

TRENDS OF STRENGTHENING NATIONAL-CONSERVATIVE FORCES IN WESTERN COUNTRIES: IMPLICATIONS FOR UKRAINE

Author:

Volodymyr Zhar

This analytical material examines national-conservative parties that have demonstrated significant growth, increased influence, and notable election results in recent years. An analysis was conducted of their ideological positioning, political platforms and programs, stance on support for Ukraine, and the preconditions for their electoral success. The possible development of the political situation in selected countries is described, taking into account dominant political and social trends, as well as the potential consequences of a "right turn" for continued support of our state by European allies.

Introduction

Since 2022, Europe and the world have witnessed a rapid increase in support for right-wing populist, national-conservative, and anti-establishment parties. This trend is increasingly influencing the global ideological climate, reshaping the structure of dominant social meanings, values, and narratives, as well as the domestic policies and foreign courses of leading Western nations. Analysis of socio-political macro-dynamics shows that the sensational result of the Brexit referendum and Donald Trump's unexpected victory in the 2016 presidential election clearly marked the beginning of a global right-wing turn, becoming the first vivid evidence of a "global conservative revolution" and providing impetus to other right-wing populists. At the same time, the fundamental trends that caused the wave of popularity of right-wing conservative forces began to form and operate long before 2016.

The key reasons and preconditions for the strengthening of right-wing populist movements on a global scale were harsh dissatisfaction with mass immigration and the migration crisis, the relocation of production facilities and job losses, the weakening of national sovereignty and borders, the restructuring of trade regimes (particularly the creation of free trade zones), and several other aspects of globalization.

The increase in popularity of right-wing populist forces in Europe and the world was also influenced by a significant portion of the population's rejection of the left-liberal agenda and left-liberal cultural policy (in a broad sense). The left-liberal course of a significant part of the ruling Western parties included the desire to build a multicultural society, a positive attitude towards mass immigration, including from African and Middle Eastern countries (which led to the erosion of traditional European and Western identities, changes in the cultural image of Europe and Europeans' lifestyle), radically progressive policies on ethnic and racial issues (particularly in the US), the destruction of traditional values, the gender agenda, and the spread of new wave feminism. These policies were actively promoted by mainstream parties from the left, centrist, and center-right parts of the spectrum, making them a key target for far-right politicians.

Consequently, the decline of the "familiar and conservative world" with a stable economy, job security, and the general dominance of traditional norms and roles, along with the social and economic losses from globalization, modernization, and migration, led to the formation of an entire class of dissatisfied and even disadvantaged people, who became the main electorate of right-wing conservative forces.

Right-wing anti-establishment parties decided to work with the alienation of the aforementioned audiences and the widespread dissatisfaction with the establishment (which allegedly betrayed traditional values, national interests, and undermined citizens' welfare) to maximize their own popularity and achieve an electoral breakthrough. This completely reshaped the political landscape and rules of the game in most Western countries.

The main characteristic of populist movements is their active criticism of the establishment, the dominant political consensus, and mainstream parties. Populist politicians gain support through overt anti-elite rhetoric, as well as radical, critical messages that challenge the established order. These messages may be considered politically incorrect but resonate with the desires of a significant portion of conservative and right-wing voters.

Anti-establishment right-wing and national-conservative parties focus on protecting identity and traditional values. They advocate for the position that the nation-state and its pragmatic interests should be the key priority, promoting ideas of strengthening sovereignty, economic nationalism, overcoming decline, reviving lost influence and greatness, and actively appealing to an ideal image of the past, a "golden age".

The victory of the "Brothers of Italy" party in the 2022 Italian parliamentary elections and the triumph of Javier Milei in the Argentine presidential election indicate a resurgence of the trend towards strengthening right-wing populist and right-conservative forces. This material examines right-wing and national-conservative parties that demonstrated rapid growth in support or achieved victory during recent national elections or European Parliament elections (June 2024), significantly changing the political situation in selected countries and potentially affecting the future position of European states regarding support for Ukraine.

Despite the fact that the center-right dominant European People's Party maintained its position, and the "Identity and Democracy" bloc, consisting of far-right and Eurosceptic forces, lost 1.8% of votes compared to the previous election, national-conservatives and the far-right demonstrated confident results and a noticeable increase in support – both at the pan-European level and at the level of individual countries. For example, the national-conservative, moderately Eurosceptic "European Conservatives and Reformists" party won 83 seats compared to 62 in 2019¹.

It's worth noting that in the context of the new wave of popularity for right-wing forces, we should consider current events on the American and British agendas. U.S. President Donald Trump managed to protect and strengthen his leadership and ensure undisputed dominance in the Republican Party, making his agenda (Make America Great Again) the main one for the vast majority of Republicans, securing support from both the party establishment and voters.

Meanwhile, in Great Britain, on the eve of parliamentary elections, Nigel Farage's right-wing populist movement "Reform UK" has received an unprecedented level of support. According to several polls, the new political force may receive more votes than the Conservative Party [1]. In addition, the national-conservative parties Vox (Spain) and AUR (Romania) maintain strong positions and demonstrate gradual growth in popularity in their own countries.

Therefore, the aforementioned events and processes are manifestations of a global trend – the growing influence of far-right and national-conservative forces. Considering that right-wing and national-conservative parties in Europe are gaining more power and authority, which may in one way or another (positively or negatively) affect the course of individual states regarding support for Ukraine, and the adoption of principled collective decisions at the EU level, it is extremely important to analyze the consequences of the right turn for our state, the opportunities and risks of various scenarios, as well as the prospects for Ukraine's cooperation with forces that stand for strengthening national sovereignty, protecting traditional values, and economic nationalism.

Freedom Party of Austria

The political positions of the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) are characterized as right-wing populist, national-conservative, Eurosceptic, and economically liberal. A key component of their political program and driver of electoral appeal among target audiences is their critical stance on immigration and the desire to implement strict measures to reduce the number of immigrants arriving in the country.

¹ The "European Conservatives and Reformists" bloc includes such parties as the "New Flemish Alliance" (Belgium), "Homeland Movement" (Croatia), Petr Fiala's "Civic Democratic Party" (Czech Republic), Brothers of Italy (Italy), Law and Justice (Poland), Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR), Vox (Spain), and Sweden Democrats (Sweden).

The FPÖ is the third-largest political force in Austria after the left-wing Social Democratic Party and the moderately conservative Austrian People's Party. This national-conservative party holds 30 seats in the lower house of the Austrian parliament – the National Council and is represented in all 9 state parliaments and many local councils. In the last elections to the National Council (May 2019), the FPÖ came third, receiving 16.2% of the votes (-9.8% compared to the 2017 election results).

One of the key factors in the FPÖ's success among Austrian voters is its active use of anti-elite rhetoric. The FPÖ positions itself as a force fighting against the political establishment and defending the interests of "ordinary Austrians" – allegedly in contrast to Austria's two main parties. FPÖ leaders claim that mainstream parties promote an agenda that serves the interests of political elites rather than the Austrian people.

Opposition to immigration is one of the key themes of the FPÖ's election and political campaigns, triggering electoral support from target groups. It allows the FPÖ to consolidate potential voters around the party and its anti-immigrant rhetoric. In 2022, Austria ranked fourth among EU countries in the number of asylum applications, despite having a population of only 4 million.

Since about 2013, following the example of other far-right forces, the FPÖ began positioning itself as an anti-Islamic party. The Economist believes that the wary attitude towards Muslims resonates with the attitudes of Austrian voters of Serbian origin [2]. Thus, the FPÖ's anti-Islamic strategy is, among other things, aimed at securing electoral support from the second largest national minority in Austria.

Since 2014, the Freedom Party of Austria has demonstrated a consistent pro-Russian position, trying to establish cooperation with the Kremlin regime, and its representatives have participated in several Russian-organized political events. Today, the FPÖ is the only Austrian parliamentary party that advocates for lifting EU sanctions against Russia and opposes military support for Ukraine.

In 2019, a loud political scandal known as "Ibiza-gate" led to the collapse of the ruling coalition and dealt a severe reputational blow to the Freedom Party of Austria.

As a result of these events, the far-right political force lost 20 out of 50 seats in the snap parliamentary elections. For months, there was a noticeable decline in FPÖ ratings and corresponding votes in elections at various levels. However, after a series of electoral defeats and a decrease in the number of mandates in legislatures, the popularity of the FPÖ began to grow again. Currently, there is a strengthening of political positions and growing ratings of the FPÖ in Austria.

Liam Hoare, European editor of Moment magazine and author of "The Vienna Briefing" newsletter, believes that the precondition for the FPÖ's rapid political comeback is a highly favorable configuration of political circumstances that allowed the party to create a strong coalition of voters by "taking a number of stubborn minority positions" [3].

Initially, the FPÖ managed to partially restore its political positions, particularly among target groups, through active criticism of the government's COVID-19 countermeasures and vaccination efforts. Analysis of the Austrian domestic political context shows that the popularity of the FPÖ (the party has been in first place in national electoral polls since November 2022, and since October 2023 regularly receives almost 30%) [4] is growing due to a number of reasons – declining popularity of the ruling ÖVP due to a high-profile corruption scandal in 2021, high inflation and rising prices (including energy) against the backdrop of Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine, another escalation of the migration crisis, as well as economic instability. It is this combination of circumstances that led to the rapid recovery of the far-right party's ratings.

Thus, on June 9, 2024, the FPÖ received the largest number of votes in the European Parliament elections in Austria (25.36%) and took first place, ahead of the two mainstream parties - the Austrian People's Party (24.52%) and the Social Democratic Party (23.22%). According to media reports, the Freedom Party of Austria aims to secure the position of Chancellor in the next parliamentary elections.

The key message of the FPÖ in the last European Parliament elections was the slogan "Stop the EU madness". The main points of the FPÖ's program and political messages during the European Parliament election campaign in Austria were:

- Return of powers from Brussels to national states and more direct democracy. Halving the European Commission, European Parliament and EU budget. Debureaucratization should become a key EU priority;
- Stop the asylum chaos by implementing a ban policy based on the Austrian model and zero tolerance for illegal asylum seekers. Austria needs a re-emigration pact that will include effective border protection, care centers only outside Europe, deportation of all asylum seekers;
- Immediate "peace negotiations" between Ukraine and Russia "instead of continuing to fuel the war". Stop supplying weapons and billion-dollar payments to the "warring parties". Austria should again pursue a policy of active neutrality, and the initiative to create an "EU army" is unacceptable. Russia's actions are condemned, but every hour won at the negotiating table is better than any additional hour of war;
- Ukraine's accession to the EU should be rejected;
- The Austrian People's Party and the Greens support the allocation of hundreds of billions of euros at the European level to finance arms supplies to Ukraine. For taxpayers suffering from high inflation and massive increases in energy prices, this policy has become a bottomless pit. Sanctions that undermine the welfare of Austrians should be lifted.

- The "Green Deal" needs to be stopped to make energy affordable again for Austrian households and the economy. Fair payments to Austrian farmers and protection of Austrian agriculture need to be ensured. Rejection of further climate bans, lifting the ban on internal combustion engines.

The socio-economic and political trends that led to the growth in popularity of the FPÖ and allow the political force to maintain the first place in national polls are likely to continue. In 2023, Austria's GDP fell by 0.5%, and in 2024, it is projected to grow by only 1%. Government measures to mitigate inflation through one-time cash payments and energy price caps for households have generally not satisfied voters.

Party for Freedom (Netherlands)

The Party for Freedom (PVV) is a right-wing populist political force whose ideological platform combines positions of cultural nationalism, right-wing populism, national liberalism, Euroscepticism, critical attitudes towards Islam, and liberalism. PVV representatives are extremely negative about immigration and related social and cultural transformations. Restricting immigration from Arab and Muslim countries has been a central point of the PVV's political agenda for many years. Additionally, the PVV advocates for a liberal and pro-market course in the economic sphere.

The leader of the Party for Freedom is Dutch politician Geert Wilders. He founded this political force in 2004 and secured the Party for Freedom's strong position in Dutch politics through harsh anti-Islamic and anti-immigrant rhetoric.

Islam and Muslims are the main objects of criticism from Geert Wilders and his political force. The national-liberal party constantly attacks Islam from the position of liberalism, individual freedoms and free-thinking, support for human rights, protection of women and LGBT representatives. Geert Wilders and other PVV leaders have called for banning the Quran, dual citizenship, and closing all mosques in the Netherlands. Skeptical attitudes towards the EU and its institutions are also an integral part of the Party for Freedom's political platform and rhetoric.

During the last parliamentary elections in November 2023, the Party for Freedom took first place, receiving 23.49% of the votes and accordingly 37 out of 150 seats in the Dutch parliament. The unprecedented victory of the right-wing nationalist force in the parliamentary elections was the result of the ongoing migration crisis and the inability of mainstream parties to reach a compromise solution on limiting migration that would also meet the demands of a significant portion of voters.

Overall, Geert Wilders very effectively used the issue of migration to significantly increase electoral support for the Party for Freedom. Voters of such system parties as Christian Democrats and D66 became disappointed in them due to the inability of these political forces

to effectively solve the problem of mass migration and decided to vote for Geert Wilders' party.

Another precondition for the success of the right-wing populist party and gaining broader support was a certain softening of radical anti-Islamic rhetoric. It's worth noting that the Party for Freedom leader began actively appealing to economic issues painful for the Dutch to increase the Party for Freedom's chances in the elections. In particular, the PVV leader promised to solve the housing crisis and the problem of inflation.

The issue of providing aid to Ukraine by the Netherlands, as well as Russia's full-scale aggression against our state, was not central during the election campaign.

In the European Parliament elections in the respective country, the result of Geert Wilders' political force was 17%. The Freedom Party took second place, losing to the center-left electoral alliance "Green Left – Labor Party". Moreover, according to the latest polls, if parliamentary elections were held, the Party for Freedom would receive 42-44 seats in the parliament, winning a confident victory with a significant margin from other Dutch parties [5].

The Party for Freedom takes a critical position on military support for Ukraine and EU sanctions against Russia. Before February 2022, Geert Wilders spoke positively about Russia and its leadership, including in contrast to the mainstream position of EU leadership and member states, criticizing "hysterical Russophobia" in Europe. After the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the Party for Freedom leader somewhat distanced himself from Moscow and called the full-scale aggression a "mistake". However, Geert Wilders continues to oppose supporting Ukraine with weapons.

In mid-June 2024, a new coalition in the Netherlands, which included the Party for Freedom, the centrist "New Social Contract", the center-right liberal VVD, and the populist farmer's political force BBB, agreed to form a government.

All coalition members, except for the Party for Freedom, take a pro-Ukrainian position, in particular, advocating for the continuation of political, economic, and military support for our state. Media and experts reported that for the sake of forming a new coalition, the Party for Freedom leader refused the position of prime minister, proved to be more agreeable and ready for compromises despite radical pre-election rhetoric.

It is expected that the new Dutch government will pursue a balanced policy that will not meet the maximum demands of the Party for Freedom, as it will have to rely on a rather mosaic coalition of different political forces. Given the above factors, the new coalition is unlikely to abandon active support for Ukraine, as such a course is supported by both the majority of the Dutch political establishment and a significant part of society.

The coalition agreement titled "Hope, Courage and Pride" states that the new government will continue to provide Ukraine with political, military, economic, and moral support. These agreements demonstrate that Geert Wilders had to make concessions regarding environmental policy. At the same time, the coalition agreement fixes future strict measures to limit migration – a key issue of the Party for Freedom 's pre-election agenda.

Probably, the above-mentioned decisions were the result of a broad political compromise between coalition members to form a new government. It is believed that the new ruling coalition and, accordingly, the new Dutch government may prove to be unstable and fragile, which could ultimately lead to early parliamentary elections.

This is primarily due to the fact that coalition partners have very different ideological platforms, programs, and positions on key issues. Significant political differences between partners make it impossible to have a common vision and implementation of consistent state policy, which a priori undermines the political capabilities and viability of the new coalition in the Netherlands, as well as hopes for long-term and sustainable work of the upcoming government.

"National Rally" (France)

In the European Parliament elections in France, the national-conservative party "National Rally" (RN) received 31.37% of the votes and took first place. Meanwhile, the result of French President Emmanuel Macron's political force "Renaissance" was 14.6% (second place).

The triumph of the nationalist and anti-system party is particularly notable not only for the significant level of voter support but also for the large margin over the "Renaissance" party and the low result of the pro-presidential political force.

After the victory of the national-conservative opposition party, the French leader announced the dissolution of parliament and called for early parliamentary elections. President Emmanuel Macron criticized the results of the European Parliament elections, calling them "evidence of the rise of nationalists and far-right political parties" that would threaten France and Europe.

The first and second rounds of parliamentary elections in France are scheduled for June 30 and July 7, respectively. The latest polls show that the electoral alliance of the "National Rally" party with political allies could take first place and receive 36-37% of the votes [6], which would mean a powerful political success for national-conservatives and a significant reformatting of the French political landscape.

It's important to note that European Parliament elections often take on the character of protest voting, where voters have the opportunity to express distrust in the current government. Therefore, French President Emmanuel Macron is likely betting on higher turnout during the

upcoming parliamentary elections, and, based on this context, a more balanced approach from the French and a tendency to vote for more moderate political forces in national elections - as opposed to a more protest strategy in European Parliament elections.

EU expert at the consulting company "Eurasia Group" Mujtaba Rahman believes that the French leader, who has a high level of distrust (65% of citizens disapprove of his work), would most likely have had to dissolve the National Assembly and call early parliamentary elections at the end of 2024 – during an attempt to adopt the budget for 2025 [7]. Thus, Emmanuel Macron decided to make a bold, risky, and unexpected pre-emptive move and try to reconfirm the political mandate and chosen strategic course. In fact, Emmanuel Macron is putting France before a choice – either a pro-European, pro-Ukrainian and centrist status quo or the risks and unpredictability of the first far-right government in French history.

Emmanuel Macron's strategic response to the triumph of the far-right in the European Parliament elections is reminiscent of the Prime Minister of Spain Pedro Sánchez's risky decision to call early parliamentary elections, which ended in the latter's victory. Some political commentators believe that the decision to call early parliamentary elections is part of Emmanuel Macron's broader and asymmetric strategy aimed at neutralizing right-wing populist forces by giving them the opportunity to form a government, and thus a *carte blanche* to fulfill election promises.

Perhaps the French President expects that the far-right government will fail due to its inability to implement its own populist program against the backdrop of inflated electorate expectations, resistance from the head of state and other forces critical of the RN. Thus, Emmanuel Macron wants to buy up the popularity and influence of the RN in advance and destroy the chances of the far-right to win the presidency in 2027.

It's important to note that until February 2022, the RN openly sympathized with Russia and its leader, following many (but not all) national-conservatives, right-wing populists, and the far-right. However, after the start of Russia's full-scale invasion, Marine Le Pen and the RN partially changed their position, abandoning approving rhetoric towards Moscow and condemning Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

At the same time, even during Russia's full-scale aggression, the leader of the National Rally called for a more "balanced" approach in the context of sanctions and opposed military support for Ukraine, as such a policy allegedly weakens France's defense capabilities.

The RN's election program for the European Parliament elections did not contain questionable positions, unlike Marine Le Pen's presidential program in the 2022 elections (desire to expand cooperation with Russia, distancing from Washington, ending defense cooperation with Germany, withdrawing from NATO's joint military command). Party representatives stated that "Russia violates international law and provokes a revision of the international order" [8].

Key points of the "National Rally" election program for the 2024 parliamentary elections in France:

- Support purchasing power. Reduce electricity bills and lower taxes on gas, fuel oil, and fuel;
- Restore order in France. Put an end to judicial leniency towards offenders and criminals;
- Stop the migration flow. Significantly reduce legal and illegal migration and expel foreign offenders;
- Support agriculture. Develop short food supply chains and fight unfair competition;
- Prioritize healthcare. Reduce "medical deserts", support public hospitals, and ensure medicine supply;
- Implement common sense savings. Reduce the cost of immigration and fight social and tax fraud;
- Ensure respect for the French. Protect Paris's sovereignty and interests in Europe.

Flemish Interest (Belgium)

During the European Parliament elections in the Dutch-speaking constituency, the national-conservative and Eurosceptic forces Flemish Interest (VB) and New Flemish Alliance (N-VA) together received 45% of the votes (Flemish Interest – 22.94%, New Flemish Alliance – 22.09%).

In the Belgian parliamentary elections, which took place simultaneously with the elections to the EU legislative body (June 9, 2024), the New Flemish Alliance's result was 16.71% and 24 seats in parliament (first place), while Flemish Interest received 13.77% and 20 seats (second place).

The central points of Flemish Interest's political program are Flanders' independence and strict measures to limit migration. The New Flemish Alliance is also a right-wing and Eurosceptic party but is considered more moderate compared to Flemish Interest. Previously, N-VA advocated for Flanders' exit from Belgium, but today it supports expanding the region's autonomy and powers within a united country with Belgium transitioning to a confederative form of government. N-VA, like many other Eurosceptic forces, also advocates for strengthening the powers and influence of national states in decision-making within the EU.

The main reason for the success of right-wing populist and national-conservative parties in the elections is the negative impact of the pandemic and Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on economic stability, as well as inflation. The inability of mainstream parties to effectively counter key challenges for voters and the vivid populist rhetoric from VB and N-VA criticizing the current political consensus, as in other EU countries, led to a confident victory for right-wing populist forces.

Internal economic and social problems are exacerbated by the right-wing populists' thesis that Flanders subsidizes and finances the less prosperous Wallonia, sending billions in tax revenues that could be used within the region.

The ruling coalition, consisting of seven parties, suffered a political defeat, and the reduction in the number of mandates (76 out of 150 seats as a result of recent elections) will not allow these political forces to form a majority and accordingly appoint a government after the elections. On June 10, 2024, after the announcement of the election results, the current head of government, Alexander De Croo, announced his resignation.

The recent elections in Belgium demonstrated the growing popularity and strengthening of political positions of far-right and far-left forces in the country. The weak result of centrist and liberal parties destroys the current political consensus, will further complicate the process of coalition and government formation, and may affect Brussels' internal political dynamics and foreign policy course.

The latest parliamentary elections in Belgium led to the formation of an even more fragmented parliament consisting of antagonistic political forces. An important feature of the political system of this country is a very complex and long process of government formation following elections, as a large number of parties with different platforms find it very difficult to find a mutually acceptable compromise and ensure a balance of interests in ideological issues, action programs, and distribution of ministerial portfolios. After the 2019 parliamentary elections, the government formation process lasted 493 days.

Given the significant results of far-right and far-left parties and the heterogeneity of the new Belgian parliament, it is expected that the process of forming a new coalition will be quite long and potentially could lead to a political crisis and early elections. The situation is complicated by the fact that systemic and moderate parties, as in other European countries, pursue a policy of isolation towards right-wing populist forces and refuse to form a coalition with radicals.

If the situation develops according to the Dutch scenario, mainstream parties will have to force national-conservatives to soften their political demands while making certain concessions on issues fundamental to national-conservatives. During the long process of coalition negotiations, Belgium will be governed by a temporary government with limited powers, particularly in the field of foreign policy.

Regarding the position of the key winners of the parliamentary elections on support for Ukraine, N-VA tried to prevent the adoption of one of the EU sanctions packages against Russia [9].

Before the start of Russia's full-scale invasion, Flemish Interest criticized the imposition of sanctions against Moscow. After February 24, 2022, the leadership of the political force

condemned Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine and distanced itself from Putin. However, VB remains critical of the impact of sanctions on fuel prices and criticizes the scale of Belgium's military support for Ukraine. Representatives of the Flemish Interest party, in particular, had contacts with Russian officials [10].

Thus, despite the fact that the issue of Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine was not among the key issues in the election campaign, the antagonistic positions of potential coalition partners, the ambiguous approaches of VB and the Labor Party to supporting Ukraine, as well as the expected complex process of coalition formation and functioning of a government with limited powers may negatively affect the dynamics, intensity, and focus of Brussels in supporting Ukraine. For now, the key challenge is the reorientation of the Belgian establishment's and society's attention to internal issues against the backdrop of coalition negotiations, socio-economic challenges, and heated debates about the future status of Flanders within Belgium, and the limited room for maneuver of the temporary cabinet, rather than the coming to power of forces skeptical towards Ukraine.

Conclusions

The key factors that contributed to the rapid growth in support for right-wing populist and national-conservative forces in the elections were: another escalation of the immigration situation in Europe, high inflation, rising prices, particularly for energy and consumer goods provoked by Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine, and the declining popularity of ruling parties that proved unable to effectively counter a number of socio-economic challenges.

Some right-wing populists (but not all) also use Eurosceptic rhetoric, sensing the dissatisfaction of some voters with Brussels' policies, particularly attempts to impose a common migration policy on all EU members, concentration of powers and budgets, the course towards green transformation, and proactive support for Ukraine.

A significant portion of national-conservative and right-wing populist parties, except for the Austrian Freedom Party, either do not focus on issues of the Russian-Ukrainian full-scale war, or cautiously demonstrate soft skeptical positions regarding sanctions against Russia and further support for our state with weapons.

Many right-wing populist forces distanced themselves from Moscow after the start of Russia's full-scale invasion and abandoned pro-Russian rhetoric. A separate case is the strategic course of Giorgia Meloni and the ruling "Brothers of Italy" party for proactive and comprehensive support for Ukraine.

It is important to reject the primitive and template approach, particularly at the media and expert level, according to which all right-wing populist parties are automatically viewed as pro-Russian, and even as "conduits of Kremlin interests in Europe". Some of them did indeed

sympathize with the Kremlin or continue to latently or openly spread anti-Ukrainian messages. At the same time, others, particularly those who have changed their political position on the Russian-Ukrainian war, can become important and promising partners for our state. Establishing interaction and reaching common positions becomes especially important, given the pan-European and global rise of national-conservatives, sovereigntists, and right-wing populists.

To most effectively secure Ukraine's interests against the backdrop of geopolitical turbulence, radical transformation of the world order, in an increasingly fragmented and nationally oriented world, it is worth pursuing a pragmatic and maximally maneuverable foreign policy that involves asymmetric and non-standard moves.

Building systematic interaction with right-wing and national-conservative parties to convey the Ukrainian vision, argumentatively prove the thesis that support for Ukraine corresponds to the pragmatic national interests of partners, finding common ground and deploying mutually beneficial cooperation formats in this context can become one of the important priorities of foreign policy.

At the same time, the growth of negative public sentiments regarding support for Ukraine, fatigue, and reorientation of attention may lead to a change in course and transition of national-conservative forces to more rigid skeptical positions regarding further assistance to our state.

Right-wing populists may again intensify criticism of the course to support Ukraine, conditionally following Fidesz and Viktor Orbán, in order to satisfy the demand from target audiences and their own political capitalization. However, this is only one of the scenarios – the most negative one.

Given the Dutch experience, even if a party took a skeptical position on supporting Ukraine, in a parliamentary model, this will not mean a radical change of course. Most likely, the national-conservative or right-wing populist force will have to compromise for the sake of forming a coalition, and its partners will act as balancers, restraining and softening the most radical demands of the said player. In addition, a significant portion of populists change their rhetoric and program of action after coming to power, making them more moderate. Another important preventive factor is that public opinion in most European countries generally remains pro-Ukrainian despite a number of negative trends that may strategically change the situation in the coming months.

Accordingly, the right turn in Europe and the world at this stage does not imply the destruction of the pro-Ukrainian consensus within the EU. Of course, individual countries and parties, especially in the case of coming to power, may create additional obstacles. In addition, configurations such as an unstable coalition in the Netherlands or a temporary government in

Belgium against the backdrop of lengthy and difficult coalition negotiations may reduce the volume and pace of support from key players, make their policies less ambitious, and further reorient political elites and voters to the domestic agenda.

Unstable configurations of power involving national-conservative and right-wing populist forces together with center-right and centrist partners are likely to become more common in Europe and beyond.

Relevant cases will require special attention and proactive diplomatic efforts, as it is precisely such an unstable balance that opens up not only risks but also additional opportunities for maintaining support for Ukraine – even despite unfavorable circumstances.

Given the approach of strategically important elections in France and the United States, the lack of systematic work with national-conservative and right-wing movements, especially those most likely to gain power or participate in its distribution, may lead, in the worst-case scenario, to destabilization of the pro-Ukrainian Western consensus, curtailing support in the foreseeable future (6-12 months).

List of sources:

1. Latest GB Voting Intention (26-27 June 2024). Redfield and Wilton Strategies, 27.06.2024. URL: <https://redfieldandwiltonstrategies.com/latest-gb-voting-intention-26-27-june-2024/>
2. Vexed in Vienna. The Economist, 21.06.2016. URL: <https://www.economist.com/europe/2016/05/21/vexed-in-vienna>
3. Austria is sleepwalking toward a far-right victory. Politico, 7.02.2024. URL: <https://www.politico.eu/article/austria-sleepwalking-far-right-victory-european-election-freedom-party-fpo-nazis-herbert-kickl/>
4. OGM/ServusTV Umfrage vom 13. Juni 2024. OGM, 14.06.2024. URL: <https://www.ogm.at/2024/06/14/ogm-servustv-umfrage-vom-13-juni-2024/>
5. PVV verliest in nieuwe zetelpeiling na bekendmaking ministers, GroenLinks-PvdA in de plus. Een Vandaag, 25.06.2024. URL: <https://eenvandaag.avrotros.nl/panels/opiniepanel/alle-uitslagen/item/pvv-verliest-in-nieuwe-zetelpeiling-na-bekendmaking-ministers-groenlinks-pvda-in-de-plus>
6. OpinionWay et Vae Solis pour Les Echos et Radio classique - Legitrack. 27.06.2024. URL: <https://f.dviz.factoviz.com/Pdfs/3/e/8/OpinionWay%20et%20Vae%20Solis%20pour%20Les%20Echos%20et%20Radio%20classique%20-%20Legitrack%20-%20Vague%203%20-%2027%20juin%202024.pdf>
7. Вибори у Франції. До чого призведе ризиківана гра Макрона? DW, 13.06.2024. URL: <https://www.dw.com/uk/dostrokovi-vibori-u-francii-do-cogo-prizvede-rizikovana-gra-makrona/a-69349450>

8. French far right pulls manifesto that included controversial Russia, NATO plans. Politico, 7.02.2024. URL: <https://www.politico.eu/article/france-far-right-manifesto-russia-nato-national-rally/>
9. N-VA houding tegenover Russisch gas roept grote vragen op. Madein, 9.06.2024. URL: <https://www.made-in.be/west-vlaanderen/n-va-houding-tegenover-russisch-gas-roept-grote-vragen-op/>
10. Russian influence on Flemish parties in Belgium. 1.06.2024. URL: <https://martavooreuropa.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Russian-Influence-on-Flemish-Parties-in-Belgium-Marta-Barandiy-Vasyl-Kushmuns.pdf>

Appendix 1. Characteristics of political positions and political strategies of Fidesz and Brothers of Italy

Fidesz (Hungary)

- The ruling Fidesz party, its leader and Prime Minister Viktor Orban, are often characterized as right-wing populists and national conservatives.
- Key political positions and priorities of Fidesz:
- Prioritizing national interests, protecting national sovereignty, Euroscepticism, harsh criticism of "Brussels bureaucracy";
- Combating illegal migration;
- Protection and support of traditional family and traditional values, stimulating birth rates through economic and social benefits, restricting abortions;
- Proactive social policy, strengthening social protection, paternalism (e.g., utility subsidies, minimum wage increases, cash gifts for pensioners);
- Higher level of state participation and intervention in economic processes (economic interventionism), including public works programs, government control over key economic sectors, cautious stance on economic globalization;
- Nationalism, soft irredentism – active support and protection of Hungarian diasporas;
- Preservation of national identity and cultural heritage;
- Appeals to Christianity, strengthening the role of Christian churches in public and political life, re-Christianization of Hungary, church and Christian values perceived as one of the leading foundations of Hungarian identity and national uniqueness.

Since 2014, the Hungarian government has been implementing policies that significantly contradict Ukraine's national interests, including opposing military support for our country, promoting the idea of immediate negotiations between Kyiv and Moscow for peaceful settlement, consistently blocking EU decisions on Ukraine's European integration, new packages of military and financial assistance, turning these strategic issues into tools for political bargaining, positioning Hungary and Hungarian foreign policy as an alternative to the "Brussels diktat" and "liberal-globalist mainstream", thus consolidating right-wing and anti-system movements in Europe and the world around a common platform (Orban and Fidesz in the role of flagship and headliner).

In the last parliamentary elections in Hungary (April 2022), the alliance of Fidesz and the Christian Democratic People's Party received 54.1% of the votes. The ruling alliance's result in the European Parliament elections was 44.82%. The second place was taken by the newly created center-right political force TISZA of Magyar Péter, which received 29.6% of the votes.

Viktor Orbán calls his political course illiberal Christian democracy or illiberal democracy. The ideology and political positioning of the Hungarian Prime Minister combines soft Euroscepticism, populism, and national conservatism. One of Viktor Orbán's key ambitions is to make Hungary the center of the international conservative movement.

According to Politico, Viktor Orbán's political philosophy resonates with social strata that "were previously peasant or working class", promoting "uncompromising protection of national sovereignty and clear distrust of Europe's governing institutions". The Hungarian Prime Minister often emphasizes the importance of Christianity. According to Lauren Stokes, Orbán's key message to "global conservatives" can be formulated as: "I alone can save you from the destructive consequences of Islamization and totalitarian progress – and in the face of these [challenges], who has time for checks, balances, and rules?"

It is believed that Orbán most thoroughly and extensively laid out his political views in a 2014 speech in Băile Tușnad (also known as the "Tusnádfürdő speech"). In the address, the Hungarian leader criticized the classical liberal theory of the state as a free association of atomistic individuals, advocating for the perception of the state's function as a means of organizing, activating, or even building a national community. Although such a state respects traditional liberal concepts such as civil rights, it can be called illiberal because it views the community, not the individual, as the political unit. Viktor Orbán emphasizes that in practice, such a state should promote national self-sufficiency, national sovereignty, family values, full employment, and preservation of cultural heritage.

One of the key foundations of Viktor Orbán's political ideology and practice is resolute opposition to illegal immigration. According to some commentators, the European migrant crisis, along with the continuation of Islamist terrorism in Europe, has made the Hungarian leader's nationalist, protectionist policy popular among European conservative leaders, although Viktor Orbán was previously ostracized for such views.

The Hungarian Prime Minister's domestic policy is based on cultural conservatism, which is particularly aimed at supporting families, increasing birth rates, and limiting immigration. To achieve these goals, the Hungarian government uses specific social and economic incentives, among other measures.

Currently, Fidesz is a right-wing and national-conservative party, but it prefers interventionist policies on economic issues (for example, in bank management). The political force has a strict conservative position on social issues and a soft Eurosceptic view on European integration.

Fidesz and the government it formed are skeptical of the classical liberal/neoliberal economic model and advocate for a higher level of state intervention in economic processes. The Hungarian government under Fidesz rule has implemented some government initiatives,

including a public works program, pension increases, utility bill reductions, minimum wage increases, and cash gifts for pensioners. The Fidesz government has also implemented a public works program aimed, in particular, at helping neglected communities. Hungary's leadership seeks national control over key sectors of the economy while taking a cautious position on economic globalization.

"Brothers of Italy"

The ruling (in coalition with other right-wing forces) "Brothers of Italy" party of Giorgia Meloni has for years built its own positioning and political strategy on the principles of nationalism and conservatism. However, after forming a coalition and coming to power, both Giorgia Meloni and her political force have partially softened their radical rhetoric and begun to drift towards traditional and mainstream conservatism.

Key political positions and priorities of "Brothers of Italy":

- Combating illegal migration;
- Conservative Catholicism, appeal to Christianity and traditional Catholic values and socially conservative positions of the Church (Giorgia Meloni positions herself as a traditional Roman Catholic and uses her religious identity to form a personal brand);
- Protection and support of traditional family (including financial); increasing birth rates; critical attitude towards abortions, same-sex marriages, euthanasia, surrogacy, adoption of children by sexual minorities; negative attitude towards the gender agenda;
- Priority of national interests; before elections – soft Euroscepticism (Euro-realism), after elections – broad pragmatic cooperation with EU leadership, proposals to introduce the principle of subsidiarity in relations between Brussels and national governments;
- Firm Euro-Atlanticism.

Giorgia Meloni and her party won a triumphant victory in the Italian parliamentary elections in September 2022. 25.98% of voters cast their votes for "Brothers of Italy". As a result of the race, a center-right coalition was formed, which included Matteo Salvini's right-populist and conservative League (8.79% of votes in the last election), Silvio Berlusconi's liberal-conservative Forza Italia (8.11%), and the conservative "Us Moderates" (0.9%).

In the European Parliament elections, "Brothers of Italy" received 28.8% of the votes, and its right-conservative coalition partners Forza Italia and League received 9.6% and 9.0% respectively. According to an SWG poll (June 2024), "Brothers of Italy" parliamentary rating is 28.6%, and the opposition and center-left Democratic Party's is 23.5%.

Giorgia Meloni is an ardent and consistent supporter of active support for Ukraine from Western allies – despite the fact that before coming to power, the Italian politician demonstrated a positive attitude towards Russia and an ambiguous position on Moscow's

aggression against our country. Today, the Italian Prime Minister is effectively one of the leading locomotives both in matters of intensifying efforts to provide defense support to Kyiv and in matters of effective deterrence of the Russian aggressor and European integration of our state.

Giorgia Meloni is a nationalist leader, her political positions are described as right-wing and conservative. She positions herself as a Christian and conservative, and claims to defend "God, homeland, and family". The Italian Prime Minister opposes euthanasia, same-sex marriages, adoption of children by sexual minorities, and believes that family is exclusively a union between a man and a woman. Giorgia Meloni uses femonationalist and anti-globalist rhetoric. Before winning the elections, she supported NATO but also held Eurosceptic views.

Meloni stated that she "supports women's issues"; she actively used near-feminist rhetoric from conservative positions to increase support and form a positive image. The Prime Minister spoke out against women's quotas and denied the alleged "anti-woman position" of which critics accused her.

She also emphasized the need to reduce taxes, cut Euro-bureaucracy, and stop immigration through a naval blockade, stating that she would put national interests first.

Giorgia Meloni criticized the approach of past Italian governments to illegal immigration, calling for a zero-tolerance policy. The politician proposed blocking migrants' access to Italian ports and increasing the birth rate of citizens to meet the country's labor needs. She linked illegal immigration to crime, as well as the arrival of refugees with human trafficking and prostitution.

During the 2022 parliamentary campaign in Italy, Giorgia Meloni tried to reduce the fears of those who considered the "Brothers of Italy" party to be far-right or neo-fascist. Meloni told the foreign press that "Italian fascism is history". As president of the European Conservatives and Reformists Party, she stated that she shares the experience and values of the Conservative Party (United Kingdom), Likud – National Liberal Movement (Israel), and the Republican Party (United States). Giorgia Meloni calls herself a "mainstream conservative" and the party she leads "mainstream conservative".

It's worth noting that after coming to power, Giorgia Meloni softened some of her political positions, choosing a more mainstream, balanced, and predictable course regarding domestic policy (the most pressing issues concerning Italians) and international partners. At the same time, she did not abandon her key right-conservative views and corresponding positioning, and, for example, continues the campaign against adoption of children by sexual minorities. However, she usually resorts to more moderate tactics and traditional instruments, particularly regarding the containment of illegal migration (abandoning the idea of a naval blockade).

The Italian Prime Minister consistently creates an image of a predictable player with a moderate image for international partners and foreign investors (helping to service the overall debt burden of over 140% of GDP), and moving away from the most radical positions and tactics allows her to gain broader support among voters. In general terms, she has maintained the foreign policy course of the Draghi government and currently adheres to the Euro-Atlantic line, advocating support for Ukraine and Israel in the war with Hamas.

Meloni also consistently builds positive relations with EU leadership, particularly with President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen, as Italy is commercially interested in understanding with the EU. The country is the recipient of the largest share of the EU fund for recovery after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Meloni likely hopes that through positive relations with Brussels, she can jointly solve the problem of illegal migration and lobby for more decisive steps in this direction.

On one hand, she is considered a tough tactician, demonstrating clever maneuvering and balancing between the mainstream and key populist promises and expectations of her electorate. This tactic has helped Meloni maintain confident political positions and implement a constructive foreign policy course that corresponds to Rome's strategic and commercial interests. On the other hand, the government has still failed to reduce migration flows and has obviously retreated from the most radical promises (for example, canceling the 2011 pension system reform). This could demoralize the electoral base, especially the core support of Giorgia Meloni, and reduce the loyalty of Brothers of Italy voters. Some American conservatives are already criticizing the Italian Prime Minister for abandoning the right-wing anti-system agenda, failing to limit immigration flows, and turning into a "neoliberal" and "flirting" with globalists.

© Centre for International Security

Author:

Volodymyr Zhar

The information and views set out in this study are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official opinion of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e.V. or the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine.

Centre for International Security

Borodina Inzhenera Street, 5-A, Kyiv, 02092, Ukraine

Phone: +380999833140

E-mail: cntr.bezpeky@gmail.com

<https://intsecurity.org/>

