Original Article

Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies

European View
1–9

DOI: 10.1177/17816858251330420
journals.sagepub.com/home/euv
Sage

Make the West Great Again? Ukraine, Israel and the appropriation of the West by European populists

Angelos Chryssogelos

London Metropolitan University, School of Social Sciences and Professions, London, UK

Abstract

As the EU faces two major geopolitical crises on its periphery, a transformation has been taking place in the outlook of European right-wing populists. Contrary to expectations based on their ideological heritage and prior policies, many populist far-right parties in Europe have taken positions that on the surface appear much closer to the pro-Western and Euro-Atlantic mainstream. Most have come out strongly in support of Israel in the Middle East, while many of them have, if not outright stood side by side with Ukraine, at least toned down any explicitly pro-Russian positions. This opportunistic posturing reveals the intention of many populist parties to appropriate and redefine the idea of the 'West' in a way that conforms to their radical ideology, a trend strengthened by the return of Donald Trump to the US presidency. Faced with geopolitical uncertainty on multiple fronts, it is important that the EU does not allow its foreign policy objectives to become hijacked by actors who oppose its values.

Keywords

Ukraine, Israel, Populism, Far right, West, Foreign policy

Introduction

The EU currently finds itself in a geopolitical poly-crisis. It is dealing with both the fall-out from the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the conflict in the Middle East, which has seen war spread from Palestine to neighbouring countries, tensions rise between Israel

Corresponding author:
Angelos Chryssogelos, London Metropolitan University, School of Social Sciences and Professions, 166-220 Holloway Road, London N7 8DB, UK.
Email: a.chryssogelos@londonmet.ac.uk

and Iran, and most recently, the toppling of the Assad regime in Syria. Yet the way these developments have been debated and contested within Europe has defied expectations, particularly in terms of the role played by populist far-right parties. Many such parties have taken positions on foreign policy that are quite different from what their ideological traditions or their most recent foreign policy posturing would have us expect.

In the 2010s, a decade of major economic and political turmoil across the EU, almost all major populist parties of the right (and left) exhibited strong sympathy for Putin's Russia. They invariably saw it as an example of a 'strong' regime that was an alternative to failing liberal democracy, a power that could stand up to the neoliberal West and a country that respected 'traditional values'. Far-right parties such as the National Front (Front National, FN) in France and the Freedom Party of Austria (Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs, FPÖ) were explicit in their sympathies towards Putin. In other countries support was more muted, owing to geopolitical and historical circumstances, but even in these places, populist leaders would at least express tacit admiration for Putin's style of leadership (Chryssogelos 2010, 273–5; Shekhovtsov 2017).

Since the war in Ukraine erupted in February 2022 however, the reaction of the populist right has been much more nuanced. True, in many countries these parties remain comparatively the most pro-Russian force, with Matteo Salvini's League (Lega) in Italy a prime example. Two far-right parties currently in the ascendancy, the Alternative for Germany (Alternative für Deutschland) and the FPÖ in Austria, have stuck to an explicitly pro-Russian profile. But looking at the far right as a whole (a far from monolithic space in any case), support has been, on aggregate, more restrained than expected, and this was especially the case in the early stages of the war (Bassets 2023). Furthermore, in many countries, due to geopolitical pressures, strategic and historical legacies, and the pressures of public opinion, the populist right has been at the forefront of opposition to Russia (Ivaldi and Zankina 2023, 25). Strikingly, some of the strongest voices of support for Ukraine have come from the populist right in countries that before the war were considered to have a soft-on-Russia foreign policy. This includes Giorgia Meloni, who was quick to occupy the pro-Ukraine niche on the Italian right which was left exposed by Salvini's pro-Russian stance.

If Russia/Ukraine is an issue that has divided the far right, the picture is much clearer, and even more surprising, when it comes to Israel. Since the attack by Hamas on Israel in October 2023, the majority of populist far-right parties in Europe have positioned themselves as supporters of Israel (Birchard 2023). This is a major departure from the European far right's historical anti-Semitism. Here too, the parties in Germany and Austria are important exceptions (Beck 2024). But they should not distract from the overall trend, which points to the populist far right having moved towards a more positive position on Israel, both relative to its past and compared to other radical political families such as the far left (see, more generally, Filc and Pardo 2021).

Taken together, these trends point to a changing role for the populist far right in European politics and foreign policy. The picture, of course, still varies among countries,

among far-right parties within the same country (as we have seen in Italy, but as is also the case elsewhere) and even between factions of the same party, with many populist parties split between two geopolitical visions, one pro-Western and pro-American, the other multipolar and notably pro-Russian (Greene 2023, 1333). But the overall trend is clear: the European far right, on aggregate, has grown both less monolithically pro-Russian than a decade ago and more pro-Israeli than its deep ideological traditions. What explains this reversal? Beyond tactical considerations of detoxifying their brand, following public opinion or proving themselves to be 'responsible' governmental actors, is there something deeper at play that hints at a more consistent geopolitical vision among far-right parties?

What does the populist far right aim to achieve with its foreign policy?

To make sense of this change, it is important to understand how the populist far right formulates its foreign policy and, most importantly, why and when it changes it. In the past, parties of the populist far right have gone through major changes in their foreign policy outlook. A historical analysis of these changes can help us to understand what drives their foreign policy considerations today.

It has largely been forgotten today, but in the first phase of their emergence in the 1980s, populist far-right parties touted their pro-Western credentials. In the context of the Cold War, both the FN in France and the FPÖ in Austria supported NATO and the West on the basis of their anti-Communist and very right-wing economic positions at the time. But more than right-wing ideology, these foreign policy positions were striking for how they reflected an anti-establishment populist mindset. Both France and Austria in the 1980s were peculiar cases of free-market liberal democracies with a complex relationship with the Cold War divide—France pursuing a more independent position within the Western alliance and Austria formally committed to neutrality. The pro-Western positions of the FN and FPÖ, with the latter being the first major Austrian party calling for Austria's NATO accession, were a strong signal of their anti-establishment credentials in their countries (Chryssogelos 2014, 93–5).

After the end of the Cold War, the populist far right's positions shifted substantially at the same time as it proliferated beyond its West–Central European core. The unipolar dominance of the US, the pressures of economic and cultural globalisation, and most of all concerns with immigration, terrorism and security, changed both the geopolitical context and the domestic opportunity structures for these parties. For the two decades during which neoliberal globalisation predominated, the established populist parties of continental Europe, such as the FN and the FPÖ, reversed their Cold War foreign policy positions and shifted to strong anti-Americanism, opposition to the West's military interventions and an explicitly multipolar vision of the world. Their anti-Western animus was such that, in the context of the US wars in the Middle East, they took pro-Arab positions, with FPÖ leader Jörg Haider even visiting Saddam Hussein in 2002. These

positions also aligned with the European far right's historical anti-Semitism. At the time, the far right's populism saw Arabs as the oppressed 'people' and Israel, an ally of the US, as one of the global 'elites' (Chryssogelos 2011, 21–6).

This profile was followed by far-right parties with similar ideological lineages in countries including Belgium, Germany and, for some time, Italy, as well as in the new democracies of Central and Eastern Europe. As support for the populist far right started to spread to other countries, however, its foreign policy profile also became more diverse. Emerging populist parties in countries with Atlanticist strategic cultures such as Denmark and the Netherlands could never be as anti-American as the parties from France and Austria. The 2000s, with its War on Terror, saw the idea gain currency that a transnational 'Western' identity was in a civilisational clash with the Muslim world. But even populist parties with ostensibly pro-US foreign policy profiles exhibited strong opposition to globalisation, especially its cultural dimensions; rejected any transfer of sovereignty to international or regional institutions, especially the EU; and adopted a relativist mindset about global politics, dismissing the idea that the West should dictate its values and policies to the rest of the world (Schori Liang 2007).

In 2009 and 2010 Western-led liberal globalisation entered a protracted period of crisis, which saw economic recession in most liberal democracies, the increased assertiveness of emergent non-Western powers and a generalised distrust of the liberal ideas that had underpinned globalisation since the end of the Cold War. The populist far right maintained its focus on immigration, but non-Western political and economic models also became more attractive during this period as alternatives to the supposedly failing West. Again, with nuances depending on the national context, the overall profile of the populist far right shifted massively from its Cold War pro-Westernism.

On the basis of this analysis, it seems that the populist far right formulates its foreign policy with two objectives in mind. First, its positions must satisfy its anti-establishment imperative, that is, it must appear to challenge the policy consensus of the elites. In Cold War France and Austria, this meant opposition to these states' intermediate strategic positioning and enthusiastic support for pro-US and pro-NATO positions. In the era of Western-led globalisation and the unipolar moment, it meant reversing this policy in favour of anti-Western, anti-American and otherwise anti-internationalist positions; distrusting most aspects of globalisation; and prioritising national sovereignty.

The second goal of populist far-right foreign policy is the formulation of coherent visions of international politics that can serve as a viable alternative to what the 'elites' of the time support. This is important, because a common critique of the far right is that it is backwards-looking and reactionary. But it is more accurate to say that it is adept at drawing on selective elements of various modern and sometimes even progressive and emancipatory concepts of political rule and sovereignty (Drolet and Williams 2018; 2022). In this way, the far right's apparently reactionary foreign policy outlook is at any given time surprisingly also the precursor of eventual transformations in the international system: from its pro-Western positions during the Cold War anticipating the rise

of neoliberal globalisation after 1989, to its sovereigntist, anti-Western and multipolar positions in the 1990s and 2000s foreshadowing the fracturing of the Western-led order after 2010.

A new (populist) West on the horizon?

The populist far right's recent about-faces on foreign policy issues such as Ukraine and Israel can be explained on multiple counts. At a basic level it is an issue of political and electoral strategy. In previous eras, as we have seen, the populist far right formulated its foreign policy with a view to profiling itself as an anti-systemic force, challenging the geopolitical and ideological orthodoxies of the time, and posing as the defender of the 'people' against the consensus of the 'elites'. Populism, not ideology, guided policy.

Today, however, the opposite consideration is at play. In almost all EU member states the parties of the populist far right are in the process of becoming mainstream, both structurally and ideologically. They are occupying ever more central positions in party systems, entering government office and becoming more prominent in the exercise of power. And, by reducing the influence of their populist anti-systemic instincts on their foreign policy, these parties can more easily accommodate established notions of transnational belonging, such as ideas of the 'West' (Greene 2023, 1324, 1333–4).

In this sense, most populist far-right parties' positions on Ukraine and Israel reflect a concerted strategy to become mainstream. In most countries, supporting either Ukraine (or in any case, toning down a pro-Russia stance) or Israel—or both—is indicative of both a party's abandonment of its radicalism and its preparations to take on responsible positions. In countries with a strong existing Atlanticist strategic culture or a geopolitical position threatened by Russia, parties of the populist far right have no option but to support both of these countries to gain respectability (Sierakowski 2023).

The situation is, of course, different in states with a complex geopolitical relationship with Russia and a heavily anti-Semitic legacy, such as Germany and Austria. For the FPÖ in Austria, a Ukraine-sceptic position and an ambivalent stance on the Middle East reflects the national mainstream (Hilgeman 2024; Karnitschnig 2023). So, in this sense, sticking to its long-standing positions (although notably with less intensity than in the past) is commensurate with a strategy of mainstreaming in the Austrian context. While it is more united on its pro-Russia platform, the Alternative for Germany's often equivocal position on Israel is exposing its internal fissures as it grows and becomes a more central player in the German party system. In any case, this oscillating position allows it to play to both sides of public opinion in a country where radical societal currents harbour deep ambivalence towards both Israel and Islam (Kissler 2024; Schindler 2024).

But beyond tactical considerations within specific national circumstances, the populist far right also draws on broader global ideological trends, most recently the election of Trump in the US, to present its rise as part of an emerging new international order. These parties look to authoritarian nationalist and populist leaders around the world who

are transforming the terms of political rule both domestically and internationally. Such leaders mobilise followers on promises of national pride, the reinstatement of traditional values, and a focus on political and cultural sovereignty. More than mass nationalism, which is already a potent political force in the Global South, through their populist authoritarianism these new forces claim that they will resurrect grandiose imperial pasts and rediscover the traditional and cultural values of their countries (Zhang 2023, 2).

European populist parties are translating this global trend into their own vision of a defensive authoritarian West. Despite variations between countries, the overall trend of drifting away from pro-Russia and anti-Israel positions points to one major common element: these parties' rehabilitation with the idea of the West (Chryssogelos 2021, 6, 17). Their 'West' is articulated as the restoration of (vaguely defined) traditional values, just as in other parts of the world. But it also addresses the popular angst for the loss of the West's global prominence. This reclaimed idea of the West promises to return power to the 'people' by representing their cultural concerns in official policymaking. It is equivalent to other 'civilisational' projects around the world (Bettiza et al. 2023), although in contrast to the Global South's civilisationism, the goal is not to supersede and replace Western liberalism, but rather to 'make it great again' by cleansing it and re-rooting it in a specifically demarcated and walled-in part of the world.

Despite its apparent alignment with the current flow of history and the promises of populists that this is the best way to protect Europe, this vision is highly pernicious for the EU. In practical terms, these parties remain united by little more than a desire to undermine the established rules-based mode of EU integration. Their international posturing may appear principled and ideological, but in reality it is always motivated by their search for external counterweights to the EU's unity and ability to act, even to the detriment of its geopolitical and economic interests. The change of tone among many of these parties with regard to Ukraine since Trump's victory in late 2024 already shows that their turn towards Kyiv was always opportunistic, ready to be reversed at a moment's notice. Similarly, their performative support for Israel has more to do with their intention to stoke ethnic tensions within European societies (in a similar vein to those ravaging the US), than to contribute to a pragmatic management of European interests in the Middle East.

Even more problematically, their vision of a nationalist and authoritarian West that is abrogating the universal values that underpin the functioning of the international order, means that they welcome the relativisation and relegation of the West's global position. This is a continuation of their globalisation-era relativism, although it is now being played out not as rejection of but support for (a certain idea of) the West. This is evident in how they ethnicise and racialise Western liberalism, for example, in how they frame the Middle Eastern conflict and Israel's character as a democratic state.

In all these ways, the populists' vision of the West, often peddled in how they speak about Ukraine and Israel, differs fundamentally from both the established self-understanding of the West as it has existed since the end of the Second World War, and the visions of the other non-Western 'civilisational' projects that are unfolding today. These

projects express the vitality and ambition of emerging powers to shape the international order, whereas the populists' idea of the West is fundamentally parochial, defensive, and corrosive of its internal unity and ability to defend its interests globally.

Conclusion: less 'West', more 'Europe'?

In previous decades the populist far right threatened to undo European integration. Today the danger it poses is the opposite: to opportunistically hijack the ideas of a united Europe and of Western values to facilitate its own normalisation. This transformation feeds off global trends in both a symbiotic and an antagonistic fashion. The European populist far right uses the danger of a 'rising rest' to exploit the anxieties of Western citizens, while presenting the assertiveness of populist leaders around the world as an inescapable global trend which the West must emulate. The concurrent positions most of these parties take on the Russia/Ukraine war and the Middle East crisis are helping them to articulate this position and their view of the EU as part of a defensive and exclusivist West.

This rhetoric and posturing of the populist right are no less dangerous than past stances, even if in concrete policy terms they appear closer to the mainstream than in previous decades. With a new Trump presidency ahead of us, and with major uncertainty as to how the crises in Ukraine and the Middle East will unfold, it would not be surprising if these parties were to reverse their Ukraine-friendly stance the moment Trump and Putin came to an accommodation, or to insist on a polarised clash-of-civilisations discourse in the Middle East once Israel's legitimate security needs had been met. Both developments would, of course, be severely detrimental for European security and interests.

While mainstream forces in Europe inevitably must work with parties that are enjoying growing electoral popularity, it does not mean that they must accept all their ideas. All the while the EU supports Ukraine and Israel, it must ensure it does so on its own terms and in support of its own interests. More broadly, the pervasive sense of the 'crisis of the West' that these parties both build on and exacerbate must not entrap the EU's perspective on its own interests in the world: its ability to project its values, maintain strong partnerships globally, and cultivate multilateral and institutional processes wherein it is at its strongest.

Perhaps paradoxically, the time may have come when, for Europe to maintain a global and confident outlook, it must cultivate a distinct foreign policy identity separate from that of the West. Rather than lamenting the passing of the West's global prominence, the EU should interact with the rest of world not as a frustrated retreating hegemon, but as a confident equal, defending its interests as well as promoting clear ideas about how best to manage global common problems. Similarly, its support for Ukraine and Israel should be framed not as the desperate defence of a besieged West, but as part of a sanguine and principled strategy to shape its geopolitical environment according to its interests. All this presupposes that the EU resists, as it must, the populist far right's ideological vision of an exclusivist and crude West operating within an authoritarian international order.

ORCID iD

Angelos Chryssogelos https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2350-9112

References

Bassets, M. (2023). Marine Le Pen: 'If Russia wins the war, it will be catastrophic . . . if Ukraine wins, it will mean WWIII has been unleashed'. *El País*, 13 April. https://english.elpais.com/international/2023-04-13/marine-le-pen-if-russia-wins-the-war-it-will-be-catastrophic-if-ukraine-wins-it-will-mean-wwiii-has-been-unleashed.html. Accessed 29 January 2025.

Beck, E. (2024). Israel should not interfere in Austria's internal deadlock – analysis. *Jerusalem Post*, 30 September. https://www.jpost.com/international/article-822545. Accessed 29 January 2025.

Bettiza, G., Bolton, D., & Lewis, D. (2023). Civilizationism and the ideological contestation of the liberal international order. *International Studies Review*. doi:10.1093/isr/viad006.

Birchard, R. (2023). Where does Europe's far right stand on the Israel-Hamas war? *Deutsche Welle*, 18 November. https://www.dw.com/en/where-do-europes-far-right-parties-stand-on-the-israel-hamas-conflict/a-67465217. Accessed 29 January 2025.

Chryssogelos, A.-S. (2010). Undermining the West from within: European populists, the US and Russia. *European View*, *9*(2), 267–77.

Chryssogelos, A.-S. (2011). *Old ghosts in new sheets: European populist parties and foreign policy*. Martens Centre. Brussels.

Chryssogelos, A.-S. (2014). Reaction and adaptation in the longue durée: The far-right, international politics and the state in historical perspective. In R. Saull & A. Anievas (eds.), *The longue durée of the far-right* (pp. 85–105). London: Routledge.

Chryssogelos, A. (2021). *Is there a populist foreign policy?* London: Chatham House.

Drolet, J.-F., & Williams, M. C. (2018). Radical conservatism and global order: International theory and the New Right. *International Theory*, *10*(3), 285–313.

Drolet, J.-F., & Williams, M. C. (2022). From critique to reaction: The New Right, critical theory and international relations. *Journal of International Political Theory*, *18*(1), 23–45.

Filc, D., & Pardo, S. (2021). Israel's right-wing populists: The European connection. *Survival*, *63*(3), 99–122.

Greene, T. (2023). Natural allies? Varieties of attitudes towards the United States and Russia within the French and German radical right. *Nations and Nationalism*, *29*(4), 1321–37.

Hilgeman, M. (2024). Pro-Russian FPÖ gains in Austrian election could be bad for Ukraine. *Kyiv Post*, 30 September. https://www.kyivpost.com/post/39817. Accessed 29 January 2025.

Ivaldi, G., & Zankina, E., eds. (2023). *The impacts of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on right-wing populism in Europe*. European Center for Populism Studies. Brussels.

Karnitschnig, M. (2023). How Hitler's homeland became Israel's European BFF. *Politico*, 15 November. https://www.politico.eu/article/adolf-hitler-homeland-austria-became-israel-europe-bff-palestine-conflict/. Accessed 29 January 2025.

Kissler, A. (2024). Ermahnen oder Unterstützen? Die AfD ringt um ihr Verhältnis zu Israel. *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 16 April. https://www.nzz.ch/international/die-afd-und-israel-die-rechten-ringen-um-das-mass-an-solidaritaet-ld.1826517. Accessed 29 January 2025.

Schindler, F. (2024). „Ich verstehe nicht, wieso wir als AfD nun Israel in den Rücken fallen". *Die Welt*, 23 October. https://www.welt.de/politik/deutschland/article254080382/AfD-Kritik-an-Chrupalla-Ich-verstehe-nicht-wieso-wir-als-AfD-nun-Israel-in-den-Ruecken-fallen.html. Accessed 29 January 2025.

Schori Liang, C., ed. (2007). *Europe for the Europeans: The foreign and security policy of the populist radical right*. London: Routledge.
Shekhovtsov, A. (2017). *Russia and the Western far right: Tango noir*. London: Routledge.
Sierakowski, S. (2023). Russian aggression is undermining populism. *Project Syndicate*, 17 January. https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/russia-war-undermine-western-populists-by-slawomir-sierakowski-2023-01. Accessed 29 January 2025.
Zhang, C. (2023). Postcolonial nationalism and the global right. *Geoforum*. doi:10.1016/j.geoforum.2023.103824.

Author biography

Dr Angelos Chryssogelos *is a Research Associate of the Martens Centre and Reader in Politics and International Relations in the School of Social Sciences at London Metropolitan University. In the past he has held research and faculty positions at London School of Economics, King's College London, the Weatherhead Centre at Harvard, the School of Advanced International Studies Johns Hopkins and the Schuman Centre of the European University Institute.*