



When Populist Friends Abroad Hurt You at Home: How Populist Leaders in Italy and the Netherlands Coped with the Russian-Ukrainian War

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INTRODUCTION

The Russian-Ukrainian war that started in 2022 embarrassed several of Russia's European political friends. Until then, Russia had enjoyed the sympathy of various politicians in Europe, particularly of right-wing populists. To such populists, strong leaders abroad, such as Russian President

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Vladimir Putin, set an example to their political aspirations and offered the prospect of potential support and recognition. Some European populists met President Putin in a formal governmental capacity (e.g., Italian Foreign Minister Luigi di Maio, and Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán). Others encountered him or other Russian representatives outside of official business (such as French populist leader Marine le Pen and *Vlaams Belang* frontman Philip Dewinter), or developed strong personal ties, such as Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi. Clearly, not all right-wing populists took a positive view of Russia: the Swedish Democrats, for instance, have long been critical of Russia and its foreign policy (Kenes, 2020, p. 34). The war has rendered warm relations with Russia and its leader a liability rather than an asset. Philip Dewinter was asked to step down as Vice President of the (regional) Flemish Parliament because of his strong ties (De Morgen, 2022). Other populist parties find it difficult to maintain a positive attitude toward Russia: the German populist *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) is heavily divided over arms deliveries to Ukraine and boycotts against Russia (ZDF, 2022). In France, Marine Le Pen's (*Rassemblement National*) chances to beat Emmanuel Macron at the April 2022 French Presidential elections were thwarted by her long-standing ties with Putin (Politico, 2022). Why were European right-wing populists so charmed with Russia and its leader? For populists in government in some countries, it was a geostrategic necessity: countries like Hungary and Italy have long been dependent on Russia for energy (Prontera, 2021). For others, particularly populists who opposed the cultural pluralism that liberal democracy embraces, it meant lining up with, and receiving recognition from, an international actor that helped prove that less pluralist notions of democracy might be a viable alternative. For others yet, interest from Russia might produce media attention and political legitimacy. For Russia, the interest lay in having allies in countries that had been critical of Russia's weakening democracy under Putin, and in reducing political cohesion within the European Union (EU).

Here, we look at right-wing populist leaders in Italy and the Netherlands and investigate the extent to which the Russian-Ukrainian war has made them redefine their position toward Russia and its president. We theorize the conditions under which leaders are open to change, even reverse, their relative perspectives on international politics, drawing on the Comparative Foreign Policy Analysis literature on cognitive beliefs and foreign policy change. Subsequently, we trace (changes in) the outlook on Russia of Dutch and Italian populist leaders. In Italy we look at the evolution of

attitudes toward Russia expressed by the three most successful Italian populist parties recently classified as ‘pro-Russian’ (Snegovaya, 2021): the Lega, the Five Star Movement (M5S), and Brothers of Italy (FdI). While Lega and FdI are usually classified as right-wing populist (Verbeek & Zaslove, 2015), M5S is often labeled a “hybrid”, “pure” populist party (Mosca & Tronconi, 2019), due to its eclectic nature and its “ideological neutrality” beyond left and right. Regarding The Netherlands, we investigate the two most vocal right-wing populist parties: Geert Wilders’s *Partij voor de Vrijheid* (PVV) and Thierry Baudet’s *Forum voor Democratie* (FvD). We examine the 2014–2017 period as the crucial period during which Russia’s standing in global politics was marred by the Sochi Olympic scandal, the annexation of Crimea, and the alleged interference in the American Presidential election campaign in 2016. For all populist leaders under examination we will describe their discursive performance and their views on Russia before and after this period of change.

POPULISTS’ ADAPTING TO CHANGE: THEORETICAL INSIGHTS

Populist leaders have early on sought support from like-minded politicians in other countries. In Europe, right-wing populists regularly meet to display solidarity and, presumably, align strategies. In 2018, there was an attempt to found The Movement, a club of anti-EU and populist actors (Politico, 2018). December 2021 saw the so-called Warsaw Summit of right-wing populists from, among other countries, Austria, France, Hungary, Poland, and Spain (Die Welt, 2021). European populists and North American conservatives also sought to establish a platform for exchange (Reuters, 2022). Nevertheless, populists do not always blend perfectly: in the current European Parliament (EP), some right-wing populists cooperate with other parties in the European Conservatives and Reformist Group, whereas others joined the Identity and Democracy Group. Yet others, like Hungary’s Fidesz, remain outside an EP political group. Fidesz left the EP’s Christian Democratic Political Group (EPP) in 2021 when expulsion seemed a real possibility.

Right-wing populists thus do not always want to be identified with one another: for example, Fidesz wanted—and still wants—to be recognized as a Christian-democratic party. Until the 2021 Warsaw Summit, the Polish PiS party was wary of being seen as close with Marine Le Pen who was considered too pro-Russian—a difficult position in Poland even before the Russian-Ukrainian war. Nevertheless, Dutch populist Geert Wilders

repeatedly showed up with Belgian populist Filip Dewinter, touring migrant-dominated suburbs of Brussels together. Also, in 2021 right-wing populist parties in EU member states, with the exception of Germany's AfD, issued a joint statement of cooperation within the EU that seemed the precursor of a separate Political Group of their own (Euronews, 2021). This brought together relatively pro-Russian populists (e.g., RN) and those who were careful to avoid close association with Russia (e.g., PiS).

The overarching interest of right-wing populists and Russian President Putin lies in conveying the plausibility that liberal democracy as professed by most European (and North American) politicians need not live up to its promises: in this narrative, liberal democracies suffer from a perceived lack of representation of citizens, fail to combat inequality, are rife with corruption and political scandal, and offer little alternation between governing elites. The more citizens embrace this narrative, the more empathy is mustered for systems that formally aspire to be a different type of democracy—an illiberal democracy. It thus reinforces the domestic status of illiberal democratic populist leaders like Hungary's Orbán and Poland's Kaczyński. For Russia, the benefit is twofold: internationally, the more the West is divided by its idea of democracy, the less democratic values can be used as a diplomatic instrument against Russia; domestically, the less the West lives up to its democratic promises, the less attractive this idea will be for Russian citizens, and the more presidential rule gains credibility as an alternative. By consequence, populist leaders were tempted not to be too critical of Russia (cf. Destradi & Plagemann, 2019).

Then came the war that posed a problem to many populists. It became more difficult to show understanding for Russia's qualms about western encirclement now that Russia had started a war of aggression. On top of that, Russia could threaten the energy security of the very people that populists claimed to defend. On a deeper level, a resurgence of the idea of Russian imperialism might well change one of the most fundamental conditions that originally helped fertilize the ground for populism: the end of the Cold War had contested the idea that Russia was a common enemy requiring unity among mainstream democratic parties (Chryssogelos et al., 2023). A new Cold War would reduce the political space for populists and would force them to embrace more explicitly the values of liberal democracy in the face of illiberal aggression. How did populist leaders cope with that situation?

Would populist leaders stick to their narratives or would they make a *volte face* and abandon their sympathy for illiberal democracies like Russia? Answering this question depends on one's perspective on populism. If one defines populism as a strategy for gaining power, then populist leaders will engage in opportunistic policy change, parallel to their assessment of where to obtain electoral gain or avoid electoral loss (Weyland, 2017). If one approaches populism as a thin ideology that juxtaposes corrupt elites with the pure people, combined with elements from another ideology (Mudde, 2004), one would expect populist leaders to remain as close as possible to their narrative, certainly where they pit elites against people. "Loss aversion theory" (Welch, 2005) offers a causal mechanism for the former perspective, while "Cognitive dissonance reduction theory" (Festinger, 1957) provides the causal mechanism for the latter. Whereas cognitive dissonance reduction theory helps us understand the cognitive unease experienced by politicians, loss aversion theory provides a clue as to which dissonance reduction strategy they apply.

Cognitive dissonance theory starts from the premise that individuals cannot receive and process all information incentives coming toward them (Cancino-Montecinos et al., 2020). Therefore, an individual needs a belief system to select information incentives and interpret them to be able to act. If new information contradicts the available belief system, the individual needs to redress the imbalance between information and belief system. Three major options are available: adjusting the belief system to the new information, adjusting the new information to the belief system, or trivializing the perceived discrepancy. Because the first option is harder to accomplish, most individuals likely opt for the latter two strategies. This may involve ignoring the presence of new information, but also producing rationalizations to make contradictory information fit the existing belief system. Cognitive dissonance reduction theory is particularly adamant that so-called master beliefs will remain intact. In case of populist leaders, we would expect their specific notion of the people versus the elite to be central to their world orientation and therefore to remain unscathed. Other elements in their ideologies might be subject to reinterpretation. David Welch's (2005) loss aversion theory, which relies on cognitive psychology, organization theory, and prospect theory, helps us understand foreign policy change (FPC): whereas the scholarly debate agrees that radical FPC is unusual (Hermann, 1990; Joly & Haesebrouck, 2021), Welch argues that radical change becomes possible when foreign policy fails repeatedly or catastrophically, or when leaders become convinced that

failure is imminent. Leaders are more likely to embrace the risks and costs of FPC to avoid losses than to realize gains. Loss aversion causes leaders to embrace change when they expect the status quo to generate continued painful loss (Welch, 2005, p. 42). Such a framework is useful to understand the conditions under which populist leaders—who are extremely sensitive to the “support” of domestic audiences (the “people!”) accept the inherent costs of (embracing the risks in) FP change.

CASE SELECTION

This contribution will focus on Italy and the Netherlands for three reasons. First, both countries have been dependent on Russia for oil and gas for a considerable time. Italy has always been prepared to ignore European or Atlantic unease over autocratic energy suppliers to ensure its energy imports (Giacomello & Verbeek, 2011). The Netherlands became more dependent in the 2010s since earthquakes in the gas winning region of Groningen urged it to reduce its own gas production. Second, both countries have been home to populist parties for decades. Importantly, in both countries populist parties were crucial participants in (or supporters of) various governments. In The Netherlands the *Lijst Pim Fortuyn* (LPF) was a full-fledged member of the coalition (2002), whereas Wilders’s PVV formally agreed to support the Rutte I minority government (2010–2012). Italy is well-known for the continued electoral success of populist leaders in the last decades. Interestingly, the Conte I government with *Lega* and M5S (2018–2019) was the first Western European government without a single mainstream party, making Italy ruled “exclusively by anti-establishment forces” (Orsina, 2019, p.1). Third, in the 2010s populists spoke highly of Russia in both countries. Italian populist parties developed a “special relationship” with Vladimir Putin. In The Netherlands leaders of FvD and PVV looked favorably to the Russian President.

ITALY

Populists and Putin Before the War

The relationship between Italian populist parties and Vladimir Putin has been noteworthy. To understand these *liasons dangereuses*, we first look at the ideological traits of these parties and then assess the kind of relationship they developed with Moscow in recent years. Silvio Berlusconi’s

portrayal of Putin reflects the common attitude of all Italian populist parties toward Putin's regime. Berlusconi developed a personal friendship with Putin for years, justifying the invasion of Crimea, praising the Russian leader for his qualities, and defining him a "warrior for the freedom and for the democracy of his country" (L'Espresso, 2022). Berlusconi has also constantly stressed his personal role in promoting a positive relationship between Western countries and Russia, as occurred in 2002 when Italy hosted a NATO–Russia summit (Pantucci & Ambrosetti, 2022, p.10). The Lega—that Salvini transformed from a regionalist political actor into a national-wide populist radical right party (Albertazzi et al., 2018)—has been the party closest to Putin, signing an agreement of collaboration with Putin's United Russia in 2017. These ties "became embarrassing in 2019 when members of the League were accused of seeking illegal party funding from Russia" (Bordignon et al., 2022, 4). Others stress how Salvini considers Putin a model for his government style, "a giant", and an "an ally in undermining the EU". After the war of 2014, Salvini affirmed before the EU Parliament that Putin's Russia was more democratic than the EU, referring to Crimea "not simply as a 'Russian', but as a 'liberated' territory waiting for international recognition" (Makarychev & Terry, 2020, p.27). Indeed, "like Berlusconi, Salvini admired the Russian president's political successes. [...] In contrast with the FI leader, Salvini shared with Putin a belief in the importance of defending Christian values, while admiring his autocratic position in the Russian political system" (Bordignon et al., 2022, p.4). The leader of FdI, Giorgia Meloni, offered her congratulations to Putin on Twitter for his electoral victory in March 2018, stressing the "unequivocal willingness of the Russian people". Such discursive performance was strongly related to FdI's identity, which displayed sovereigntist and Eurosceptic views (Zulianello, 2019), adopting an electoral manifesto in 2018 that emphasized the need of "taking back control of national sovereignty" (Chryssogelos, 2017). Also, some members of the M5S have expressed sympathy for Putin, even participating (with the current Undersecretary of Minister of Foreign Affairs, Manlio Di Stefano) at the convention of Putin's party. Di Stefano considered Ukraine (in 2016) as a "puppet state in the hands of USA and NATO" (L'Espresso, 2022). While criticizing Russia's actions in Ukraine, the M5S opposed EU sanctions against Moscow, arguing that, "the Italian government is too subservient to its European and NATO allies and neglects the national interest" (Siddi, 2019, p.127). After the Russian invasion of Crimea, Lega, FdI, and M5S all wanted to end the sanctions against Moscow. Especially

for the Lega, economic considerations came into play. The Northern regions—the party’s main reservoir of votes—had been hit the hardest by the effects of EU sanctions and Russian countersanctions” (Siddi, 2019, p.128). The Lega, like the other parties, was “well aware that it cannot deliver on the promise of lifting the sanctions, but it can still blame others (at the EU level) for this” (Makarychev & Terry, 2020, p.27). *Lega* also voted against (with the M5S abstaining) on a motion in the European Parliament condemning the attempt to kill the leader of the Russian opposition, Andrey Navalny. M5S and *Lega* emphasized this point in their Yellow-Green coalition “contract”, which portrayed Russia as a partner rather than a menace (Coticchia, 2021). On the whole, all these “Russian sympathizing parties” (Bordignon et al., 2022), illustrate what the literature (Onderco, 2019; Snegovaya, 2021) has defined as “a populist link” with Putin’s regime.

Italian Populist Parties and Putin During the War

The Italian-Russian “special relationship” was not endorsed by populist parties only. Irrespective of the ideological affinity between Italian populists and Putin, “Italy has been one of the leading advocates in the EU of dialogue and cooperation with Russia [...]. Italy has consistently sought to hedge between its close transatlantic ties and its longstanding connections with Moscow (Pantucci & Ambrosetti, 2022, p.1). Because of Russia’s growing strategic role in areas vital to Italian interests (Libya, the Mediterranean, fighting ISIL in Syria), “Italy’s interest in mediating and facilitating the de-escalation of tensions between Russia and the West was functional to Rome’s goal of reconciling its quest for cooperation with Moscow with its commitment to the Euro-Atlantic community” (Siddi, 2019, p.132).

Interestingly, however, despite these traditional ties between Italy and Russia, Italy’s energy dependence on Moscow, and the “special relationship” between Italian populists and Vladimir Putin, the Draghi government (2021–2022) abandoned hedging: it strongly condemned the Russian attack on Ukraine, provided economic and military support to Kiev, and sustained EU sanctions against Moscow. Indeed, 24 February 2022 proved a watershed in Italian-Russian relations. The Draghi government, a technocratic government backed by most Italian parties (but not FdI), described the invasion as a profound assault on European security (Kazmin, 2022). *Lega*, M5S, and FdI supported all governmental measures adopted since February 2022. While after the 2014 Russian invasion

of Crimea, Berlusconi endorsed the annexation, criticized EU sanctions against Moscow, and praised Putin's leadership, all populist parties condemned the 2022 Russian invasion. The parliamentary votes confirmed the large bipartisan consensus that generally marks Italian foreign policy (Coticchia & Vignoli, 2020). It also corroborates the hypothesis that Italy supports its traditional allies in crisis situations (Natalizia & Morini, 2020). Parties in parliament generally remained loyal to the government: its communications and decrees (e.g., 25 February, 1 March, 19 May, 21 June) were adopted with over 80% of the vote, with sporadic "rebel votes" by M5S and *Lega*. Yet, populist leaders soon acted differently in public debate. Matteo Salvini distanced himself from Putin, condemning the invasion and showing solidarity outside Ukraine's embassy in Rome. In the Senate, on 1 March, he affirmed that, "there is an aggressor and a victim and we should stand with the victim". Salvini also visited the Ukrainian-Polish border, where a local mayor used Salvini's 2014 pro-Putin T-shirt to defy him in front of the cameras. M5S also supported the government and, when one of its MPs (the President of the Parliamentary Foreign Affairs Committee) voted against the motion advanced by the majority coalition on 1 March, the party expelled its member. Finally, Meloni—who was elected President of the European Conservatives and Reforming Party (ECR) in 2020—firmly condemned Moscow and strongly supported Ukraine, renewing FdI's Western and European commitments. FdI has consistently supported all governmental decisions on Ukraine, thus spreading abroad the image of a reliable, pro-Western conservative party.

In the first days of the war, the Italian "populist sympathizers" of Putin changed their views. After 24 February, continuing the "Putin lovers" image would have increased their reputational costs in the West. In line with loss aversion theory, leaders abandoned the status quo (their pro-Putin positions) to avoid painful loss. However, whereas initially Italian public opinion converged on support for Kiev, this changed after several weeks, and political parties followed suit. Salvini "correctly felt that a large part of Italians [were] not comfortable with the mainstream position of supporting Ukraine and blaming only Russia" (De Luca, 2022). Oddly enough, Salvini adopted a "pacifist position", pushing for a diplomatic solution while criticizing the deployment of weapons he had voted for (La Repubblica, 2022). While Italy's television talk shows gave plenty of air-time to Moscow sympathizers, Salvini adopted a novel discourse, drawing on the relevance of peace, against the "warmongers" of the EU (Sebastiani,

2020), and asking Biden on Twitter to “lower the tones”. Before the regional elections in the Spring, his “old” Euroscepticism had come back, while “a pacifist” Salvini openly considered the deployment of weapons to Kyiv as an obstacle to peace (Cicchitto, 2022). Elections mattered, as illustrated by the evolution of Italian attitudes toward the war. In April 60% of Italians preferred a diplomatic solution to “supporting Ukraine at any cost” (RAI, 2022). Interestingly, 36% of right-wing voters considered the Russian invasion somehow “justified”. Italy was the only G7 country where Russia not seen as a major risk (Munich Security Brief, 2022). Ukraine was considered the major obstacle to peace by 35% of Italians (while 39% identified Russia as the main impediment to a diplomatic solution) (Krastev & Leonard, 2022). On Twitter, Salvini constantly emphasized that he agreed with the majority of Italians who refused to send weapons to Ukraine. He also criticized sanctions, emphasizing their limited results and the never-ending “Italian need of Russian gas”. Subsequently, M5S also moved toward a more qualified position. While affirming his loyalty to the coalition, Conte announced to work on a resolution to avoid an escalation in the procurement of weapons to Ukraine. M5S’s criticism of the government’s war policies led to an open conflict with pro-Ukrainian Minister of Foreign Affairs—and former M5S leader—Luigi Di Maio, who decided to abandon M5S, taking with him dozens of MPs (Rainews, 2022).

The scholarly debate (Coticchia & Vignoli, 2020; Diodato, 2022) has emphasized the gap between M5S’s anti-war discourse and the stunning continuity in its defense policies (missions, procurement, etc.) when in government (Coticchia, 2021). From a theoretical point of view, Salvini and Conte started focusing on the “domestic costs” of Italy’s support to Kyiv, doubting sanctions and military aid. Indeed, after the war’s initial days, the two leaders aimed at the (large) domestic audience that was skeptical of supporting Ukraine at any cost. At the same time, inter-party competition interfered: while Meloni vocally stated her firm pro-Western (and Ukrainian) position—still criticizing the EU for inflation, Conte and Salvini needed to mark their relative positions (the latter criticizing Di Maio and the former emphasizing traditional pacifist opposition to increased military spending). Eventually, the resistance to meet NATO spending commitments and the growing criticism over Italy’s military assistance to Ukraine pushed M5S to end its support for the government (Bechis, 2022). Thus, with M5S voting for sending more aid to Kyiv, Conte’s comments opened the political crisis: Salvini and Berlusconi

exploited the contrast between Draghi and Conte, dropped their support for the government, which then collapsed (The Conversations, 2022), provoking elections that would usher in Meloni as Prime Minister.

THE NETHERLANDS

Populists and Russia Before the War

Celebrating 400 years of Dutch-Russian relations by commemorating Czar Peter's study trip to the Netherlands and organizing exhibitions and music and ballet performances, the year 2013 was meant to mark the good relations between the two countries. Actually, the year produced many frictions, including Dutch unease over a new Russian law punishing "non-traditional sexual relations", the arrest in Russia of the crew of the Dutch-registered Greenpeace ship *Arctic Sunrise*, and the arrest of a Russian diplomat in The Hague on grounds of domestic violence. The following year, the relationship would sour with the Russian invasion and annexation of the Crimea, the violent conflict in Ukraine's Donbas region, and particularly the suspected Russian role in the downing of flight MH17 over Ukraine, causing the death of 298 passengers, among which 198 Dutch citizens.

Around the time Vladimir Putin started his third term as Russian President in 2012, scholars observed that Putin appealed to populists from the left and the right. In the Netherlands, where populist parties had attracted between 20 and 25% of the national vote since 2002 (except 2003 [12.4%]), the PVV was accused of showing a Janus face of being critical of Russia at home, but effectively supporting Russia's foreign policy goals in practice (Political Capital Institute 2014, p.6). Indeed, Wilders's presence at a European-wide far right parties' meeting in Turin, also hosting Viktor Zlobarev (MP for Putin's United Fatherland Party), was seen as indicative of this. It has always been difficult to classify Wilders's PVV: because of its defense of the welfare state and of women's and LGBTQIA+ rights, and the relative absence of advocating strong leadership, it could not be simply cast as far right; at the same time, its islamophobia and resistance to immigration and, by consequence, to multiculturalism earned the PVV the label of nativist populism (Mudde, 2014). The PVV's ideological traits show in its anti-EU attitude: the European Union represents the agent that opens the door to immigration from both outside and inside the EU. At the same time, the PVV portrays

the EU as transferring Dutch people's money to spendthrift and corrupt countries in the EU's south. Within this context, the PVV in the early 2010s did not explicitly support or condemn Russia in its foreign policy (indeed, it does not surface in its 2012, 2014, or 2017 election programs). The events of 2014 would be fitted into that general mold.

Dutch Populists, Russia, and Ukraine

When in early 2014 events started unfolding at Kyiv's Maidan Square, the EU (together with the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development) was contemplating a 11 billion euro package for Ukraine. In the Dutch parliament, various parties criticized this package, most vocally Geert Wilders, who complained about Ukraine's weak anti-corruption policies and the transfer of Dutch taxpayers' money to a state outside the EU. His diatribe occurred 2 weeks before the Dutch would elect regional assemblies and, indirectly, the Dutch Senate; in May 2014 the EU would hold elections for the European Parliament. The debate coincided with the Maidan Square protests where Members of the European Parliament joined the calls for the resignation of the pro-Russian Ukrainian President Yanukovich. Wilders referred to 'inciting europhiles' holding 'imperialistic dreams' (based on *Handelingen Tweede Kamer* 5 March, 2014). Wilders's position followed logically from his view of the EU, but clearly served Russia's interest in deterring the EU from supporting regime change in Kyiv. Shortly after Maidan and Yanukovich's flight, Russia struck in the Crimea. Dutch political parties were not as quick to condemn Russian interference in 2014 as they would be in 2022. Motions explicitly condemning Russian behavior as a violation of Ukrainian sovereignty or as aggression were only backed by a minority of *Christen-Democratisch Appèl* (Christian-Democratic Appeal; CDA), D66, and *GroenLinks*; the government supported the preparation of phased EU sanctions against Russia, but at the same time continued the preparation of a Dutch trade mission to Moscow as part of the biannual World Energy Forum. The PVV consistently argued against sanctions against Russia and against EU financial support for Ukraine (*Handelingen Tweede Kamer* 13 March 2014; 18 March 2014).

The downing of flight M17 on 17 July 2014, the wave of emotions it stirred throughout Dutch society and the ensuing discussion on Russian involvement and responsibility changed the general attitude of Dutch political parties and government toward Russia. The PVV joined in condemning Russia for its involvement in shooting the aircraft, but retained

its position that EU activism at Maidan Square had contributed to escalation, and remained skeptical about sanctions, because they would hurt the Dutch economy. When pressed, PVV MP Beertens stated that Islam-inspired terrorism (ISIS) posed a bigger threat to Dutch security than East-Ukrainian separatism (Handelingen Tweede Kamer 2 September 2014). At the same time, the PVV supported reinforcing the military in the context of events in Eastern Europe as long as this would not require new funding, suggesting to abort Dutch military missions to Mali and Afghanistan instead (Handelingen Tweede Kamer 13 November 2022).

From 2015 the debate focuses on the EU Association Treaty with Ukraine, which had been concluded in 2014. This mobilized a broad coalition of left-wing and right-wing opponents that succeeded in collecting enough signatures to hold a consultative referendum, a direct democracy device that had been in place since 1 June 2015. The turnout narrowly surpassed the required threshold of 30% of the electorate. A majority of 61% rejected adoption of the treaty, forcing the government to reconsider and require a guarantee from ‘Brussels’ that the treaty would not automatically lead to full membership. On that promise, the Dutch parliament endorsed the treaty in May 2017. Importantly, the anti-treaty campaign propelled Thierry Baudet into the spotlight, who after the referendum founded a new party *Forum voor Democratie* (FvD). The 2017 electoral manifestos of PVV and FvD demanded that parliament would reject the treaty. Neither manifesto mentioned the MH17 crash. The PVV again pointed to Brussels as the enemy: “europhiles” had “forced the Treaty down the throat” of the Dutch citizen (Partij voor de Vrijheid, 2017: 3 [unnumbered]). FvD presented an analysis that held Russia in the clear: it considered the treaty as a major cause of the violent conflict within Ukraine and of its conflict with Russia (Forum voor Democratie, 2017, p.8). It called for normalizing relations with Russia and for reintroducing visas for Ukrainian travelers. Sanctions should be abolished as they only harmed the Dutch agricultural sector (Forum voor Democratie, 2017, p.22).

Although supportive of the sanctions, the PVV opened up to Russia in the following years. In March 2018, Wilders visited Moscow as a counterpoint to “hysterical Russophobia”, meeting a junior member of Putin’s government. Wilders stated that Russia was an ally in the battle against terrorism and immigration from Africa and described Putin as a “true patriot”. He even expressed doubts regarding the Russian origins of the BUK missile that took down MH17 (Nederlands Dagblad, 2018). In its 2021 electoral program the PVV argued that bad relations with Russia

were detrimental to Dutch interests and called for a normalization of relations. Importantly, however, the PVV insisted on the persecution of responsible individuals for the MH17 tragedy including responsible state actors and favored continuation of related sanctions (Partij voor de Vrijheid, 2021, p.48). FvD's 2021 program did not mention MH17 and called for restoring Dutch-Russian relations (Forum voor Democratie, 2021, p.38).

On 24 February 2022, the PVV clearly condemned Russia's invasion of Ukraine labeling it a violation of Ukrainian sovereignty. It called the West's earlier suggestion that Ukraine might eventually join NATO a blunder, but explicitly stated that this could never justify the Russian invasion. Wilders endorsed the assistance of Ukrainian refugees, calling them 'real refugees', but preferred accommodation in the region. In subsequent months, the war surfaced in Wilders's tweets only infrequently: Wilders communicated mostly on Islam, migration, energy prices, and on the daily death threats he continues to receive. In his tweets Wilders mainly instrumentally referred to the war in order to criticize the Dutch government: imposing sanctions would harm Dutch citizens and would not stop Russia from selling oil and gas elsewhere and thus financing its war machine; Ukrainian refugees would be welcome in the Netherlands, provided the government expelled asylum seekers from Africa and Syria; generally, Wilders presented a frame that the government's policies were detrimental to the interest of the Dutch citizens: "I have sympathy for Ukrainians but I represent the one million Dutch citizens who have elected me" (Wilders tweet 18 March 2022). In doing so, he would portray Prime Minister Rutte and Finance Minister Sigrid Kaag as part of a cosmopolitan elite who would discuss the war while drinking champagne at the Davos World Forum (Wilders tweet 21 May 2022).

The war frequently surfaced in Baudet's analyses of current events on FvD's website and in his tweets. Interestingly, Baudet, while regretting the human suffering, refused to condemn or endorse the Russian invasion and instead took the position that there is no morality in international politics. Proposing that international conflicts are shady and complex, he found plausible Russian claims that the Russian-speaking minority in Ukraine might have asked for Russian support; that EU and NATO invitations to Ukraine in the 2010s formed the root cause; and that the West had violated norms regarding territorial change in Kosovo and Libya. To Baudet, the war fits the bigger picture of the Great Reset, the theme of the Davos World Economic Forum. To Baudet, wary of conspiring elites, Covid and

the Western reaction to Russia formed part of an attempt to govern the world economy at the expense of national sovereignty (Handelingen Tweede Kamer 28 February 2022). In his current affairs analyses on FvD's website, Baudet depicted NATO's expansion, the color revolutions, as well as the Arab Spring as part of a long term American objective of regime changes globally. Given Ukraine's vital geopolitical position, Baudet refuses to condemn or endorse Russia, but proposes a neutral Ukraine as a way out of the crisis (Baudet, 2022). Unsurprisingly, FvD opposes Ukrainian EU membership and announced its active opposition to the ratification of an accession treaty (Forum voor Democratie, 2022). The FvD's implosion after 2021 and further demise of the CDA paved the way for a new political party: the Farmer Citizen Movement (BBB). Defying classification, BBB exploits discontent around the dormant Dutch center-periphery political cleavage, winning the 2023 regional and Senate elections. It vehemently condemns Russia, but frames the Dutch interest in the conflict in terms of food security and thus in reinforcing the position of the agricultural sector.

CONCLUSION

Populist leaders who used to take a sympathetic view on Russia and its leader arrived at a fork in the road when Russia struck against Ukraine in February 2022. Of course, the challenge was more salient for populists in government, like in Italy, who had to decide on foreign policy, than for populists in opposition, like in the Netherlands, who could watch from the side stage. Nevertheless, all populists faced a potential loss of support because of the general condemnation of Russian aggression. This chapter argued that these politicians face cognitive dissonance because of the war and that any complete *volte face* on Russia would depend on their fear of losing their constituents' support.

In the Netherlands right-wing populists differ in their response to the Russian-Ukrainian war. Geert Wilders and his PVV clearly distance themselves from the war, explicitly condemning Russian aggression. Thierry Baudet and his FvD do not embrace the Russian position but engage actively and frequently in attempts to "counterbalance" what they consider the media's pro-Ukrainian bias and to give room to alternative perspectives, including the Russian. FvD goes furthest by pointing to the West when looking for the deeper causes of the war. Both populist parties

reject sanctions against Russia, as they are counterproductive and hurt the people in the Netherlands.

From a theoretical perspective, both parties interpret the events since February 2022 from their dominant political beliefs. Wilders consistently talks about the effects for the Dutch people—the one million citizens who voted for him. Indeed, he hammers on the suffering of the Dutch people in terms of inflation and the effect of sanctions, lambasting the Dutch political elite whom he always presents as neglecting the people. Interestingly, since the outbreak of the war he no longer talks about Putin as an admirable politician: it is not opportune to present the Russian leader as an ally against terrorism and migration. Baudet, on the other hand, frequently addresses the war and the disinformation that he perceives. Indeed, it fits his dominant beliefs regarding the elites and the people: to him, supporting Ukraine in this war is part of, or plays into the hands of, a larger elitist threat: the ideas of the cosmopolitan elites, symbolized by the Davos World Forum, to reset the world economy.

Both Dutch leaders thus engage in cognitive dissonance reduction: Wilders by focusing on the domestic effects of the war in the Netherlands, Baudet by presenting ‘alternative information’ to the dominant news. In terms of loss aversion theory, both Wilders’s reluctance to praise Putin as he has in the past and his explicit condemnation of Russia’s aggression fit the theory: these adjustments are necessary to not to lose touch with the feelings of his electorate. Baudet, on the contrary, seems prepared to actively defy the dominant narrative and thus looks undaunted by electoral risks. Indeed, public opinion research suggests that not even 5% of FvD supporters see Russia as a threat in contrast to over 50% of PVV voters (Houtkamp et al., 2022) Maybe this is understandable as FvD seems less and less interested in having impact through elections but presents itself increasingly as an alternative social bubble (Het Parool, 2021).

In Italy, the war, during its first weeks, fostered a relevant change in populist parties that had expressed strong support for Putin for years. Friendship, admiration, and ideological affinity with the Putin had indeed shaped the Salvini’s and Berlusconi’s views even after the 2014 war. In the case of the Lega, “the backlash against liberal values, criticism of the EU and of its handling of the refugee crisis, as well as the claim of being the ‘defenders of Christian Europe’, constitute[d] the ideological foundations of this alignment” (Siddi, 2019, p. 128). To a lesser extent, FdI and M5S also praised Putin, while criticizing the EU approach to Moscow. Until 2022, all Italian governments aimed to foster dialogue with Russia, which

was never viewed as a threat by leaders or public opinion. Economic and political ties, along with the perceived increased Russian influence in the Mediterranean, contributed to frame Moscow as a crucial interlocutor rather than a menace or an enemy.

However, “Italy’s strong condemnation of Russia’s actions points to a rethinking regarding its ties with Moscow, despite public attitudes to the war and the continued interest of Italian businesses in maintaining relations” (Pantucci & Ambrosetti, 2022, p.22). Our framework allows us to understand the evolution of the attitudes expressed by Italian populist leaders. In line with the “loss-aversion” theory of foreign policy change, those actors became convinced that after 24 February 2022 continued support for Putin would have brought unacceptable reputational costs within the West, thus promoting a change in their public utterances. Meloni—whose “pro-Putinism” was less evident than that of Berlusconi and Salvini – exploited the opportunity to enhance FdI’s international credentials, firmly sustaining Western decisions on Ukraine. The other leaders engaged in cognitive dissonance reduction, deeply focusing on the domestic costs of war, from the effects of sanctions to the price of gas, interpreting the conflict from their dominant beliefs, such as “pacifism” against international elites who would prefer enhanced military spending on diplomatic solutions. After some weeks of unity, tensions also exploded within the majority coalition. The breakup of Draghi’s government in July 2022 exposed the “divergences in Italy’s wider politics, as well as its relationship with Russia in particular” (Pantucci & Ambrosetti, 2022, p.22). Future studies should look in detail at the ways through which Italian populist parties have dealt with Russia also during the Meloni government.

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