

Far-Right and Populist Forces in Europe: Risks for Regional Stability and Implications for Ukraine

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2026

Summary

The paper was prepared as of July 20, 2026.

The rise of far-right and populist parties is usually explained ideologically: either as a “new wave of nationalism”, or as a “crisis of liberal democracy”, or even purely electorally, through percentages and demographics. None of these explanations answers a simple question: why do the very same themes – blocking sanctions, resisting the Green Deal, shielding state-owned companies from transparency – appear simultaneously in Budapest, Bratislava, Rome, and Warsaw? This article proposes an analytical approach based on the theory of state capture and classical elite theory.

The anti-European stance of the far right is treated here as a position that is functional rather than ideological – that is, as a defensive reaction of networks (built around control over strategic state-owned companies in energy, defense, and other sectors) to the supranational oversight of the European Union (EU).

Introduction

This study rests on the proposition that contemporary far-right movements in Europe and their Eurosceptic positioning perform a structural rather than an ideological function. Across the various countries where such political projects operate, this pattern is stable and serves a quite rational interest that is in fact concealed behind populist rhetoric: preserving opaque control over strategic state assets. The EU's regulatory policy – its requirements for state subsidies (procurement and funds transparency rules, climate regulation) – poses a challenge to that interest and, accordingly, a threat to the networks of entrenched elites. And for this resistance, far-right populism supplies such projects with a ready-made electoral base.

For Ukraine, this storyline may prove critical. The very same decision-making mechanism in Brussels that the far right seeks to block for the sake of its own assets will, should their positions in the Council of the EU strengthen, also decide the fate of Ukraine's accession to the EU. The same battle over the EU's climate and energy regulatory framework – at first glance a purely intra-European affair – therefore directly determines how difficult Kyiv's path to membership will be, and will also carry weight in the context of other decisions that require EU unanimity (such as the extension of sanctions against Russia).

The study is grounded in classical elite theory (Pareto, Mosca, Michels) and in the theory of state capture developed by World Bank economists¹ to describe the phenomenon of far-right activity (not as a phenomenon in itself, but as a system united by a comprehensible rational interest). The factual part and the forecast are built on an analysis of opinion polling on far-right party ratings and on the saturation curve (the so-called Verhulst equation) used to assess the potential electoral ceiling of such political projects at elections, which makes it possible to analyze electoral points in the pre-election context more broadly.

I. Theoretical Framework

Elite theory and the iron law of oligarchy. According to this theory (Vilfredo Pareto, Gaetano Mosca, and Robert Michels), in any society power is unevenly concentrated in the hands of an organized minority. On this approach, even an organization created with democratic aims gradually turns into a system in which leaders protect their own interests instead of those of the voters. Following the Paretian position, populist rhetoric about “the people versus the elites” often serves as an instrument that diverts attention from the true nature of such power and allows networks in power (or aspiring to it) to keep serving their own interest.

The theory of the captured state, which gained currency in the early 2000s and was authored by World Bank economists Joel Hellman and Daniel Kaufmann, analyzes why it was in post-Soviet transformations that private actors acquired the ability to set the “rules of the game” themselves. Their main conclusion, however, can also be applied to current trends in Europe, especially in countries with a high concentration of resources and minimal transparency of state regulation and oversight.

Four faces of one phenomenon and a shared pro-Russian orbit. The term “far right” is used in this article rather as a working interpretive template for a fairly heterogeneous field that should be distinguished along at least four categories. At the same time, the division into these categories is conditional. Since the characteristics of all four categories are observed to a greater or lesser degree in all the parties, this tentative classification is meant to accentuate the dominant characteristic from the perspective of the party network, rather than individual or anomalous incidents.

- › Far-right projects that built their political capital on the legacy of interwar fascism and the elite networks of the postwar period. This group includes, for example, Giorgia Meloni’s Brothers of Italy (FdI), which upon coming to power softened its rhetoric, publicly condemned the crimes of the fascist regime, and has consistently condemned Russia’s aggression against Ukraine. At the same time, from the standpoint of the proposed methodology, this history of the party’s formation appears important precisely because it characterizes the political force as a network;
- › Radical right-wing populism without a direct ideological lineage, built on nativism and an anti-liberal cultural agenda – such as Alternative for Germany (AfD), National Rally (RN), and Reform UK – which build their agenda first and foremost on criticism of the EU (while also containing elements of the other categories);
- › Illiberal political forces that are likewise Eurosceptic but oppose not so much the EU as a supranational entity as the liberal agenda itself, replacing the “right-left” axis with a “people versus elite” axis. A case in point is Viktor Orbán’s Hungarian Fidesz up to its 2026 defeat.
- › Left-wing populism with xenophobic and openly pro-Russian elements – for example, Robert Fico’s Slovak Smer, which formally masquerades as a social democratic party.

At the same time, all four categories (with the possible exception of Ms Meloni’s party) gravitate toward a pro-Russian or at least anti-sanctions course, albeit for different reasons – and this difference matters. For the AfD it is a predominantly ideological-agent position: the party has no assets of its own linked to Russia, but it shares a geopolitical worldview in which the West and liberalism are the main enemy, and it receives Moscow’s support for this. For RN and part of Italy’s Lega it is rather a transactional logic: business contacts, loans, specific commercial schemes. For Orbán’s Fidesz it is a clan-based, “kleptocratic” dependence on energy contracts and state procurement tied to specific people in his inner circle. For Fico’s Smer it is a personal and transactional logic at once: personal gas supply contracts and the leader’s own diplomatic line. In

other words, this is not a single ideology but, roughly, four different paths to a similar goal – resisting the EU's supranational oversight and ensuring one's own political survival.

Sovereignism as a common language for different interests. Because the motives of the four categories differ while the political goal is effectively the same, such projects need a shared “rhetorical umbrella” capable of uniting heterogeneous projects into a single political force. In today's geopolitical conditions, that role appears to be played by the rhetoric of “sovereignism”. In far-right communications, such appeals mean above all the rejection of the primacy of supranational EU law wherever it becomes inconvenient. Sovereignism thus allows these political actors to speak the language of “defending the nation” about things that in practice mean defending the specific interest of a particular network of influence (group). Romanian Deputy Prime Minister Oana Gheorghiu, for instance, put it quite bluntly in one interview: a publicly listed company can no longer be controlled at will – it must report publicly, and this sharply complicates its use as a political instrument².

This particular thesis is corroborated, among others, by Carnegie Endowment analysis, which records that this connection has long since gone beyond isolated episodes: in recent years, durable networks have formed between far-right institutions, right-wing media, and corporate actors. Moreover, in the think tank's assessment, these networks have effectively become the axis between deep electoral strata and the political anti-green movement³.

Three competitors, one point of convergence. The most counterintuitive thesis of this article is that Russia, the administration of current US President Donald Trump with his MAGA electoral core, and domestic oligarchic networks act as competitors on most issues while remaining situational allies in preserving the EU's dependence on the “old elites” – for example, by blocking the Green Deal and preserving Europe's dependence on fossil fuels. Russia, for its part, is equally interested in a weak EU and in preserving its energy dependence. RN Member of the European Parliament Mathilde Androuët described this quite frankly: behind closed doors, some MEPs from the European People's Party (EPP) admit they would like to “kill” the Green Deal but are unwilling to take the blame, preferring that the far right play that role⁴.

II. “Ideological” Architecture: Two Competing Projects

These three vectors of influence (pro-Russian, American, and domestic-oligarchic) did not take shape simultaneously. The first phase of the formation of the “far-right club” can be roughly dated back to the 1990s. That stage grew out of attempts by Russian elites to build ties with European elites. Only two decades later did the transition to the next, roughly American, phase occur. Both lines are traced separately below, starting with the Russian one.

Dugin and the Kremlin’s first steps in building a far-right project in Europe. The historian Anton Shekhovtsov identifies two distinctly different periods⁵. The first, 1991–2004, was a time of purely private, almost chaotic initiative, when Moscow took little interest in contacts with the European far right and instead actively built relationships with mainstream Western politicians, counting on its own integration into the liberal-democratic West. A separate track was the contacts of Alexander Dugin who, by then already a marginal ideologue of neo-Eurasianism, traveled to Paris as early as 1989 and 1992. There he established contacts with the then still young National Front of Jean-Marie Le Pen, and through the 1990s and 2000s was already organizing joint conferences⁶. In parallel, LDPR (Liberal Democratic Party of Russia) leader Vladimir Zhirinovskiy – reportedly drawing on Iraqi financing – launched in the early 2000s the “World Congress of Patriotic Parties”, which brought together far-right politicians from France, Germany, Greece, Finland, and Czechia⁷.

The second period, according to Shekhovtsov, began in 2005 and continues to this day⁸. Its starting point was the so-called “color revolutions” (Georgia in 2003, the Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2004, and the Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan in 2005). It was these mass pro-European mobilizations, the Ukrainian one in particular, that showed the Kremlin that popular movements could change governments even in countries Moscow considered its sphere of influence. From then on, contacts with the European far right turned from the private ideological project of Dugin and Zhirinovskiy into an instrument of state policy – notably a way to discredit the very idea of a pro-European choice for Russia’s neighbors by showing that the West, too, has influential forces that criticize the EU no less than the Kremlin does⁹. The following years brought concrete manifestations of this shift: the Russian loan to the National Front in 2014, at the height of the annexation of Crimea; invitations of the leaders of Austria’s Freedom Party (FPÖ) to Moscow; public praise of Putin from the leadership of Britain’s UK Independence Party (UKIP)¹⁰; and more.

Dugin’s personal ties remained an important channel at this stage as well. Another Russian figure and Dugin associate, Konstantin Malofeev, founder of Tsargrad TV and the think tank Katehon, began financing the World Congress of Families – a platform for spreading “traditional values”, notably in Moldova and Romania¹¹. In 2015, Dugin took part in a meeting in Rome with Marion Maréchal-Le Pen, Heinz-Christian Strache (FPÖ), and Mario Borghezio (Lega), where the Russian anthem was performed in his honor. The scholar Marlène Laruelle argues that his ideological ties with the far right predated the Kremlin’s networks and paved the way for a new pan-European illiberal ideology, by whose logic critics of Brussels automatically become potential allies of Russia¹².

Twenty years on: Bannon’s competing American project. While the Russian network matured over two decades, in 2018 a competitor from the opposite geopolitical pole tried to stake a claim on the same field. Steve Bannon, chief strategist of Donald Trump’s first presidential campaign,

attempted to transplant the MAGA model onto European soil through The Movement, officially registered in Brussels, with the intention of coordinating the far right ahead of the 2019 European Parliament elections.

His attempt failed for two reasons. First, legal restrictions prevented campaign financing in 9 of 13 countries. Second, the leading figures, who by then already had their own, much older ties to Moscow, publicly distanced themselves from the new American curator: Le Pen, for example, declared that “Bannon is an American – we will structure this force ourselves”, while Gauland of the AfD stressed that “we are not in America; the interests of Europe’s anti-establishment parties differ”¹³.

Yet the failure of US-led coordination attempts did not mean an absence of American influence – it merely changed form. Instead of a centralized project, a decentralized ecosystem emerged: CPAC Hungary (since 2022), financed by Orbán (then Hungary’s sitting prime minister) through the Center for Fundamental Rights; the Heritage Foundation as an ideological think tank; the Danube Institute as a funding channel for American far-right researchers; and Elon Musk’s X as media infrastructure.

The Carnegie Endowment notes that a transnational far-right ideology took shape through contacts and mutual learning of tactics, with Orbán and Fidesz remaining a hub of this network with a powerful MAGA component¹⁴. By the mid-2020s, then, two parallel networks of influence coexisted in Europe (the Kremlin’s and Trump’s), rarely intersecting directly but converging on one point – blocking the Green Deal and the strengthening of the EU.

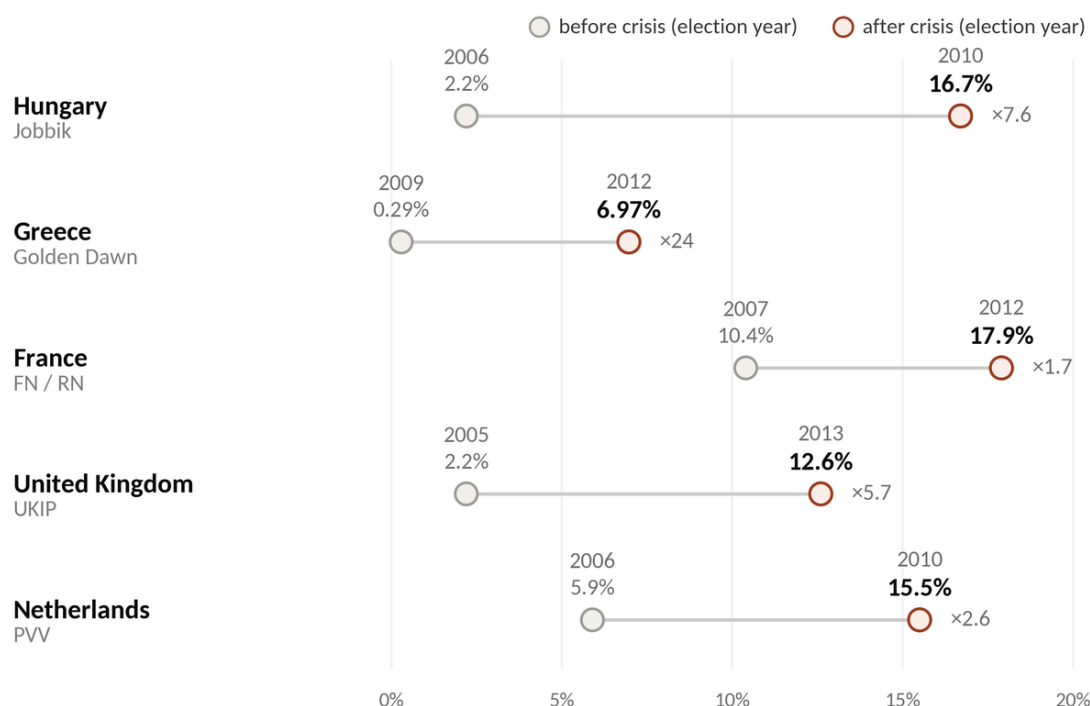
The metapolitics of the “Great Replacement”. The third line of influence is neither Russian nor American but a purely European intellectual tradition. Alain de Benoist, founder of the French Nouvelle Droite, together with the Research and Study Group for European Civilization (GRECE), which he created in 1968, introduced the concept of the “right to difference”, which gives the far right an already ideological foundation – an “intellectual” alternative to open racism¹⁵. This line was developed by Renaud Camus in his book *Le Grand Remplacement* (2011), which advanced the thesis of a demographic and cultural “replacement” of native Europeans allegedly abetted by the elites. The concept crossed French borders and became part of the discourse of the AfD (in the form of “Umvolkung”), of the British far right, and of the MAGA movement in the US, and also figured in the manifestos of the terrorist attacks in Christchurch (2019) and El Paso (2019), among others.

III. Waves of Crises as Trigger of Far-Right Rise

Crises worth remembering. The growth of the far-right projects' specifically electoral popularity in Europe coincides with the peaks of palpable crises. Thus the global financial crisis of 2008–2009, which in Europe hit Greece, Ireland, Portugal, and Spain hardest, is one of the preconditions for the consolidation of networks around this course. Next came the COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2022), which brought Europe-wide lockdowns, an economic standstill, and the deepest recession since the Second World War.

In the medium term, COVID acted as an amplifier of already existing trends: by mobilizing anti-vaccine and anti-institutional audiences and mastering TikTok and Telegram as communication channels (later exploited by actors such as Călin Georgescu in Romania), actors that had formed their positions long before acquired real political weight.

That said, the link between the far-right upsurge and the 2008–2009 financial crisis is traced far more convincingly. The study by Funke, Schularick, and Trebesch (covering around 100 financial crises and more than 800 national elections in 20 democracies since 1870) finds that after financial crises the far-right vote share rises by more than 30%, and that the effect is specific to financial crises rather than ordinary economic downturns¹⁶.



* Visualization created using AI tools (Claude)

This can be explained by the so-called “fear of falling” effect, whereby the middle class feels its property status threatened and turns to parties that promise “order” and personify the blame in the figure of the “outsider”. Thus the Hungarian scholars Gyöngyösi and Verner argue that after 2008

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Jobbik attracted precisely mortgage-holding voters who “would not normally have voted far right” but found themselves under the threat of debt¹⁷.

The European Center for Populism Studies (ECPS) likewise identifies a similar pattern, distinguishing between the hardest-hit countries (Greece, Spain, Portugal, Ireland, Italy), where far-right growth was most dramatic, and the less affected ones (Austria, France, Britain), where it came later and more indirectly¹⁸. The year 2008 thus became the first impetus for consolidation, the 2015 migration crisis the second, and the pandemic the third – with each crisis layering onto the previous one rather than replacing it.

Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 had a contradictory effect on the far-right camp. In the first months of 2022, parties with close ties to Russia suffered reputational losses: RN and Austria’s FPÖ distanced themselves from Moscow or avoided direct accusations in their public statements. In the medium term, however, the invasion handed the far-right camp a new mobilization resource in the form of so-called “war fatigue” and the rhetoric of “peace at any price”.

For example, an analysis of European Parliament votes on Ukraine resolutions reveals four phases of this transformation¹⁹. First, unanimous support (February–June 2022). Then the first disagreements over sanctions (mid-2022 to early 2023). Next, growing “fatigue” and more consistent far-right opposition (2023–2024). And finally, a “mainstream contagion” is observed, as the rhetoric of a toxic “peace” seeps into the programs of other parties as well, such as the EPP or the European liberals (from late 2024)²⁰. For the far right, Ukraine remains a mobilization instrument within the functional logic described in the theoretical section. It is notable, however, that in countries with a more palpable threat from Russia such parties still have to balance between openly pro-Russian sympathies and the anti-Russian sentiments of their voters.

IV. Country Analysis

Germany: how an opposition party of economists became a lobbyist for a foreign actor. The AfD was founded in 2013 as a party of Eurosceptic right-conservative economists who opposed the eurozone bailout of Greece at the expense of German taxpayers. Two years later, in 2015–2016, during the mass influx of refugees, Angela Merkel's then ruling Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union (CDU/CSU) coalition adopted a course of admitting migrants that part of society perceived sharply negatively – and the AfD capitalized on this.

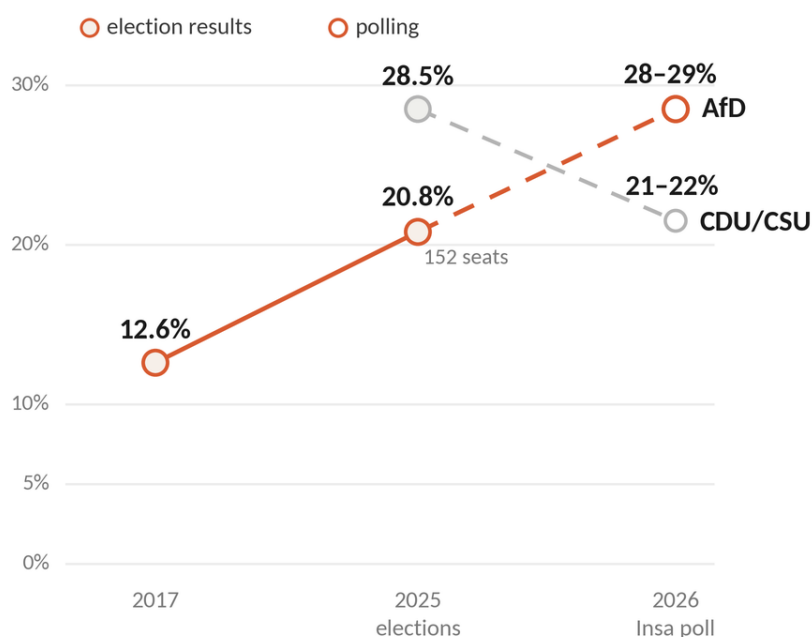
In opposition, the party armed itself with the anti-migration theme, thereby taking deep root in the east German Länder (the territories of the former German Democratic Republic (GDR), a separate state that existed until reunification in 1990 and still lags behind the country's west in incomes and economic dynamism). The result was a steep electoral trajectory: 12.6% in the 2017 elections, then 20.8% and 152 seats in February 2025 (second place behind the CDU/CSU, which won 28.5% and again formed the government)²¹. As of July 2026, the party consistently leads the polls: Insa puts the AfD at 28–29% against 21–22% for the now-ruling CDU/CSU, a 7–8 point gap that has held for several months running²².

AfD support remains highest in the east, among men, and among voters with secondary education and low incomes. At the same time, the party is growing markedly among the youngest cohorts: in the 2025 elections it came second among voters aged 18–29 and first in the 30–44 group. In May 2025, the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (BfV) definitively classified the AfD as a “confirmed right-wing extremist organization”²³. Tellingly, back in 2018 the then director of that same BfV, Hans-Georg Maaßen, according to published reports, advised the AfD leadership on how to avoid surveillance – an indication of how deep the penetration could reach, even into the structures meant to protect against it. In October 2025, Thuringia's interior minister reported that party parliamentary inquiries were being used to gather information on critical infrastructure in the Kremlin's interests²⁴.

Unlike the other parties in this article's sample, the AfD's leaders – Alice Weidel (a former Goldman Sachs consultant) and Tino Chrupalla (a painter-decorator by trade) – have no personal ties to state companies. Yet Moscow supported the party financially and politically to promote positions favorable to Russia, as demonstrated by the AfD's consistent support for restarting Nord Stream, in which Gazprom held 51%. Nord Stream lobbying, however, is not an exclusively far-right phenomenon: former Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) chancellor Gerhard Schröder, who led Germany's government in 1998–2005, went on after leaving office to chair the boards of the Nord Stream 2 consortium and of Rosneft. In the Bundestag, the AfD votes against weapons deliveries and sanctions and for “peace talks” in a reading favorable to Moscow, remaining the most consistent opponent of support for Ukraine.

The public debate over the unspoken “quarantine” around the AfD (in Germany it is called the “Brandmauer”, literally “firewall” – the party's political isolation) wobbled noticeably in 2026. A Forsa poll finds that in eastern Germany 53% of respondents support other parties forming coalitions with the AfD, against 44% opposed, while in the west rejection prevails (61%)²⁵. The five state elections of 2026 – in Baden-Württemberg, Rhineland-Palatinate, Saxony-Anhalt, Berlin, and Mecklenburg-Vorpommern (these being precisely the Länder on the territory of the former GDR) – will be the first practical test of whether this isolation withstands the pressure²⁶.

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* Visualization created using AI tools (Claude)

France: from the fringe party of Le Pen senior to the threshold of the Élysée Palace. The National Front of Jean-Marie Le Pen was founded in 1972 and was perceived from the outset as marginal. The transformation of the party began in 2011, when his daughter Marine Le Pen took over its leadership. She abandoned the openly antisemitic rhetoric while concentrating on the anti-migration, anti-Islam, and anti-European lines. In 2014 (during the annexation of Crimea), the party received a 9 million euro loan from the First Czech-Russian Bank, though after 2022 there were also attempts to balance: public condemnations of the invasion, but no support for providing Ukraine with weapons or for imposing anti-Russian sanctions.

After the 2018 rebranding as Rassemblement National (RN), the party steadily built up its electoral ratings: 17.9% in the first round of the 2012 presidential election against the Socialist François Hollande; reaching the 2017 runoff against Emmanuel Macron with 33.9%; 89 seats in the National Assembly in 2022, the best result in the party's history; and finally 31.4% in the European Parliament elections and 33.2% in the first round of the 2024 parliamentary elections, when RN was already running as the opposition²⁷²⁸.

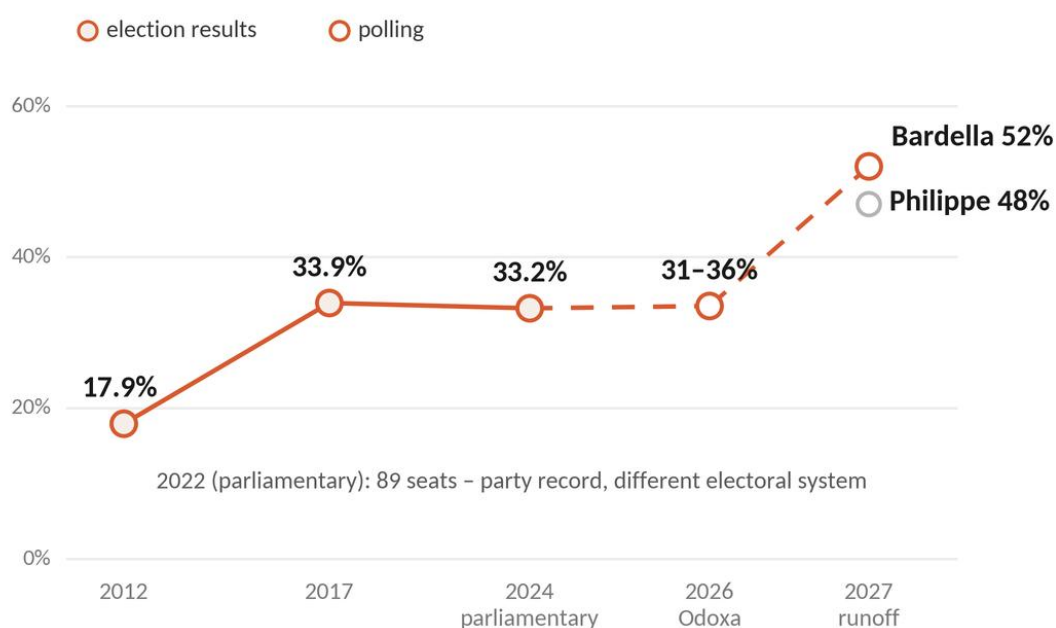
The Yellow Vest protests in France in 2018–2019, directed against the Macron government's fuel tax increases, formed a new mobilization base in "peripheral France" – among provincial voters who see Macron and Brussels as defenders of privileged castes. After those events the electoral base diversified markedly: young suburban voters joined the traditional core (the rural south and the north). In the 2024 European Parliament elections, RN won 25% among voters under 25, up from 12% in 2022, having systematically mastered TikTok through Jordan Bardella's account²⁹.

Bardella himself was born in 1995 in Drancy, a working-class suburb of Paris in the Seine-Saint-Denis department, and joined the National Front at just 16; he studied at the Sorbonne but abandoned his studies for a party career. His ascent was swift and unfolded entirely under Le Pen's patronage: party spokesman (2017–2019), vice president (2019–2021), acting president (2021–2022) and, finally, elected RN president at the 2022 congress with almost 85% of members' votes against Le Pen's former partner Louis Aliot.

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In April 2026, France 24 revealed a series of closed-door meetings between Le Pen, Bardella, and the corporate elite: dinners with the leadership of Engie, TotalEnergies, Renault, and AXA. Sciences Po analysts suggested that French business elites are not “falling in love” with RN but buying an “insurance policy”, calling it a pragmatic move rather than ideological alignment³⁰.

As of mid-2026, RN polls at 31–36% in the first round of the 2027 presidential race³¹. Le Pen herself cannot currently run: in March 2025 a Paris court found her guilty of embezzling European Parliament funds and imposed an immediate five-year ban on holding elected office, which is why the polls test Bardella for RN³². In a hypothetical runoff against the centrist Édouard Philippe, a former prime minister, an Odoxa-Mascaret poll for the first time gives victory to Bardella – 52% to 48%³³. Odoxa also cautions against premature conclusions: a year remains before the vote, which is ample time for the dynamics to change.



However, if RN comes to power in 2027, the consequences could be incomparable to the Hungarian precedent: France is a permanent member of the United Nations (UN) Security Council, a nuclear power, and one of the key sponsors of support for Ukraine.

* Visualization created using AI tools (Claude)

United Kingdom: from Brexit to a fossil fuel donor model. The British wave has its own specifics, which manifested most loudly during Brexit in 2016. The flagship party of that era, Nigel Farage’s UKIP – never in power and acting rather as a pressure party on the ruling Conservatives – used dissatisfaction with EU membership to break out of the margins. After the 2016 referendum, which UKIP essentially won, the party lost the “point” of its existence, and Farage founded the Brexit Party (2019) and then Reform UK (2021).

In the 2024 general election, when power passed from the Conservatives to Keir Starmer’s Labour, Reform UK won 14.3% of the vote but only 5 seats owing to Britain’s first-past-the-post system³⁴. In the May 2026 elections to the Welsh Senedd, the party came second and won 34 seats – its first major breakthrough at the regional level³⁵. Polls in 2025–2026 consistently give the party 20–25%, already a challenge to the ratings of the ruling Labour Party.

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Reform UK is the only case in the sample with direct financing from a single industry. According to DeSmog, 67% of the party's funding came from donors with financial interests in fossil fuels (more than 24 million pounds). The largest contribution came from Christopher Harborne (22 million pounds), whose company AML Global trades in aviation fuel³⁶. Party treasurer Nick Candy publicly described a strategy of attracting oil and gas donors "dissatisfied with British taxes on the profits" of the renewable energy industry – which almost verbatim translates the interests of the party's donors. While domestic industry interests define the party network, cases of Russia financing individual party members have also been documented. In November 2025, the former leader of Reform UK in Wales was sentenced to 10.5 years for bribes from a pro-Russian agent in exchange for pro-Russian speeches in the European Parliament; these bribery episodes relate to his 2018–2019 term as a Member of the European Parliament³⁷. Overall, certain party positions effectively coincide with pro-Russian ones: skepticism toward the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), "Britain First" rhetoric, and Farage's statements that "NATO enlargement provoked Russia". While the party is in opposition this remains rhetoric, but should it come to power, the risk for support of Ukraine could become entirely real.

Slovakia: Fico's three premierships and the first signs of fatigue with the man himself. Robert Fico and his Smer party are an atypical case. The party is social democratic in name, left-populist in rhetoric, and distinctly pro-Russian in foreign policy. The ECPS writes that Smer has always carried nationalist and Eurosceptic elements in its rhetoric³⁸.

Fico himself founded Smer on November 8, 1999, after leaving the Party of the Democratic Left (SDL) – the successor to the Communist Party of Slovakia – where he had been passed over for the post of prosecutor general. At first the party positioned itself as a centrist "third way"; after absorbing the SDL in 2005 it became the country's dominant left-wing force.

Its leader Robert Fico headed the government twice in succession (2006–2010, 2012–2018) until, after the 2018 murder of journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée Martina Kušnírová (Kuciak had been investigating tax fraud with alleged links between Smer-connected figures and the Italian 'Ndrangheta mafia; the murder triggered the largest protests, "For a Decent Slovakia", since 1989), he was forced to resign, and power passed to a pro-Western coalition. In 2020 it was replaced by the even more pro-Western government of Igor Matovič and later Eduard Heger, which, however, failed to deliver convincing results in fighting corruption. It was voter fatigue with ineffective governance that opened Fico's path to a third premiership in 2023, when Smer won with 22.9%³⁹.

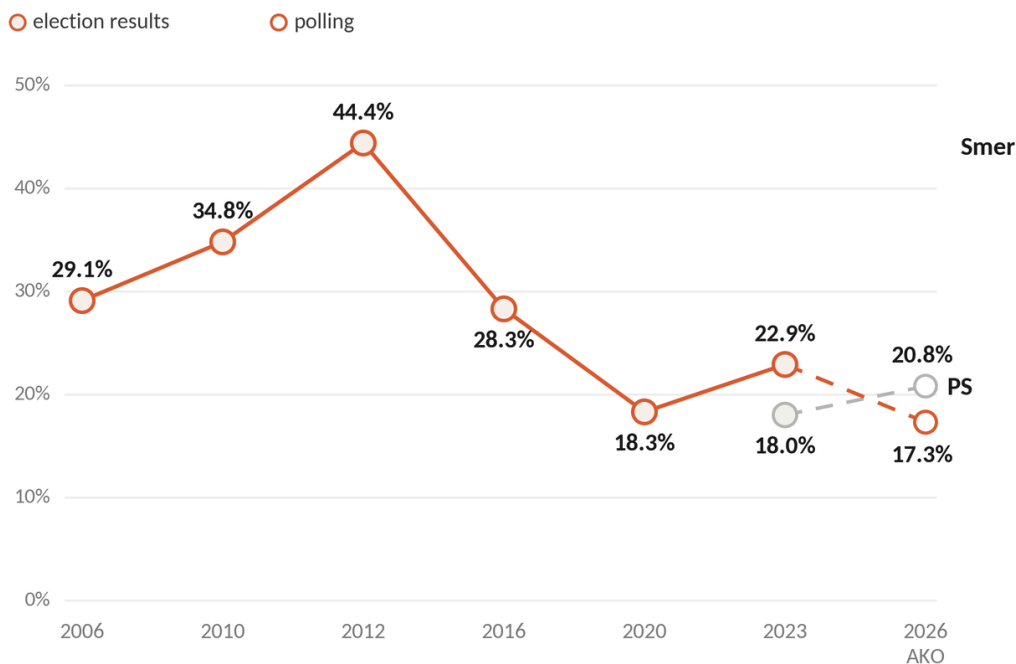
Yet as early as 2021, while in opposition, Fico methodically built alliances with "alternative media" and the extra-parliamentary far-right opposition, while the pandemic and the war in Ukraine provided the resource for mobilizing anti-vaxxers and pro-Russian authoritarians. His shift into the right-wing field under a left-wing banner is thus likewise functional survival rather than an ideological "mission".

Having canceled military aid to Ukraine immediately after returning to power in October 2023, Fico simultaneously developed a personal gas diplomacy. The state gas supplier Slovenský plynárenský priemysel (Slovak Gas Industry, SPP) retained its long-term contract with Gazprom until 2034 thanks to an exceptional status under EU directives, and remains one of the few EU companies buying pipeline gas directly via TurkStream (around 4 billion cubic meters a year). In September 2025, Fico met Putin in person in Beijing and publicly declared interest in Russian gas supplies⁴⁰. Moreover, after the transit agreement expired in early 2025, Fico threatened Kyiv with a lawsuit. And since Slovakia is the geographic and technical buffer between Ukraine and Central Europe, its blocking position has a disproportionately large impact on aid logistics.

As of July 2026, however, Fico's own standing has wobbled noticeably. An AKO poll puts the opposition Progresívne Slovensko (Progressive Slovakia, PS) at 20.8% against 17.3% for the ruling

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Smer – the first time the opposition has consistently led the governing party after several months of near-parity⁴¹. The next parliamentary elections must be held no later than September 28, 2027, which makes the Slovak case important for the electoral forecast⁴²: “Fico fatigue” could well replicate the logic of Hungary’s 2010 “Gyurcsány fatigue” (Ferenc Gyurcsány, Hungary’s Socialist prime minister, whose 2006 speech caught on tape – with the words “we lied morning, evening, and night” about the state of the economy – sparked riots after the recording leaked and shattered trust in the left, clearing the way both for Fidesz’s victory and for Jobbik’s parallel surge in 2010), only in a pro-European direction⁴³.



* Visualization created using AI tools (Claude)

Romania: from the surprise breakthrough of 2020 to a “new window of opportunity”. The Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR) emerged practically from scratch in the December 2020 elections (the party was founded on December 1, 2019 – Romania’s Great Union Day – by George Simion, an activist of the movement for union with Moldova, and Claudiu Târziu, a conservative journalist). It won 9.1% – the most unexpected result in Romanian electoral history, achieved while a center-right coalition, exhausted by the first year of the pandemic, was in power.

The pandemic provided a platform for the anti-vaccine narrative; the large Romanian diaspora voting online leaned toward ultranationalist positions; and leaders George Simion and Claudiu Târziu made skillful use of TikTok and Telegram. The party steadily built up its position, and in the December 2024 presidential election the surprise front-runner was one “independent” candidate, Călin Georgescu (a former desertification specialist who had worked in United Nations structures, was virtually unknown to the wider public before 2024, and declared zero campaign spending; the Constitutional Court later barred him from the rerun, and in May 2025 he announced his withdrawal from public politics), linked both to AUR and to a pool of other, smaller far-right projects, as well as to pro-Russian networks.

The Constitutional Court annulled the results after the exposure of a TikTok influence operation, provoking a sharp diplomatic dispute with the Trump administration, whose representatives publicly

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came to Georgescu's defense. The loudest was Vice President JD Vance, who in his speech at the Munich Security Conference in February 2025 called the annulment "a threat to democracy"; Elon Musk backed him as well.

In the May 2025 rerun, George Simion won the first round with 40.96% but lost the runoff to the current president, Nicușor Dan – 53.6% to 46.4%⁴⁴. This is one of the few cases in the sample where the mobilization of the pro-European electorate stopped a far-right candidate at the final stage. AUR/Simion support stabilized at 25–30% in 2025–2026, with especially high figures among the young: according to the CURS exit poll of May 2025, Simion won over 43% among voters aged 18–30 and 44.5% in rural areas. Former foreign minister Teodor Baconschi has publicly stated that the Georgescu–Simion doctrine was "formed in the unreformed part of the intelligence services and promoted for years". Meanwhile, according to the findings of the Romanian Intelligence Service (SRI), the slogan of Georgescu's TikTok campaign was "methodologically identical" to a previous TikTok campaign Russia had deployed in Ukraine.

Romania continues to play the role of a key transit corridor for weapons and humanitarian aid to Ukraine through the ports of Constanța and Galați and the Mihail Kogălniceanu air base. The next parliamentary elections must be held no later than November 30, 2028, but the recent fall of the Bolojan government (Ilie Bolojan, leader of the National Liberal Party (PNL), headed the government from June 2025; it was toppled by a vote on May 5, 2026), initiated by one of the ruling parties, the Social Democratic Party (PSD), together with the far-right AUR – notably after his attempts to privatize a number of strategic enterprises – keeps the threat of early elections alive.

V. Comparative Synthesis

The table below reduces the six cases to a single format. The risk assessment in the last column is not a formal index but a qualitative judgment based on three criteria: the potential of a blocking vote at the EU level, the degree of documented connection to pro-Russian or anti-sanctions networks, and the party’s nearest electoral horizon (whether it is approaching power or moving away from it). These criteria are applied consistently to all six cases examined above.

Comparative matrix (as of July 2026):

Country	Party	Linkage mechanism	Growth trigger	Position on Ukraine	Risk 2026–2027
Germany	AfD	lobbying for a foreign actor	2015 crisis (refugees)	hostile: against weapons and sanctions, for Nord Stream	high
France	RN	pre-election engagement of corporations	2008 crisis, Yellow Vests	ambiguous, critical risk after 2027	critical
United Kingdom	Reform UK	donor dependence	Brexit, failure of “levelling up”	ambiguous, risk growing	medium, growing
Hungary	Fidesz	“state capture” (NER – System of National Cooperation)	2008 crisis, Gyurcsány tapes	hostile, systemic blocker	reduced after the 2026 elections
Slovakia	Smer	personal diplomacy (SPP)	reform fatigue (2023)	hostile, froze aid	high, though ratings falling
Romania	AUR	“revolving-door” cadres, Russian networks via former intelligence officials	COVID, 2020 TikTok operation	mixed, transit blocking risk	medium, growing

VI. Electoral Cycles 2026–2029: Assessing Trajectories

The next three years contain at least five points at which far-right and populist dynamics could shift the balance of support for Ukraine at the EU level: five state elections in Germany in 2026; possible early elections in Slovakia (by September 2027); parliamentary elections in Romania (by November 2028, with the risk of an early scenario after the fall of the Bolojan government); presidential and parliamentary elections in France (April–May and June 2027); and the next Bundestag elections (early 2029).

Comparative matrix - as of July 2026

country / party	linkage mechanism	growth trigger	position on Ukraine	risk 2026–27
Germany AfD	lobbying for a foreign actor	2015 crisis (refugees)	hostile: against weapons and sanctions, for Nord Stream	high
France RN	pre-election engagement of corporations	2008 crisis, Yellow Vests	ambiguous, critical risk after 2027	critical
United Kingdom Reform UK	donor dependence	Brexit, failure of “levelling up”	ambiguous, risk growing	medium ↗
Slovakia Smer	personal diplomacy (SPP)	reform fatigue (2023)	hostile, froze aid	high ↘
Romania AUR	“revolving door” cadres, ex-intelligence networks	COVID, 2020 TikTok operation	mixed, transit blocking risk	medium ↗

risk scale 2026–2027 - a qualitative judgment on three criteria:

potential of a blocking vote at the EU level · documented links to pro-Russian or anti-sanctions networks · the party’s nearest electoral horizon

critical

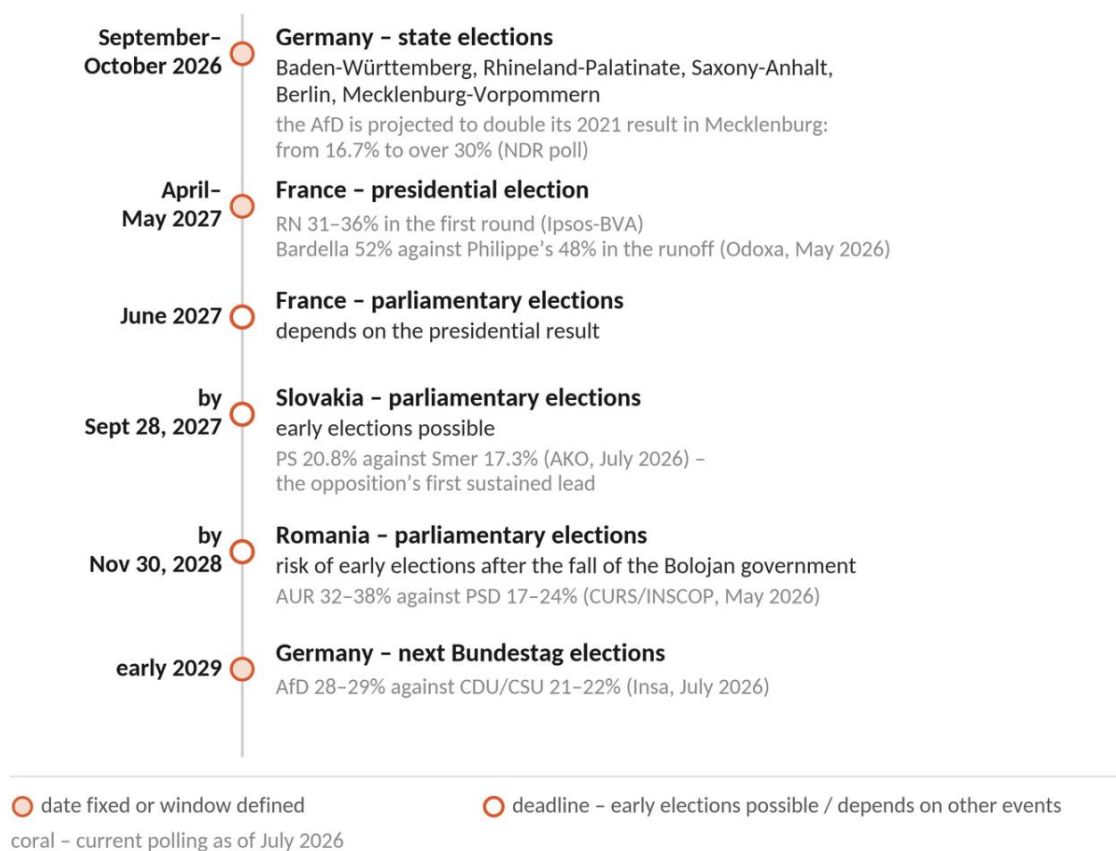
high

medium

· arrows – direction of risk dynamics

* Visualization created using AI tools (Claude)

Calendar of key electoral points 2026–2029



* Visualization created using AI tools (Claude)

How the forecast is built

The forecast uses a formula that estimates the “ceiling” of rating growth (the Verhulst equation): $dS/dt = r \cdot S \cdot (1 - S/K)^{4546}$. Under it, rating growth (S) is determined by two quantities: the baseline rate (r) and the share of “free space” remaining up to the ceiling (K). While the rating is far from the ceiling, the party grows at almost full speed; the less space remains, the slower the growth, until a plateau is reached.

For each country, the calculation used two points in time, from which the rate is derived, and a ceiling estimate. The notional ceiling is an expert value set from the parties’ actual maximums in open sources, and it is therefore the model’s main source of error.

Germany, AfD. Starting points: 20.8% in the February 2025 elections and 28–29% in July 2026; ceiling – 32.5%. The projection for the next Bundestag elections (early 2029) is around 32%. The model assigns the bulk of the gains to 2026–2027; thereafter the rate falls below one percentage point a year, and the party approaches polling day practically at its own maximum.

France, RN. Starting points: 23.1% in 2022 and 33.2% in 2024; ceiling – 37.5%. The projection for the first round of the presidential election in April 2027 is 36–37%, the upper bound of current polling. An important caveat is that the last cycle’s gains are accelerating rather than slowing – characteristic of a party that has not yet reached its ceiling. The 37.5% should therefore be read as a lower estimate of the maximum, not a guaranteed limit.

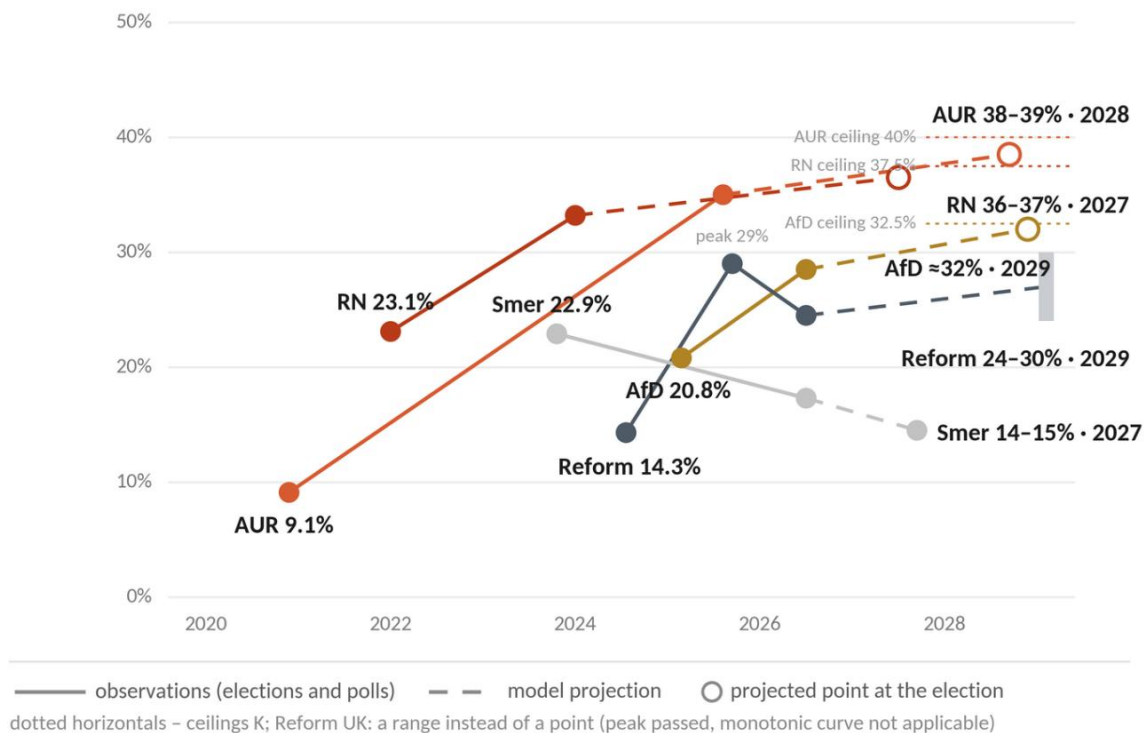
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United Kingdom, Reform UK. The only case where the rating has already passed its maximum of around 29% in 2025 and rolled back to 23–26% as of mid-2026. A point forecast here would give false precision; a sound estimate for the 2029 elections may range between 24% and 30%, with a maximum that, on the available data, is already behind or close to being repeated without significant exceedance.

Slovakia, Smer. The dynamic is the reverse of the rest of the sample: 22.9% in the 2023 elections against 17.3% in July 2026. Extending this pace yields 14–15% for September 2027. The party's historical maximum (44.4% in 2012) is two electoral cycles behind, and the model records not an approach to the ceiling but a retreat from it; the relevant question for this case is not growth potential but the speed of losing power.

Romania, AUR. Starting points: 9.1% in December 2020 and 32–38% in May 2026; the ceiling is taken at 40% as a working assumption, since the Romanian party field offers no direct historical benchmark. The projection for the parliamentary elections due by November 2028 is 38–39%, with a plateau reached already during 2027. The fragmentation of the Romanian field makes this assumption the most vulnerable in the sample: with further splintering of the opponents, the actual ceiling may prove higher than assumed in the calculation.

Saturation-curve forecast – observations and projections to 2029



* Visualization created using AI tools (Claude)

VII. Implications for Ukraine

The current support framework and its fragility. As of June 2026, the Council of the EU had adopted the 20th sanctions package against Russia (April 2026: 120 new individual restrictions, the largest package in two years) and approved a 90 billion euro loan to Ukraine for 2026–2027 (December 2025). The EU accession negotiation process continues: in March 2026 Ukraine received an invitation to open negotiating clusters, starting with the “fundamentals” cluster. The decision on the 90 billion euro loan was taken in “enhanced cooperation” mode without Hungary, Czechia, and Slovakia – a precedent that attests to the real possibility of EU unity splitting.

The most obvious risk lies in the blocking of sanctions packages and financial assistance by veto. Decisions requiring unanimity are especially vulnerable: sanctions packages, new aid tranches, Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) decisions on weapons supplies, and so on. If RN comes to power in France in 2027, or the AfD becomes part of a coalition government in Germany, there will be enough blocking votes to paralyze such decisions.

The far right in Hungary, Slovakia, and Romania systematically exploits the issue of EU enlargement for domestic mobilization, portraying Ukraine’s accession as a threat to local farmers and subsidies. Since accession requires the unanimity of all members, every “problem” country can turn out to be that very “no”. Romania and Slovakia are key transit corridors for weapons, so their obstruction would have a disproportionately large impact on the logistics of support.

Indirect risks and the role of partners whose position is more complex than it seems. The far right has a stake in preserving dependence on fossil fuels: every euro the EU spends on Russian energy indirectly finances Russia’s army, its influence operations, and the support of the far right itself (incidentally, this is worth factoring into the communication strategy with countries where these trends are observed). Dismantling the Green Deal would mean preserving these revenues for Russia. If RN wins in France in 2027 and the AfD sets the agenda in Germany, the Franco-German engine of Euro-Atlantic support for Ukraine will weaken markedly.

The more insidious long-term risk is the slow drift of mainstream parties toward far-right positions, recorded by European Parliament researchers as the “fourth phase” (which we are currently observing in Romania): the penetration of “peace at any price” rhetoric into the programs of the EPP and the liberals. This is not outright blocking but a gradual normalization of escapism. Under this trend, the dominant form of pressure becomes not direct pro-Russian propaganda but a “realist” discourse around the themes of peace, the burden of costs, farmers’ rights, market protection, and the “sovereign right to decide” – a discourse that can masquerade as pragmatism and is hard to refute head-on.

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Imprint

Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung Ukraine (Kyiv)

kas.de

Publisher: Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung Ukraine (Kyiv), 2026, Kyiv
wul. Akademika Bohomoltsia 5, Office 1, 01024 Kyiv, Ukraine
Telephone: +380444927443
<https://www.kas.de/en/web/ukraine>

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The publication is prepared under the project “Strengthening the Analytical Capabilities of the Foreign Policy Decision-Making with the Civil Society” of the Centre for International Security with the support of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung Ukraine (Kyiv).



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