

How has the populist threat replaced the threat of the far right?

Summary of the study

November 2022

The popular language and political science struggle to define the far right, mainly due to the difficulty in drawing a clear dividing line between extremism and radicalism. For this reason, the term far-right is primarily used as a catch-all term, encompassing several tendencies. However, according to Cas Mudde's definitions, the main difference between the (extreme) far right and the populist radical right, apart from the many similarities, is the anti-elite or anti-establishment populism. **The essence of populism, which can be understood both as an ideology and a political strategy, is that it defines itself as the representative of the 'true people/nation' in opposition to the 'political elite' while in many cases being itself a long-standing part and beneficiary of the system.** Populists exclude their opponents and certain minority groups from their arbitrarily (but flexibly) defined nation and portray them as enemies.

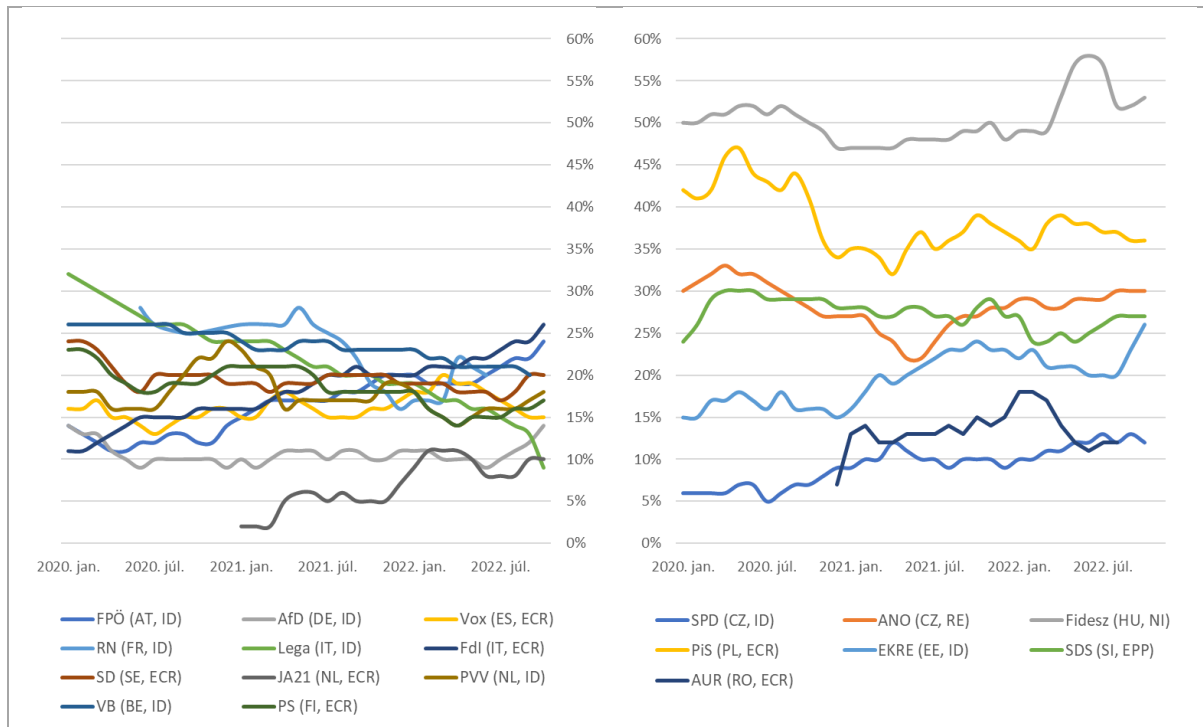
One of the reasons for the rise of populists is the "strategic radicalization" of traditional right-wing parties, i.e., the adoption, legitimization and mainstreaming of far-right narratives, which has led to the radicalization of the mainstream. **Another reason is the 'strategic refinement' of previously hardline far-right parties,** i.e., the refinement and 'packaging' of particular views to broaden their electoral base.

The main danger of populism is that "two-way mainstreaming" (the radicalization of the traditional right and the strategic refinement of extremism) **blurs the boundaries between the classical far right and the center right, and extremist narratives become part of the public discourse and even the norm. It also blurs the boundaries between what is acceptable and unacceptable in a broader sense. In the name and the interests of the 'people', everything is allowed:** dismantling the rule of law and democratic institutions, restricting the rights of independent actors and minority groups branded as enemies, promoting the interests of foreign authoritarian regimes, weakening international cooperation through a policy of national egoism, creating an alternative reality based on disinformation and conspiracy theories that increase polarization and tribalism.

Populist and far-right parties in the EU focus on similar themes and follow similar strategies in all countries. Their most important themes are criticism or rejection of the European Union wrapped in criticism, opposition to immigration, opposition to gender and LGBTQI, and defense of the 'traditional family'. Although most of them used to have close ties with the Kremlin, the Russian aggression against Ukraine has apparently led many to change their position, although the majority, at least indirectly, continue to promote narratives in the interests of the Russian state, such as the ineffectiveness and counterproductivity of sanctions. They also seek to exploit the growing discontent over inflation and the rise in food and energy prices.

Although populist and far-right parties won big electoral victories in Sweden and Italy in 2022, they were defeated in France and Austria. Crises tend to favor politics based on people's insecurities and concerns. **Still, Europe's populist and far-right parties have so far failed to turn the permanent crisis from 2020 to their advantage. Nor can we speak of an overall strengthening of these parties in terms of popular support.** In Italy, too, the electoral results were more a reflection of the fall of the left and the reshuffling of the right.

Figure 1: Support for populist and far-right parties in the EU 'old' (left graph) and 'new' (right graph) Member States between 1 January 2020 and 1 November 2022 (Source: Politico Poll of Polls¹, except RN data, which is sourced from Wikipedia²)



Among populist and far-right parties, those that are or have been in power and have rolled back the rule of law, checks and balances and have taken control of the press, or at least attempted to do so, enjoy the greatest support. These parties are all to be found in the new EU Member States that joined in 2004 or after.

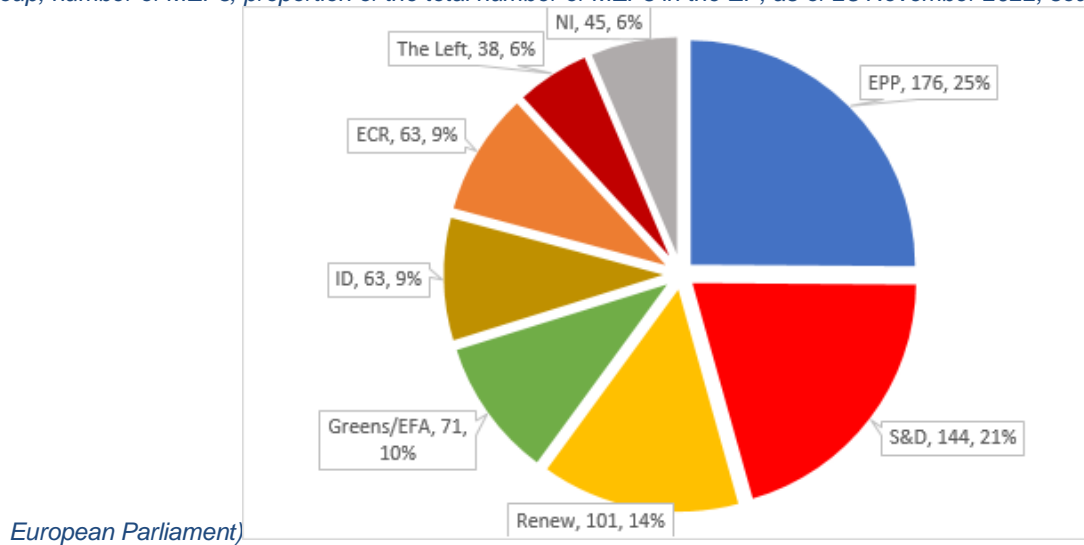
Populist and far-right parties have been working for years to establish closer cooperation and a joint parliamentary group in the European Parliament. The desire was expressed before the 2019 EP elections, and since then, there have been constant meetings, joint events, and support for each other's campaigns. **Their cooperation aims at 1) spreading illiberal ideas and mutually reinforcing each other in national political arenas, 2) sharing and adopting "practices" and innovations on populist, illiberal governance and policies, and 3) achieving a change of policy and power in Europe.** The latter would give them free rein to take anti-democratic measures in their own countries to entrench their power.

However, a "takeover in Brussels " does not seem realistic in the near future. In the EP, the majority of populist and far-right parties sit in two groups and only make up just over 20% of MEPs, even if you count the representatives of parties scattered in other groups or among independents.

¹ „POLITICO Poll of Polls — European Polls, Trends and Election News”, *POLITICO* (blog), 2022. február 2., <https://www.politico.eu/europe-poll-of-polls/>.

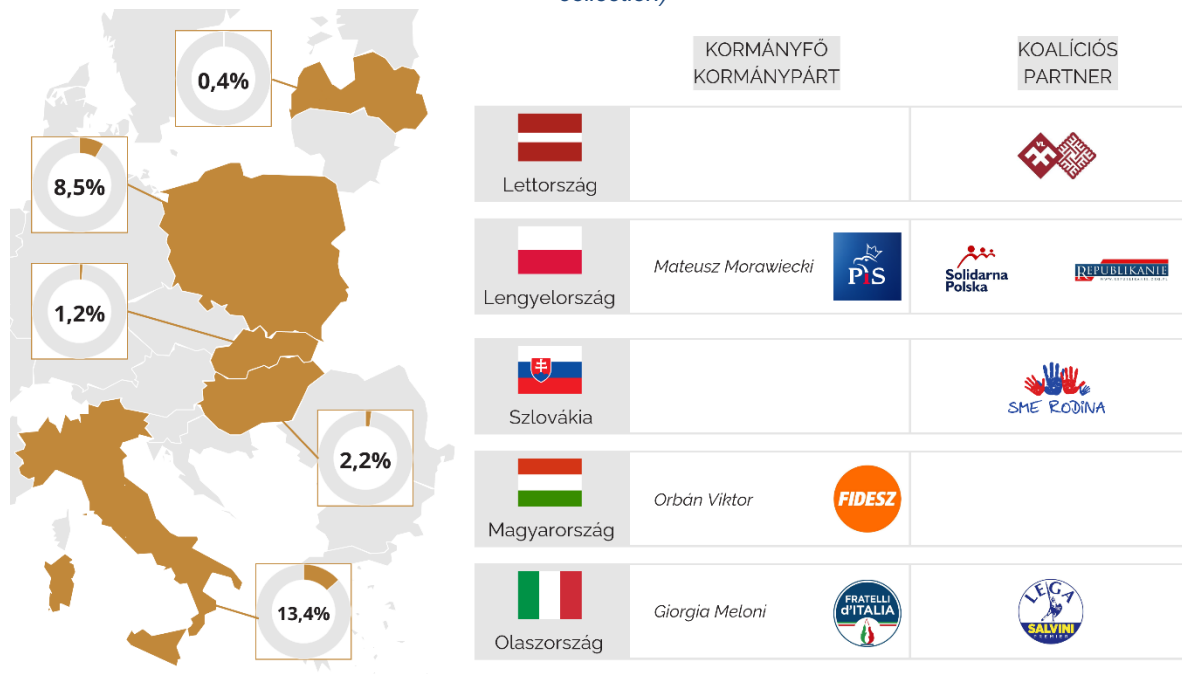
² „Opinion Polling for the 2022 French Legislative Election”, in *Wikipedia*, 2022. október 12., https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Opinion_polling_for_the_2022_French_legislative_election&oldid=1115624826.

Figure 2: Composition of the European Parliament by political group (abbreviation of the name of the political group, number of MEPs, proportion of the total number of MEPs in the EP; as of 23 November 2022, source:



In the **Council**, the EU's main decision-making body, populist and far-right parties are represented in the governments of only 5 out of 28 EU countries (plus indirectly in Sweden, where they support the government from outside).

Figure 3: The five EU Member States where populist and far-right parties are in government, showing the proportion of the countries' population in relation to the total EU population (Source: Political Capital own collection)



There are, however, **serious obstacles to closer cooperation between populist and far-right parties**. Although they try to focus on common issues, they are **divided on a number of issues**. The main one is the **relationship with Russia**, but they also differ on the details of cooperation with the EU. In addition, serious **personal differences and diverging power interests** make it difficult to conclude a European alliance and merge the factions.

Conclusions and recommendations

- **Populist and far-right forces threaten social peace and a democratic order** based on human dignity, equality, common rules and healthy competition. **The political and social actors of the 'center' must therefore take united and decisive action** to defend these values and to oppose populist and far-right forces.
- **The parties of the 'center' must not normalize far-right ideas; they must offer** a credible and potent **alternative** and have to **guard the fairness of democratic competition**.
- **Both the EU and the Member States must guard democratic institutions and a free and independent press.** If these start to break down, it will become increasingly difficult to change power through democratic competition.
- **All means, including the extension of sanctions, must be used to counter Russian destabilizing efforts,** including direct or indirect support and networking of populist and far-right actors.
- All youth professionals, institutions, organizations and, of course, parents have a **key responsibility to reinforce young people's democratic values** and develop the skills to help them navigate the (dis)informational noise and public issues.