengthening the EU's external borders, alongside opposition to others, like a binding agreement on redistributing asylum seekers.

Foreign Policy Positions

The SD's main foreign policy focus is immigration, with which other areas, such as EU enlargement and overseas development aid, are often linked. Similarly, the party's positions on issues relating to Islam, for example, are tied to foreign policy but ultimately derive from a domestic political source. The SD often frames EU-related issues as part of foreign policy by describing them as an encroachment on national sovereignty and viewing Brussels as an external entity; but these issues are no longer as significant for the party as they once were.

On other questions, such as Sweden's memberships in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the EU, the SD has shifted significantly, suggesting that foreign policy is not a core issue for the party. Instead, the SD focuses primarily on domestic issues, such as crime, the economy, and culture war issues, which the party perceives as cases of liberal political correctness and multiculturalism. This emphasis is partly explained by the fact that the SD's political partners on the right—long-established parties like the Moderates—have been more active on foreign policy matters, so the SD can relatively easily compromise in these areas in exchange for domestic political concessions.

Immigration and Asylum

Immigration has long been the SD's flagship policy issue. Broadly speaking, the party supports either halting or drastically reducing non-EU migration, especially of refugees and of migrants from Muslim-majority countries.⁴⁹⁸ The party frequently links migration to various social issues, like crime, fiscal strains, housing, and multiculturalism.⁴⁹⁹ The SD's relatively hardline position on migration was partly the reason for its isolation from other political parties. However, since Europe's 2015 migration crisis, several other parties have gradually moved closer to the SD's position.

In the lead-up to the 2018 general election, the party made headlines with a proposal to restrict dual citizenship. The policy was by no means new, with the party having declared in 2011 that “a Swedish citizen shall not possess another citizenship aside from the Swedish one, and only Swedish citizens shall have the right to vote in general elections.”⁵⁰⁰ In 2018, the party modified its position after a backlash, albeit only by making an exception for citizens of other Nordic countries, in part because of Sweden's large population with dual

Finnish-Swedish citizenship, historically the country's biggest minority. Nordic citizens have virtually all of the same rights in each other's countries, except for the right to vote. In 2019, the SD officially abandoned its opposition to dual citizenship.⁵⁰¹

Ukrainians are a notable exception to the party's anti-immigration stance. Unlike with migrant groups from the Middle East and sub-Saharan Africa, the SD did not oppose the entry of Ukrainians into Sweden or the EU after the start of large-scale hostilities between Russia and Ukraine in February 2022. This was despite the fact that the Swedish Migration Agency predicted that over 200,000 Ukrainians could enter Sweden by summer 2022, which would have eclipsed the 160,000 migrants who arrived in 2015 or the 80,000 who arrived in 1993, the two biggest migration waves in recent Swedish history.⁵⁰² Ultimately, far fewer migrants arrived in Sweden in 2022.

This discrepancy is possibly due to the different attitudes held by Swedes more broadly toward European and non-European migrants. According to research by Linnaeus University, the arrival of European migrants into a neighborhood has little impact on ethnic Swedes' desire to either continue living there or move away. However, once the non-European population reaches 3–4 percent of the total, ethnic Swedes begin to move out of neighborhoods, a trend that has contributed to growing segregation in Sweden.⁵⁰³

In recent years, the significance of immigration for the SD has diminished. This can be explained in a couple of ways. First, growing anti-immigration sentiment, especially after the 2015 migration crisis, resulted in other parties also pursuing policies aimed at restricting immigration, reducing the differences between the SD and other parliamentary parties—especially on the right but also with the Social Democrats. Second, the salience of immigration as an issue in Swedish society in general has declined. Other issues, such as healthcare and the economy, have been more important for voters, leading to both the SD and the broader political discourse in Sweden shifting away from immigration.

Trade

The SD has used the rhetoric of free trade in various phases of the party's history. Previously, the party supported Sweden's withdrawal from the EU and expressed optimism for strong trade even in the absence of a free-trade agreement with the EU.⁵⁰⁴ Since changing its position, the party has advocated the transformation of the EU from a political union into a trade-based one.⁵⁰⁵

At times, the SD has seized on the rhetoric of antiprotectionism, albeit for a different purpose. The clearest example is the party's opposition to the EU's Fit for 55 initiative, an effort to reduce the union's greenhouse gas emissions. In opposing the plan, the SD has accused the European Commission of engaging in protectionism while violating the sovereignty of EU member states.⁵⁰⁶

Meanwhile, the party has been accused by others, including former Swedish prime minister Stefan Löfven, of advocating protectionism by not supporting the easing of trade with neighboring countries.⁵⁰⁷ After the 2022 election, the SD became a supporting party for a coalition whose members are in favor of free trade. Shortly after the government's formation, the new prime minister, Ulf Kristersson, affirmed the coalition's belief that "with our open and export-dependent economy, it is in Sweden's interest to strengthen . . . the EU's position as a trade bloc."⁵⁰⁸

NATO

Historically, the SD favored Sweden's nonalignment and opposed the country joining NATO. The party's commitment to nonalignment resulted in its opposition to a 2016 host-nation agreement that aimed to make Sweden better able to provide and receive military support from NATO in the event of a crisis—although the party gave up its opposition once a large parliamentary majority in favor of the deal had been formed. Sweden's NATO membership has arguably been the second-biggest dividing issue, after EU membership, between the party and its would-be partners in the parliament.

After the start of the Russia-Ukraine conflict in February 2022, the SD took a cautious approach. Instead of explicitly supporting Sweden's entry into the military alliance on its own terms, the party linked the country's membership with Finland's, arguing that Sweden should join only if Finland did the same.⁵⁰⁹ Relatively quickly, it became clear that Finland would seek membership in NATO, paving the way for Sweden's application.

The issue of NATO membership had pitted the SD, on the one hand, against the center-right parliamentary parties—the Moderates, the Christian Democrats, and the Liberals—on the other. In fact, the latter three parties, along with the Center Party, were the only supporters of Sweden's entry into NATO before spring 2022. Yet, the widespread parliamentary support that emerged for NATO membership meant that the subject had largely become a nonissue by the September 2022 election.

However, Sweden's application for NATO membership turned out to be more difficult than expected because of resistance from Turkey.⁵¹⁰ Beginning in early 2023, a series of Quran burnings in Sweden complicated matters, not only with Turkey but also with the wider Islamic world. In a bid to salvage Sweden's membership application and minimize the diplomatic fallout, Kristersson emphasized his disapproval of the burnings, resulting in some pushback from the SD. Ultimately, the tension between the two parties had no lasting effects, and Turkey eventually approved Sweden's membership bid.

Development Aid

The SD has generally supported cutting Swedish development aid. Sweden has historically been one of the most generous countries in terms of foreign aid and, until 2022, had aimed at spending the equivalent of 1 percent of its gross domestic product (GDP) on aid. In its spring 2020 proposed budget, the SD suggested slashing the country's development expenditure to the equivalent of 0.5 percent of GDP.⁵¹¹ In fall 2022, the new Moderates-led government agreed to cut Sweden's foreign aid budget.⁵¹² Furthermore, the government endorsed the idea of linking aid with immigration by using development assistance as leverage in a bid to stem irregular migration.⁵¹³

In 2023, building on this foundation, the government shifted toward a strategy of using foreign aid to advance national interests, by making aid conditional on other policies, such as Sweden's foreign trade or the relations between aid recipients and Russia.⁵¹⁴ After the October 7, 2023, Hamas attacks on Israel, the SD pushed for a total stop of aid to Palestine.⁵¹⁵ Subsequently, the government paused nonhumanitarian aid to the Palestinian territories.⁵¹⁶

EU Enlargement

The SD has a generally ambivalent attitude toward EU expansion but leans toward a negative stance. In its 2019 European Parliament election manifesto, the party stated that the EU was "not capable of admitting more members," citing economic challenges and questioning the new member states' capacity to control their borders.⁵¹⁷ While acknowledging that the EU's eastward expansion has benefited many countries, the party believes that enlargement has also had significant downsides, such as transnational organized crime and a race to the bottom in terms of wages. At the same time, the SD does take a firm position against Turkey's membership in the EU, calling for a withdrawal of the country's candidate status and an end to membership talks.

Climate Change

As a party, the SD does not explicitly deny the existence of climate change, but at the same time, it does not view it as a major issue. Numerous members of the SD, including Leader Jimmie Åkesson, are climate change skeptics, verging on climate change deniers, and often dismiss environmental concerns and the scientific consensus on the issue.⁵¹⁸ The party frequently highlights Sweden's small population and relatively light carbon footprint compared with those of other countries as justifications for not taking greater action on climate change. Indeed, the SD argues that any such efforts by Sweden would have negligible positive consequences and simply harm the country's global competitiveness.

The SD consistently opposes fuel taxes, both for personal car use and for flights. Despite its antipathy toward China, the party opposes climate change demands such as emissions tariffs

in EU-China trade talks.⁵¹⁹ The party, along with those on the center right, usually points to nuclear energy as a possible alternative to fossil fuels.

The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

The SD is supportive of Israel and favors recognizing Jerusalem as the country's capital, having proposed moving the Swedish embassy in Israel to the city.⁵²⁰ Richard Jomshof, the SD chairman of the Swedish parliament's justice committee, said on a 2023 visit to the Knesset that "Israel is the only true democracy in the region . . . we are pro-Israel, we would like to cooperate with Israel and we want to be friends."⁵²¹

Sweden's change in stance after the October 7 attacks, from a historical supporter of the Palestinian cause to a more pro-Israel position, has been associated with the government's shift to the right.⁵²²

After alleged scenes of people in Swedish cities celebrating the October 7 attacks, the SD leadership stated that those who praised the attacks should be expelled from the country and that the clause of the 2022 coalition agreement on deporting noncitizens on grounds of poor character should be used against those who support Hamas.⁵²³ However, such threats—as well as calls by the SD to tear down mosques—have been condemned by the Kristersson government.⁵²⁴

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