

The background of the entire page is a photograph of the European Union flag, which is blue with twelve yellow stars arranged in a circle. The flag is waving in the wind. In the background, there is a large, modern building with a curved facade and many windows. The sky is clear and blue. The overall tone is professional and official.

# THE SPECTER OF AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES IS HAUNTING EUROPE

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POPULIST FRIENDS  
SEEK TO HELP LOWERING  
THE EU'S GUARD

Patrik Szicherle, Csaba Molnár, Péter Krekó





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Political Capital is an independent policy research, analysis and consulting institute founded in 2001 in Budapest. Our institute owes no allegiance to any government or political body. We have developed an extended network of professional partners, both domestically and internationally, all of whom have helped our institute become one of the most influential think tanks in Central and East Europe.

We are committed to the guiding principles of parliamentary democracy, market economy, human rights and Euro-Atlanticism. Through the creation of analytical content, quantitative and qualitative policy research, and by organizing substantial debates, we want to

- promote critical political thinking and increase understanding for politics,
- raise awareness about political issues that have an impact on citizens' everyday life, even if indirectly, and
- contribute to and develop critical public discourse and policy making based on knowledge and evidence.

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This paper is the summary of the results of a two-year-long research project covering the foreign policy-related votes of Members of the European Parliament in the current, 9th European Parliamentary term, with a special focus on Central and Southeastern European countries (Czechia, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, Austria, Romania and Bulgaria), to establish the potential openness of MEPs to authoritarian influence, and particularly to Russia and China. We further advanced the novel methodology created last year, to be able to depict the situation in the institution even more accurately. We hope our results will help better understand foreign policy decisions in the EU and identify how authoritarian regimes might be able to lobby for their interests in the unique decision-making system of the European Union. For more information on the project, including the short summary of this study, please visit our thematic website: [https://politicalcapital.hu/authoritarian\\_shadows\\_in\\_the\\_eu/](https://politicalcapital.hu/authoritarian_shadows_in_the_eu/)

This summary is based on votes cast by all MEPs who sat in the plenaries of the 9th European Parliament between 2 July 2019, the start of the term, and 20 May 2021. The analysis was aided by our local partners from Czechia, Slovakia, Poland, Austria, Romania and Bulgaria. We are grateful to all authors listed above for their valuable contributions. We are also grateful to the National Endowment for Democracy for their support, without which this research would have been impossible. All errors and omissions are our own.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Central and Eastern Europe - CEE

Council of the European Union - Council

Foreign Affairs Council - FAC

European Parliament - EP

European Commission - EC

Common Foreign- and Security Policy - CFSP

Common Security and Defense Policy - CSDP

EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment - CAI

China-critical Index - CCI

Kremlin-critical Index - KCI

Counter-authoritarian Index - CI

Counter-disinformation Index - CDI

Common Foreign Policy Index - CFPI

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- **Authoritarian influence in the European Union primarily targets individual member states, not European institutions.** The vast majority of the Members of the European Parliament, the only directly elected EU institution, are highly supportive of strong European measures against autocratic interference, disinformation and human rights abuses. Hostile foreign states are therefore more likely to target individual member states and politicians, in order to have an impact on European foreign policy. 53% of the 680 MEPs we were able to categorize based on our criteria (casting the required number of votes) belong to the group of Integrationist Hawks, who both recommend taking a critical line on authoritarian regimes and seek to provide the EU with the means to put these policies into practice.

**Not all populists are the same when it comes to stepping up against authoritarian countries.**

*Integrationist Hawks* not only support strong action against authoritarian regimes, but want to give the EU the means to implement these policies by making foreign policy decisions more effective. This is by far the largest group, with 359 MEPs (53% of all categorized representatives), mostly from the EPP, S&D and Renew Europe groups. *Establishment-critical Hawks* support a critical stance on authoritarian third states, but express concerns about proposed policies against disinformation or overarching European strategies. This group of 176 MEPs (26% of the total) includes mainly representatives from the Greens and the ECR, as well as key ruling parties from the CEE region, such as the PiS, ANO 2011 and Fidesz. *Sovereignist Balancers* are willing to condemn autocrats on a case-by-case basis. The group of 52 representatives (8% of the total), mainly from the ECR and ID – Vox, Fratelli d'Italia, Lega –, is highly critical of China, and even votes against Russian interests on occasion. However, they clearly reject EU action against disinformation or a more coordinated EU foreign policy. The 39 *Hypocritical Pacifists* (6% of the total) from GUE/NGL and ID, such as Syriza or the FPÖ, are almost never critical of Russia, but sometimes condemn actions by China or other authoritarian regimes. *Eurosceptic Dictator-huggers*, 54 MEPs (8% of the total), from ID and small communist parties, like the AfD and the National Rally, are the only group that seems to reject any and all forms of foreign policy cooperation or action against authoritarians.

- **Chinese soft and sharp power efforts have been relatively unsuccessful within the European Parliament.** China's image in the European Parliament is rather negative. China's only open supporters sit in the far-left GUE/NGL Group. Even some far-right parties, such as Lega, are highly critical of Beijing, and vote with the EP mainstream. Thus, the Chinese regime is likely to rely on a combination of hard and sharp power, directed at the national and personal levels, to gain allies in Europe. This combination includes leveraging attempts exploiting China's massive internal market and economic prowess, efforts to – at the very least – create the perception that Beijing offers advantages to states that support its interests, and benefits for local elites via economic cooperation and people-to-people contacts. Member states with the most to gain from cooperation with China are the most likely to back Chinese interests in the EU, while there are only a few actors that would



support Beijing on ideological grounds. The nearly unanimous EP approval of freezing the ratification of the EU-China investment deal indicates that the Parliament is willing to act even if their actions have immediate, tangible consequences.

- **The Kremlin's appeal is much broader, rooted in economic, structural and ideological factors.** Ideologically, the Putin regime can appeal primarily to far-right political parties. More importantly, Russia has been highly successful in portraying itself as a superpower economically, militarily and politically, which ensures that both the far right and the far left see it as a counterweight to US influence, liberalism and western alliances, and a role model. This also may be a reason why some mainstream forces argue for a reset of the relationship with Russia. Russia's financial and natural resources (e.g., Nord Stream 2) can also help disrupt EU unity on action against the Kremlin.
- **Authoritarian alliances with European political forces might not last forever.** A very significant shift in the past year is that Lega changed its voting behavior on Russia substantially in late 2020. The formerly pro-Russian Jobbik's sole MEP is highly critical of the Kremlin in the European Parliament. However, there are examples for the reverse of this trend, a party becoming more pro-Russian over time, too. This reverse trend was exhibited primarily by the Les Républicains party, whose Kremlin-critical Index score degraded considerably over the research period. These moves are often dictated by domestic political circumstances – e.g.; preparing to become a major coalition partner in the former case, or losing a party's most pro-Western politicians to another force in the latter one.
- **Support for action to protect European values in third countries is strong, but sometimes depends on ideology.** For instance, over 80% of representatives supported action against the Lukashenka and Assad regimes, while criticism against authoritarian practices in Chad, Haiti or Pakistan was supported by over 90% of MEPs. However, even MEPs in mainstream factions are prone to ideological bias: the center-left is more reluctant to condemn left-leaning regimes (e.g., Cuba), while the center-right is in some cases more likely to avoid criticizing states with right-wing governments or third countries' policies that fit the agenda of rightist parties (e.g., tough stance on migration).
- **The fight against disinformation can be more contentious.** The Greens and the ECR are considerably less likely to support EP proposals on disinformation than the other three mainstream caucuses. However, their reluctance is not necessarily the result of friendliness to authoritarian regimes. The Greens have often noted that they believe disinformation-related proposals fail to address certain key policy aspects and are afraid of unintended consequences on the freedom of speech. The ECR group has also argued that the freedom of speech should not be limited, but they were afraid specifically of certain viewpoints being censored simply because the mainstream does not agree with them, making their justification more ideological in nature. Both have highlighted the need to focus on media literacy training as a method to counter disinformation. Crucially, there was widespread support behind the Parliament's opinion on the Digital Services Act, the EU's flagship anti-disinformation, anti-hate speech initiative.



- **The formulation of a common EU foreign policy will prove to be the toughest challenge, due to the fact that the majority behind such initiatives is relatively slim.** For instance, the report on the implementation of the European Union's Common Foreign- and Security Policy in 2020 – advocating for qualified majority voting in the EU in international affairs in some cases – was approved by only approx. 50% of representatives casting a vote. The Greens and the ECR are more critical of the Parliament's proposals on making European foreign policy more effective and overarching EU strategies vis-à-vis Africa or Asia, among others. The former, for example, expressed concerns about free trade deals and the militarization of EU foreign policy. The latter argued against moving towards qualified majority voting in the field of European foreign affairs or forcing third countries to adopt liberal democracy.
- **Some member states' national delegations seem to be very open to supporting authoritarian practices, while others only tend to back authoritarian interests on some specific issues.** Ireland, France, Cyprus and Greece are generally among the worst performers in all five policy areas analyzed, mostly due to their proportionally high number of far-right or far-left MEPs.
  - Hungary seems to be particularly vulnerable to China, mostly as a result of Fidesz's efforts to gain economic benefits from cooperating with Beijing. In turn, the ruling party represents Beijing's interests on the European level; e.g., by vetoing joint EU initiatives critical of China or becoming one of the few national parties in the EP to vote against freezing the ratification process of the EU-China investment agreement.
  - Italy is one of the most pro-Russian countries due to the relatively low Kremlin-critical Index scores of Lega, Fratelli d'Italia (Fdi) and the Five Stars (M5S). Since all three are among the four most popular parties in recent Italian polls, this can be a cause for concern for European allies. It must be noted, however, the Lega's voting behavior on Russia changed considerable in the last few months of the research period; the party became much more critical of the Kremlin.
  - Czechia and Italy are ranked low on the Counter-disinformation Index. In the latter case, Lega and Fdi reject most EP proposals against disinformation. In Czechia, the main concern would be the Czech Pirates' low score on this Index, although they have mainly policy-related concerns; their score is not the result of pro-authoritarian tendencies.
  - Lega and Fdi are also vehemently opposed to a more united European foreign policy, including overarching strategies on Africa, Asia or the EU Security Union. In Czechia, there are several mainstream parties, such as ANO 2011, the ODS, and the Czech Pirate Party, which have abstained on several reports related to more effective EU action in international affairs.
- **As a result of their Eurosceptic or pro-authoritarian political platforms, far-right and far-left MEPs often repeat pro-Kremlin, pro-Chinese, or anti-US disinformation narratives in plenaries.** The far-left GUE/NGL Group regularly cited US actions as the reason for their rejection of EP initiatives against Russia or China. They also submitted several amendments that fall in line with Moscow's narratives: for instance, one declaring the Maidan revolution a western coup. ID members have often accused the European Union and the western mainstream establishment of spreading disinformation themselves or "warmongering" against Russia.

- **Personal contacts can be key for authoritarian regimes to extend influence.** MEPs with close contacts with Chinese officials tend to perform weaker on our China-critical Index than their peers. While Jan Zahradil (Czechia) has a CCI score of 54, his three other colleagues from the Civic Democratic Party reached the maximum score of 100.
- **Even the most resilient have “red lines.”** Financial or commercial interests can play a major role in weakening defenses against authoritarian influence. The vast majority of the German EPP delegation, for instance, rejected all EP calls to halt the construction of Nord Stream 2.
- **The European Union will presumably remain unable to follow actions proposed by a wide range of parliamentarians against Russia, China and other authoritarian regimes with unanimity voting in place in the Council.** Authoritarian regimes can exert influence over European decisions via close relations with individual member states as a result of unanimous voting in the Foreign Affairs Council. Foreign policy vetoes and key political parties’ arguments against the European Union’s sanctions policy vis-à-vis authoritarian regimes may also limit the ambitions of European officials’ proposals, as they need to ensure that these proposals are acceptable to the Council.
- **The European Parliament will likely continue carving out an even greater role for itself in foreign policy.** This is visible, for instance, in how MEPs pushed for further sanctions against members of the Belarusian regime, and their decision to freeze the ratification of the EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment. Backed by a large majority of MEPs, the institutions could exert further pressure on the Council to follow its recommendations. With more negotiations to reach a consensus, parliamentary majority could be broadened on issues regarding disinformation and common EU foreign policy initiatives as well, giving a louder voice to parliamentarians on these policy matters, too.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

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- **Moving to qualified majority decisions in foreign policy should be a key topic in the Conference on the Future of the European Union.** It is crucial to address the risks posed by the unanimity rule that cripples rapid and effective EU action in the frames of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), while providing a window to abuse national vetoes for political or economic purposes. Due to the multiple geopolitical challenges the EU is facing, the need for a sovereign and competent Union has become more pressing than ever. The “coalition of the willing” and the European Parliament should therefore ensure that the advantages of qualified majority voting (QMV) in foreign policy be broadly articulated during the ongoing Conference on the Future of Europe. The participatory event could also serve the purpose of strengthening cooperation between cross-regional national foreign policies.
- **A solution can also be found without entering the “black hole” of treaty change.** Should there be no political appetite for ordinary treaty revision, the currently existing toolkit may be rationalized and developed. The more systematic use of constructive/positive abstention could help overcome institutional deadlocks in the area of CFSP. The mechanism allows member states to abstain without vetoing EU action: while the respective country does not have to apply the decision, it has to accept that the agreement binds the European Union. Although it is less likely that constructive abstention would prevent countries from using their leverage in relation to their financial interests vis-à-vis China or Russia permanently, it may be a viable option for neutral countries in certain situations.
- **Countries willing to coordinate their foreign policy should form “coalitions of the willing” within the EU and involve reluctant states over time.** Following the approach of the Juncker Commission, Brussels should push the Council to gradually use QMV at least in certain segments of common foreign policy, for instance when amending the list of EU-sanctioned individuals. This could be done by activating the so-called “passerelle clause,” allowing the alteration of legislative procedures without a treaty change, introduced by the Lisbon Treaty. While the provision could potentially establish the culture of QMV in the long run, it still requires a unanimous decision by EU governments. In the meantime, the “coalition of the willing” countries should start coordinating their position as groups within the EU, aiming to involve reluctant countries over time.
- **The CEE region could be an important resource in the fight against authoritarian regimes if western allies can win the hearts and minds of the local populations and elites, and help the democratization and anti-corruption efforts of these states.** The West needs to show the region that they have more to gain from a strong commitment to western alliances than from cooperation with eastern autocrats.

- **Bottom-up solutions are key in fighting hostile electoral interference.** When it comes to protecting elections from hostile influence, civil society organizations should propose bottom-up solutions instead of focusing only on top-down political actions. Naturally, bottom-up solutions should be supplemented by top-down efforts as well. An “Authoritarian Influence Unit” should be established within the Commission to identify and monitor the discrepancies in member states’ capacities to manage the challenges of their interactions with hostile external regimes. The multidisciplinary research platform attached to the research platform of the EU Commission (IDEA) should also provide tailor-made recommendations on the national implementation of the Digital Services Act once the EU approves the law. Increased support for investigative journalism and cross-border editorial cooperation would also be essential to better inform the public about these issues.
- **Transparency, especially lobbying rules, must be enforced on both the EU and national levels.** Cutting off the financial channels of corrupt foreign influence should be a matter of utmost urgency. In order to deactivate authoritarian “Trojan Horses” in EU institutions, the enforcement of transparency regulations needs to be improved. Rules should be made against the ‘revolving door’ type of corruption: i.e., former senior level politicians signing up for jobs offered by Russia at state companies, such as Gazprom or Rosneft. Furthermore, better coordination is needed between EU institutions, since several European transparency registers are not publicly accessible or are poorly implemented on the national level. While drastic reforms are accepted on a large scale, national governments often fail to enforce them in practice.
- **The European market must be protected from investments by hostile third countries aiming to achieve diplomatic goals within the EU; the existing investment screening mechanism must be enforced consistently.** EU institutions have to protect their financial interest from harmful foreign investment and hostile takeover in a more efficient way. Russia and China are textbook examples of weaponizing interdependence and using their economic leverage to achieve diplomatic and political goals in the EU. Thus, the EU should strive for a more clear-cut strategic plan within its FDI Regulation for Engagement with authoritarian regimes. While the current FDI screening mechanism could strengthen cooperation between the EU and national institutions, effective implementation and enforcement should be the main focus of attention. Circumventing the EU’s FDI screening-based recommendations should result in negative consequences to member states for future investments from within the EU. The EU should also use the rich rule of law toolkit at its disposal to monitor investments from suspected sources for malpractice such as monopolization, corruption and media capture.
- **The European Parliament should play a key role in democratic and transparent oversight in the context of the above-mentioned mechanisms.** Furthermore, being the most hawkish EU institution with regards to foreign policy, the EP should firmly push the message that corruption is a gross human rights abuse; the EU’s Global Human Rights Mechanism should thus cover acts of significant corruption.



- **The United States should and could do more to push back against authoritarian foreign influence in the EU, and build alliances against China.** In contrast to former President Trump's approach to Europe, the Biden administration should support the EU in increasing its resilience, by paying more attention and committing resources to the European Union's CFSP. Holding authoritarian regimes accountable for their human rights violations and protecting the integrity of the elections against hostile foreign interference should also be on the agenda of future US-EU coordination. Coordination should take place especially between Congress and the European Parliament to build support for coordinated action and refrain from unilateral decisions without European partners.
- **FDI-related corruption should be a key matter for Washington and Brussels.** As far as FDI-related corruption is concerned, the Biden administration should create a link between the United States' Committee on Foreign Investment (CFIUS) and the European Commission's screening authorities to develop regular intelligence sharing on this matter. The EU and the US should also impose a coordinated set of sanctions targeting relevant political and economic stakeholders, via coordinated criteria and announcements.

## INTRODUCTION: THE EP AS THE FOREIGN POLICY HAWK

The European Union has faced a long series of foreign policy challenges since the new European Parliament started its mandate on 2 July 2019. The international challenges facing the bloc did not stop with Russia's continued occupation of Crimea and its backing for eastern Ukrainian separatist republics, and they have included China's increasing repression of the Uyghurs in Xinjiang and its quasi-takeover of Hong Kong; the Belarusian presidential election and Alexander Lukashenka's oppression of Belarusian citizens; as well as the Azerbaijan-Armenia conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh – among others. To evaluate how the EU could cope with these challenges and authoritarian states' efforts to lobby for their own interests in Europe, Political Capital continued its project focusing on analyzing the foreign policy preferences of Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) and quantifying their votes cast in the European Parliament, as well as our efforts to outline individual member states' potential vulnerabilities to efforts of hostile influence.<sup>1</sup>

The European Union has achieved results in facing these challenges. For instance, the Council of the EU adopted a human rights sanctions regime on 7 December 2020, a measure the European Parliament had advocated for in previous years.<sup>2</sup> **Despite long discussions in the past about deciding on the implementation of sanctions with a qualified majority in the Council, in the end, member states agreed to the proposal only if punitive measures are tied to unanimity.** While the unanimity requirement, as in other cases, could hinder the European Union from effectively responding to human rights crises, the new sanctions regime has been used multiple times, for instance, against four Chinese officials involved in running internment camps for Uyghurs in Xinjiang. However, the EU did not target the Communist Party chair in Xinjiang, Chan Quanguo, even though he was first hit by US sanctions in 2020.<sup>3</sup> This decision could have been the consequence of two potential factors. First, EU decision-makers might have wanted to avoid particularly harsh measures to keep the EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI)<sup>4</sup> alive. Second, the unanimity voting requirement might have kept EU ambitions in check.<sup>5</sup>

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1 For more on Political Capital's project, please visit our dedicated website at [https://politicalcapital.hu/authoritarian-shadows\\_in\\_the\\_eu/](https://politicalcapital.hu/authoritarian-shadows_in_the_eu/)

2 European Parliament. (2021). EU human rights sanctions: Towards a European Magnitsky Act. EP Briefing. Accessed: 2 June 2021. Link: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2020/659402/EPRS\\_BRI\(2020\)659402\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2020/659402/EPRS_BRI(2020)659402_EN.pdf)

3 Stuart Lau and Jacopo Barigazzi. (2021). EU imposes sanctions on four Chinese officials. Politico. Accessed: 2 June 2021. Link: <https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-imposes-sanctions-on-four-chinese-officials/>

4 European Commission. (2020). EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment: Milestones and documents. Accessed: 2 June 2021. Link: <https://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/press/index.cfm?id=2115>

5 What we mean by this is that some member states, such as Hungary, have frequently blocked EU statements on China or emphasized the negative effects of sanctions on Russia. European officials' proposals might be restricted by this, as they would seek to propose something that can be approved by the Foreign Affairs Council. See more on this potentially negative effect in the following study: [https://www.politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/authoritarian-shadows\\_in\\_the\\_eu\\_2020\\_09.pdf](https://www.politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/authoritarian-shadows_in_the_eu_2020_09.pdf)



Roland Freudenstein, EU policy director of the Wilfried Martens Center, noted the Council's quick reaction to Belarusian authorities' hijacking of a Ryanair plane as the most notable EU foreign policy success in the current European parliamentary term, although it came down partly to a questionable decision by Belarusian strongman Alexander Lukashenka.



*"The sheer speed. The expectation was that the EU as usual would take forever to come to a consensus and then very little would come out of it. The decisions that came around 48 hours after the act were very forceful, although they still lacked detail. In any case, the swiftness of the declaration that some sanctions will follow against individuals I think surprised many people, and it was partly due to timing. Lukashenka timed this attack two days before an EU summit. That is not a wise decision to make."*

**Roland Freudenstein**  
EU policy director, Wilfried Martens Center

He added that **the continuous existence of sanctions against Russia is another success, as not even PM Viktor Orbán dares veto them.**

In contrast to some successful actions, the European Union has also committed foreign policy blunders. For instance, on 30 December 2020, the Commission agreed – in principle – on a trade agreement with Beijing – the aforementioned CAI – which supposedly would commit China to offer a greater level of market access for EU investors. The decision was criticized by officials of the Biden

administration already before they assumed office.<sup>6</sup> Commission President Ursula von der Leyen noted then that the agreement is an “*important landmark in our relationship with China and for our values-based trade agenda.*”<sup>7</sup> The EC president’s remarks came only half a year after Beijing passed a national security law for Hong Kong, making it easier to punish protesters and shrinking the city’s autonomy,<sup>8</sup> and over a year after the Xinjiang Papers were leaked, detailing how China organized the mass detention of Uyghurs.<sup>9</sup> **By the time of the agreement, the European Parliament had called on the EU to adopt sanctions in connection with the repression of Uyghurs and actions against Hong Kong’s autonomy multiple times.** The EP, in fact, adopted a resolution asking the EU to put the rule of law at the center of the EU-China relationship and take all necessary steps to persuade the Chinese government to close down the camps in Xinjiang just a couple of weeks before the CAI was concluded.<sup>10</sup> Roland Freudenstein also highlighted China-related events as the main failures of EU foreign policy since 2019, which both took place in March-April 2020 and provided examples of the EU kowtowing to China. First, the 27 ambassadors of member states accredited to China, along with the EU head of delegation in Beijing, wrote a letter on the 45<sup>th</sup> anniversary of EU-China diplomatic relations, but then allowed the Chinese government to edit it.<sup>11</sup> Second, the East Stratcom Task Force of the EEAS watered down a report on Chinese disinformation activities during the pandemic, “*and whatever the EEAS has said since then about it not being watered down, just having two versions of the same report – one internal and one public, I know this is nonsense.*”

Moreover, the Council failed to respond to the Parliament’s recommendation on strengthening the EU’s existing sanctions against Russia – among others.<sup>12</sup> **This lack of response is also likely the result of the unanimity voting requirement in the field of foreign policy in the EU, and the same problem exists outside of the case of Russia,** too. The European Union’s attempts to implement sanctions against the regime of Belarusian strongman Alexander Lukashenka after its brutal crackdown on protesters questioning the legitimacy of the 2020 presidential election in the country was delayed by Cyprus’s veto.<sup>13</sup> Hungary blocked three attempts by the Council to adopt a text, explaining the bloc’s

6 Andrew Small. (2021). Europe’s China deal: How not to work with the Biden administration. ECFR. Accessed: 2021.06.17. Link: <https://ecfr.eu/article/europes-china-deal-how-not-to-work-with-the-biden-administration/>

7 European Commission. (2020). EU and China reach agreement in principle on investment. Accessed: 2 June 2021. Link: <https://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/press/index.cfm?id=2233>

8 Grace Tsoi and Lam Cho Wai. (2020). Hong Kong security law: What is it and is it worrying? Accessed: 2 June 2021. Link: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-52765838>

9 Austin Ramzy and Chris Buck

10 European Parliament. (2020). Forced labor and the situation of the Uyghurs in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. Accessed: 2 June 2021. Link: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2020-0375\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2020-0375_EN.html)

11 Isabelle Kumar and Laura Ruiz Trullois. (2020). Coronavirus: EU regret after state-run newspaper China Daily removes COVID-19 mention from op-ed. Accessed: 2021.07.01. Link: <https://www.euronews.com/2020/05/07/coronavirus-eu-regret-after-state-run-newspaper-china-daily-removes-covid-19-mention-from>

12 European Parliament. (2020). Situation in Russia, the poisoning of Alexei Navalny. Accessed: 2021.06.02. Link: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2020-0232\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2020-0232_EN.html)

13 DW. (2020). Cyprus blocks EU sanctions against Belarus. Accessed: 2021.06.09. Link: <https://www.dw.com/en/cyprus-blocks-eu-sanctions-against-belarus/a-55001174>



“deep concern” about the implementation of China’s National Security Law in Hong Kong and that amendments to the city’s Basic Law “have a significant negative impact on democratic accountability and political pluralism.”<sup>14</sup> Considering that a member state vetoed a simple statement on Hong Kong, **EU decision-makers are likely discouraged from proposing further sanctions under the EU human rights sanctions regime against Chinese individuals since the probability of their adoption is rather low.** The case may be similar regarding the strengthening of anti-Kremlin sanctions: the Hungarian government’s regular, vocal anti-sanctions arguments can deter other EU members from pushing for toughening punitive measures against Russia.<sup>15</sup>

While the above paints a bleak picture of the European Union’s foreign policy efforts, this is not always the case. The efforts of the European Parliament, the only directly elected body of the European Union, which – as former Polish Foreign Minister and current MEP Radosław Sikorski told Political Capital – can use this popular mandate and its greater independence to be the “conscience and supervision” of executive power and express its views on foreign policy in clear terms.<sup>16</sup> The Parliament’s hawkish stance on foreign affairs is crucial because in contrast to compromises struck between member states in the Council, the EP, even with its weak foreign policy purview, consistently represents strong international action and promotes European values on the global scene, amplifying the European Union’s voice on these issues.

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14 Hans von der Burchard and Jacopo Barigazzi. (2021). Germany slams Hungary for blocking EU criticism of China on Hong Kong. Accessed: 2 June 2021. Link: <https://www.politico.eu/article/german-foreign-minister-slams-hungary-for-blocking-hong-kong-conclusions/>

15 For more information on how authoritarian regimes have and potentially could influence EU decision-making, please see: Patrik Szicherle et al. (2020). Authoritarian Shadows in the European Union. Political Capital. Accessed: 2021.06.02. Link: [https://www.politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/authoritarian\\_shadows\\_in\\_the\\_eu\\_2020\\_09.pdf](https://www.politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/authoritarian_shadows_in_the_eu_2020_09.pdf)

16 Political Capital. (2020). Interview with Radosław Sikorski. Accessed: 2021.06.19. Link: [https://politicalcapital.hu/authoritarian\\_shadows\\_in\\_the\\_eu/publications.php?article\\_read=1&article\\_id=2579](https://politicalcapital.hu/authoritarian_shadows_in_the_eu/publications.php?article_read=1&article_id=2579)

## PROJECT RATIONALE

The European Parliament, as noted above, has proven to be consistently hawkish on foreign policy, demanding a tough response from the Council to essentially all international challenges the EU has faced since 2019. Even though the institution has not always been able to influence the behavior of the Council, it has achieved some results, for instance by putting pressure on the Council to add President Alexander Lukashenka to the list of sanctioned Belarusian officials.<sup>17</sup> Results such as this indicate that the European Parliament's voice in foreign policy decision-making may be louder than many assume. Roland Freudenstein told Political Capital that the EP has been able to grow its influence significantly in this field. *"The first point for the European Parliament is that it can become a trailblazer among EU institutions, and urge the Council and the Commission to develop in certain directions" – he said. Moreover, the resolutions and declarations of the EP have a direct impact on the EU's image in the world, and the best proof of this is that China has banned MEPs, among others, from entering the country, in response to the EU's mild sanctions against Chinese officials. Last, but not least, the EP does have tangible powers in some cases, such as international trade: "the CAI has become for several reasons a massive foreign policy topic in the European Union, the issue of strategy, its significance has gone far beyond the bilateral EU-China relationship and the Parliament is in pole position to speed up or actually freeze the ratification process" – he added.*

Since the tone of the European Parliament has become increasingly hawkish on foreign policy over time and many of its proposals are backed by an overwhelming majority, it may be able to push the future policies of the EU in this direction, at least to a certain extent. **As a consequence of the points listed in this section so far, we believe it is worthwhile to examine the behavior of European parliamentary groups, national parties, and in some cases individual MEPs sitting in the EP, to draw a map of their foreign policy views and – especially – openness to cooperation with authoritarian regimes.** This effort may help predict (a) the policy preferences of the incumbent European Parliament as a whole on a wide array of issues, (b) the main points of contention among MEPs; and (c) which national parties may prove to be open to cooperating with authoritarian regimes, especially if they gain significant influence over national or European policy decisions.

We thus monitored the European Parliament's foreign policy and disinformation-related resolutions between 2 July 2019 and 20 May 2021. We observed, first, that the number of relevant texts approved increased in the autumn 2020-spring 2021 period, which is a consequence of increasing global tensions (e.g., Chinese or Russian hostile actions domestically and internationally) and the fact that the Parliament was partly able to shift its focus away from the COVID-19 pandemic. In the end, we were able to analyze the results of 92 EP votes (including full texts, individual paragraphs or parts of paragraphs) cast in the research period, which we divided into five areas: (1) Chinese Communist Party-critical, (2) Kremlin-critical, (3) Counter-authoritarian pushback, (4) information sovereignty and (5) Common EU foreign policy. One text was assigned to one category on each occasion.

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<sup>17</sup> European Parliament. (2020). MEPs call for EU sanctions against Belarusian President and Navalny's poisoners. Accessed: 2021.07.01. Link: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20200910IPR86829/meps-call-for-eu-sanctions-against-belarusian-president-and-navalny-s-poisoners>

To quantify voting behavior, we assigned a weight to all possible voting outcomes (for, against, abstain, did not vote, was not MEP) based on whether the given action was against authoritarian interests ('critical') or in line with them ('supportive').<sup>18</sup> While acknowledging that numbers, in themselves, create only a black-and-white picture of the situation, we still believe that our weighing method painted a fairly accurate picture of MEP preferences. Using the weights assigned to potential voting actions, we calculated an index score for all MEPs, national parties, national delegations and EP groups for all five categories, using only the votes belonging to the given category. These scores provided the foundation of our analysis. The indices we created are the following: China-critical Index (CCI), Kremlin-critical Index (KCI), Counter-authoritarian Index (CI), Counter-disinformation Index (CDI) and Common Foreign Policy Index (CFPI). The index scores range from 0 to 100, where 0 indicates the most supportive attitudes towards the interests of authoritarian regimes, and 100 represents the most critical ones. To be able to assess voting outcomes, we only took into account texts decided by a roll-call vote.<sup>19</sup> On the CCI, KCI and CI, a critical attitude means that an MEP votes consistently in favor of condemning the hostile actions of China, Russia and other authoritarian states, respectively. On the CDI and CFP, a critical attitude describes a stance that is in favor of EU action against the disinformation efforts of hostile third states or a more unified and more effective foreign policy that could allow the EU to implement stronger action against such regimes.

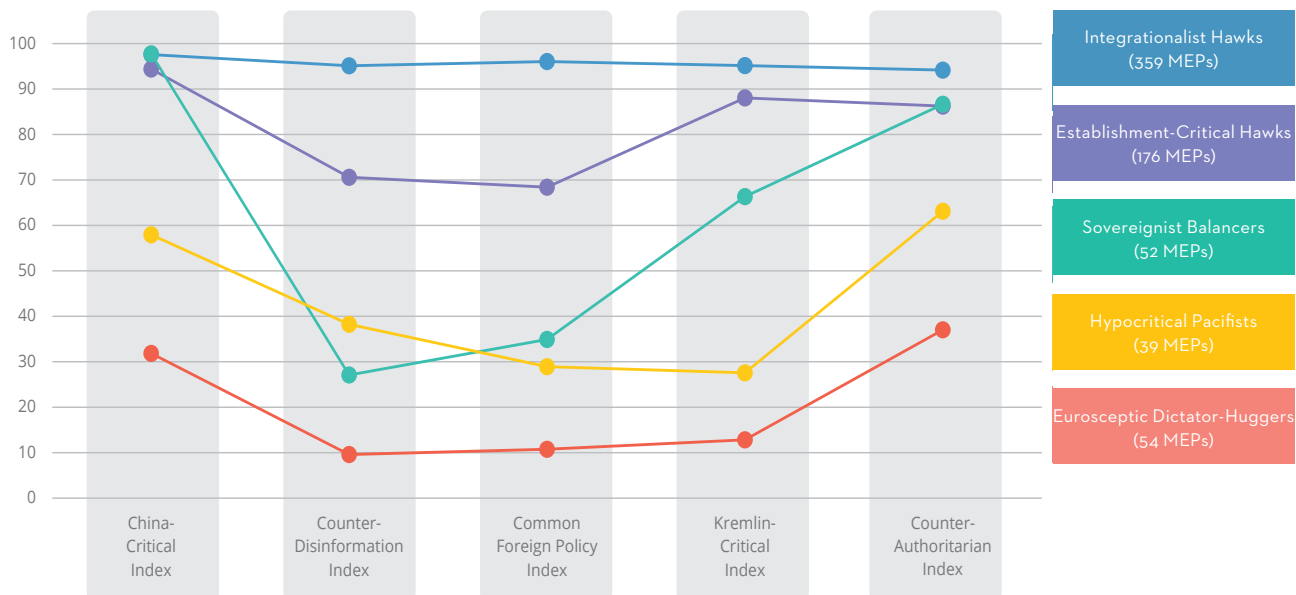
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<sup>18</sup> The "weight" of a vote is used to describe the attitude presented by the given action.

<sup>19</sup> Please see more detailed methodology at the end of the study, under the section on methodology.

## FIVE DIFFERENT APPROACHES TO EU FOREIGN POLICY

Figure 1. Cluster analysis of MEPs based on their scores on the five indexes (China, Russia, Authoritarian, Disinformation, Common Foreign Policy).



### METHODOLOGY

We classified MEPs based on their scores on the five indices using K-means cluster analysis. Five subgroups emerged from the clustering. Not all MEPs were included in the analysis: only those whose number of valid votes (for, against or abstain) reached a certain limit. The limits for the categories are the following (the numbers in the parenthesis represent the total number of votes in the respective category): China-Critical Index: 4 (6), Counter-Disinformation Index: 4 (7), Common Foreign Policy Index: 10 (17), Kremlin-Critical Index: 15 (25), Counter-Authoritarian Index: 20 (37). 680 MEPs met these criteria.

After conducting a cluster analysis positioning MEPs based on their scores on the five indices, as Figure 1 indicates, we were able to separate five relatively distinct groups of MEPs based on their scores on our five indexes.

**Group 1**, marked in blue contains national parties with high scores on all five indexes. They are consistently critical of China, Russia, vote to protect EU values in other authoritarian states, and support joint EU efforts against disinformation and in foreign policy. They may be labelled “*Integrationist Hawks*.” This is by far the largest group with 359 MEPs out of the 680 eligible for analysis. The group consists mostly of MEPs from the EPP, Renew Europe, and S&D parliamentary groups, **who not only recommend taking a critical line concerning authoritarian regimes, but want to provide the means for the EU to pursue these policies as well.**



**Group 2**, marked in purple, includes MEPs who are strongly against authoritarian regimes, including Russia and China, but have doubts about some policies proposed against disinformation and strategic issues. They can be labelled “*Establishment-critical Hawks*.” This is the second-largest group with 176 MEPs, mostly from the Greens/EFA Group, who often stated that disinformation and common foreign policy-related resolutions do not take into account some key considerations, and the ECR, whose members are opposed to further EU integration ideologically. Moreover, some ruling parties from the CEE region belong here, such as Fidesz-KDNP from Hungary and the ANO 2011 from Czechia<sup>20</sup> – besides the PiS, the leading force in the ECR. **The representatives in the “Establishment-critical Hawks” group often help create an even larger majority for proposals against specific authoritarian regimes, but also either prevent the EU from accessing the tools to implement them efficiently or disagree on key strategic questions (e.g., disinformation policy, EU-Africa, EU-Asia relations).**

**Group 3**, shown in green, includes a collection of more moderate parties from ID in terms of foreign policy and more extremist ones from the ECR. The key members are, among others, the Italian Lega and Fratelli d’Italia (FdiI), the Swedish Democrats and the Spanish VOX. Members of this group are highly critical of China and the majority of authoritarian regimes, but not necessarily of Russia. They strongly refuse joint EU action against disinformation, however, along with more efforts to create a common EU foreign policy. They may be labelled “*Sovereignist Balancers*.” Their attitude differs from that of Group 2 in that the latter (a) are more likely to agree on a common EU position regarding authoritarian regimes, especially in the case of Russia, and (b) are more likely to agree with overarching topical EU strategies, for instance on the EU Security Union Strategy, defense-related procurements, or PESCO. **Group 3 includes 52 MEPs who are willing to support EU action on a case-by-case basis.**

**Group 4**, marked in yellow, includes the majority of the GUE/NGL Group and some ID members. They are critical of China and other authoritarian regimes in a limited number of cases, but support almost no initiatives against Russia, and are generally highly critical of the EU’s disinformation and common foreign affairs strategies. They may be called “*Hypocritical Pacifists*.” This group numbers 39 MEPs and includes Syriza, the former Greek ruling party, the FPÖ, a former Austrian coalition member, and Podemos, a current member of the ruling coalition of Spain. **They might potentially support EU foreign policy action in a very small number of cases when their interests strictly meet European proposals.**

**Group 5**, shown in red, includes parties that only support EU foreign policy proposals in a very limited number of cases or not at all. They refrain from any criticism of China, Russia or most other authoritarian regimes, and refuse any joint EU action in practically any field. They can be labelled “*Eurosceptic Dictator-huggers*.” Their 54 members include the German AfD, the French National Rally, and the Dutch Forum for Democracy, as well as multiple small communist parties. **They are unlikely to be convinced to cooperate on any EU proposals.**

In the next sections, we will discuss the state of play in the five individual policy areas under scrutiny, not just in terms of votes, but the potential justifications of these votes as well. These analyses will also be supplemented with domestic political insight, where possible and necessary.

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<sup>20</sup> Please see more information on why Fidesz and ANO 2011 belong to this group in the chapter entitled ‘Regional outlook: the East is not as vulnerable as it seems.’

## STRONG, BUT NOT UNITED AGAINST CHINA

We included six texts on China from the period under review in our research, five of which condemned Beijing's domestic (Hong Kong, Uyghurs) and international (countersanctions against MEPs) actions, and one dealt with an EU-China agreement on cooperation on geographical indicators, which also stated that respect for human rights is a pre-condition for engaging in trade and investments with the country.<sup>21</sup> The European Parliament voted critically of China in all cases with a wide majority (85% or more). **The text that froze the Parliament's discussions on ratifying the EU-China Agreement on Investment (CAI),<sup>22</sup> required for the agreement to come into force, was approved by the votes of 87% of MEPs present. This vote was especially important since it was the one with the most tangible consequences.**

All mainstream EP groups (RE, EPP, S&D, Greens, ECR) – as shown in Figure 2 below – are highly critical of China, with scores of over 90 on the China-critical Index. The far-right ID Group shows limited resilience to China: its CCI score is halfway between the most pro-China caucus, The Left, and mainstream party families. **Their result is largely the consequence of the high frequency of group members' abstentions on these texts, which – in many cases – can be considered a 'softer' expression of support for authoritarian interests.** This is indicated clearly by the speakers of ID in plenary debates:



In a debate concerning the treatment of Uyghurs in December 2020, Thierry Mariani (National Rally, France) did not question that the minority is being repressed in China, but stated that the EU should work on improving the situation by engaging in dialogue with Beijing rather than through a policy of permanent denunciation.<sup>23</sup>

**Thierry Mariani**  
National Rally, France

In January 2021, ID's speaker, Gunnar Beck (AfD, Germany), argued in a debate on Hong Kong that the EU is incapable of sanctioning China, so there is no point in discussing the political situation in the city. He thus used the EU's own weakness in foreign policy, discussed in the introduction, to argue why the EP should not even debate issues that might be uncomfortable for China.

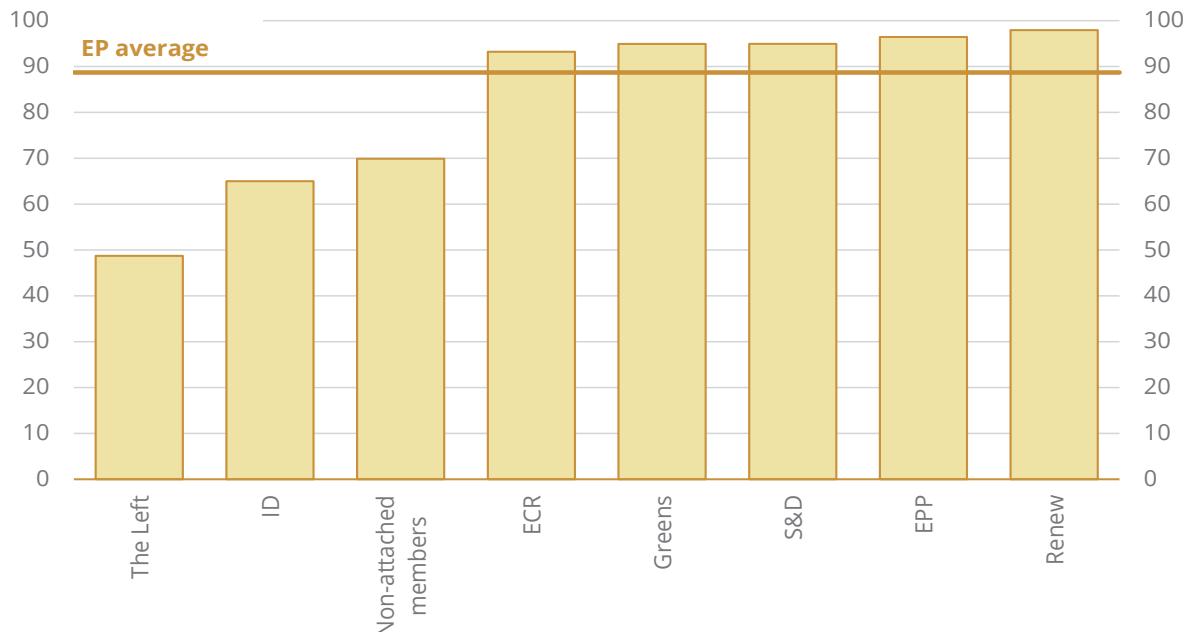
21 For the full description and results of China-related votes, please see: [https://www.politicalcapital.hu/authoritarian-shadows\\_in\\_the\\_eu/votes.php](https://www.politicalcapital.hu/authoritarian-shadows_in_the_eu/votes.php)

22 European Parliament. (2021). Chinese countersanctions on EU entities and MEPs and MPs. Accessed: 2021.07.06. Link: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2021-0255\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2021-0255_EN.html)

23 European Parliament. (2020). Debate on the situation of the Uyghurs in Xinjiang. Accessed: 2021.07.06. Link: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-9-2020-12-17-ITM-008-02\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-9-2020-12-17-ITM-008-02_EN.html)

Beck added that democracy in the EU itself is degrading,<sup>24</sup> which is presumably an attempt to depict the European Union as an actor not credible to make judgements on the issue.

**Figure 2. The China-critical scores of EP Groups on a scale of 0 to 100. The higher value indicates a more critical stance.**



The reason we may say ID as a whole is somewhat resilient to Chinese influence is that Lega, the group's largest national party, is strongly critical of Beijing, achieving a score of 98, which is only short of 100 due to party members not casting votes six times.<sup>25</sup>



In the debate on the text freezing the ratification process of the EU-China investment deal, Lega's Marco Campomenosi expressed full support for Council actions taken in light of the situation of the Uyghurs in Xinjiang, and added that he hoped the deal would be struck down by Parliament.<sup>25</sup>

**Marco Campomenosi**  
Lega, Italy

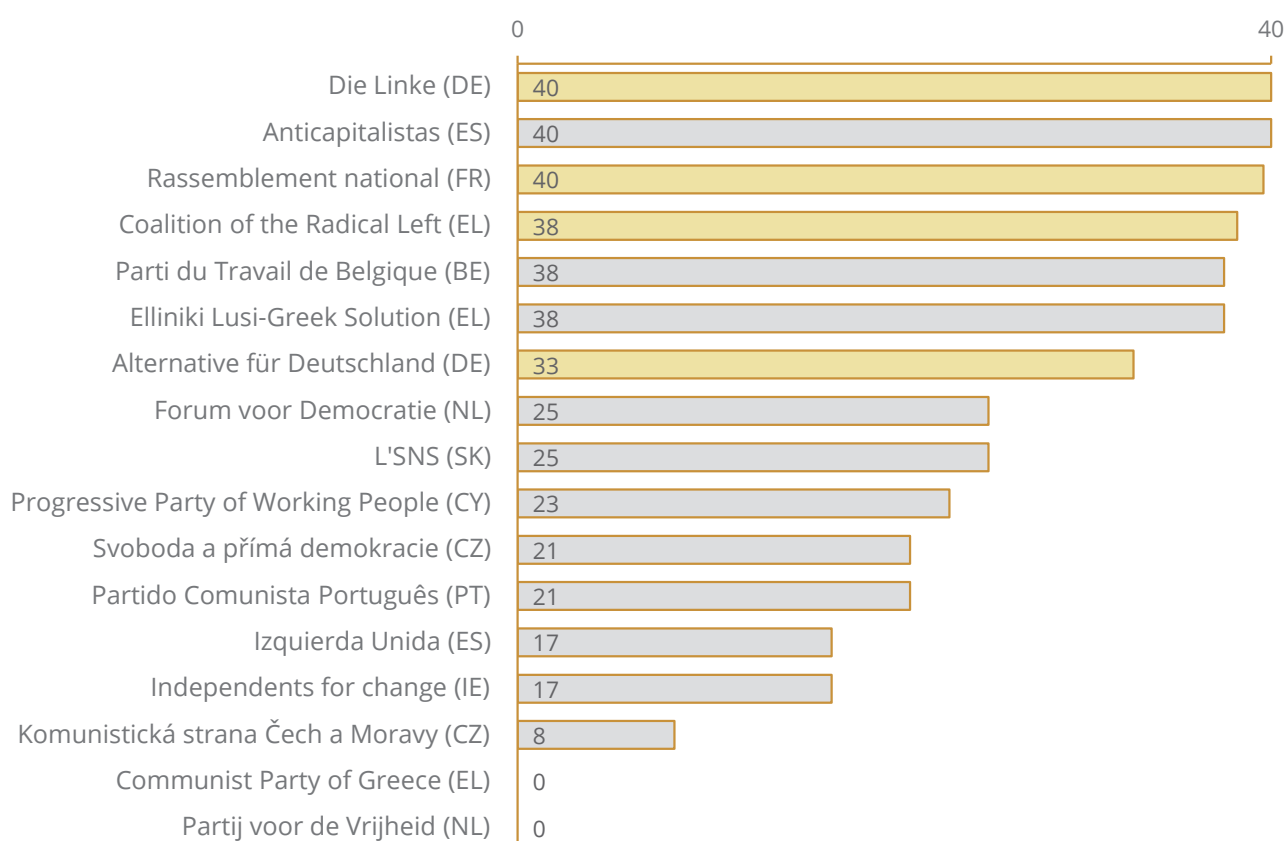
Moreover, several smaller ID members, such as the True Finns and Vlaams Belang, are also rather critical of Beijing, with scores of 79 and 82, respectively. These scores are in stark contrast with those of the AfD (33) or the French National Rally (40), which show considerably more “dovish” attitudes or vulnerabilities to China.

<sup>24</sup> European Parliament. (2021). Debate on Hong Kong. Accessed: 2021.07.06. Link: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-9-2021-01-21-ITM-007-01\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-9-2021-01-21-ITM-007-01_EN.html)

<sup>25</sup> European Parliament. (2021). Debate on Chinese counter-sanctions. Accessed: 2 June 2021. Link: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-9-2021-04-28-ITM-011\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-9-2021-04-28-ITM-011_EN.html)

Among EP groups, the far-left GUE/NGL is the one that shows the largest vulnerability to China with a score of 49; its party members supported China explicitly or via abstentions in the majority of cases. National parties belonging to the far-left group make up the majority of the worst performers on the China-Critical Index, including – as shown in Figure 3 below – the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (8), which backed the Czech government in Parliament until recently; the Portuguese Communist Party (21), which is backing the incumbent government of the country; the Progressive Party of Working People of Cyprus (23), which finished second in the 2021 Cypriot general election; or Podemos (50), a member of the Spanish ruling coalition. Their members are also significantly less covert when defending Chinese interests in plenaries. In a debate on Xinjiang in December 2020, **Sandra Pereira, a Portuguese communist, argued that the EU and its institutions sadly joined the disinformation campaign the United States had started against China.**<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, it must be mentioned that some forces in this group view China less favorably, such as the single member of the French Republican and Socialist Left, Emmanuel Maurel (79), and the France Unbowed party (75). Emmanuel Maurel was, in fact, highly critical of China’s breach of the “two systems, one country” principle in the case of Hong Kong,<sup>27</sup> and argued strongly against the CAI.<sup>28</sup>

**Figure 3. National parties with a China-critical score under 40. Only includes parties whose MEPs cast at least five votes. Parties with at least 5 MEPs are highlighted in yellow.**



26 European Parliament. (2020). Debate on the situation of the Uyghurs in Xinjiang. Accessed: 2 June 2021. Link: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-9-2020-12-17-ITM-008-02\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-9-2020-12-17-ITM-008-02_EN.html)

27 Debate on Hong Kong

28 Debate on Chinese counter-sanctions



MEPs' votes on China-related matters show that Chinese soft power efforts, in general, have been highly unsuccessful among the European political elite and the only open supporters of the country sit on the very edges of the political spectrum. The bulk of China's open supporters can be found in The Left, which is the closest to Beijing ideologically, and consist of mostly smaller communist parties, with a few exceptions. In contrast, parties on the far right do not generally express open support for China or whitewash its repressive measures, their arguments against the EU taking action are mostly founded on 'whataboutism' (e.g., the EU is undemocratic, too) and the rejection of joint European action.

China is therefore likely to turn to a combination of “sharp”<sup>29</sup> and hard power tools to influence European decisions, targeted at the national and personal levels. These efforts are a combination of leveraging China's large domestic market and massive financial resources, creating – at the very least – the perception that it offers advantages to states, individuals that support its interests, and benefits to local elites via economic cooperation and people-to-people contacts. It is not a coincidence that it was mainly Germany which has been pushing for the EU-China investment deal, since their companies likely stand to gain the most from it,<sup>30</sup> and that it has generally been countries with considerable Chinese investments that have blocked joint EU action against Beijing, such as Hungary and Greece – although the latter, based on media information, did so back in the days of the Syriza government,<sup>31</sup> which remain strongly pro-China in the EP.<sup>32</sup> These actions offer proof that Beijing has indeed been relatively successful in selling the idea that it grants economic favors to states or political forces supporting its interests in the West, or at least the perception that it does so, and will continue to attempt to earn the loyalty of local elites via joint projects in the EU in order to better lobby for its own interests.

Using soft power, China can essentially only target far-left parties due to their ideological proximity, a limitation similar to what the Soviet Union faced.<sup>33</sup> Financially, however, Beijing has more options. First, it can target governments which stand to gain the most from an economic relationship with China, such as that of Germany. Secondly, Beijing can target mainstream parties from economically less developed member states (which are more prone to corruption) with the promise of Chinese investments to help local economies. **China's economic “favors” could then translate into vetoes in the Council.**

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29 Sharp power may be defined as geopolitical means employed by state actors to manipulate target audiences abroad through the use of disinformation, as opposed to “soft” power, based on attraction, or “hard power,” based on coercion via military, financial or other means. For more please see: [https://www.politicalcapital.hu/russian\\_sharp\\_power\\_in\\_cee/research\\_results.php?article\\_read=1&article\\_id=2391#\\_edn8](https://www.politicalcapital.hu/russian_sharp_power_in_cee/research_results.php?article_read=1&article_id=2391#_edn8)

30 Hans von der Burchard. (2020). Merkel Pushes EU-China investment deal over the finish line despite criticism. Politico. Accessed: 2021.07.01. Link: <https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-china-investment-deal-angela-merkel-pushes-finish-line-despite-criticism/>

31 Robin Emmott and Angeliki Koutantou. (2017). Greece blocks EU statement on China human rights at U.N. Reuters. Accessed: 2021.07.16. Link: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-eu-un-rights-idUSKBN1990FP>

32 *Authoritarian Shadows in the European Union*

33 Yehven Fedchenko. (2016). Kremlin propaganda: Soviet active measures by other means. Accessed: 2021.06.22. Link: [http://ekmair.ukma.edu.ua/bitstream/handle/123456789/11622/Fedchenko\\_Kremlin\\_propaganda.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y](http://ekmair.ukma.edu.ua/bitstream/handle/123456789/11622/Fedchenko_Kremlin_propaganda.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y)

Additionally, Beijing can potentially rely on far-right parties that have backed Chinese interests in the EP covertly by rhetorically condemning the regime's actions but regularly abstaining from voting on or rejecting EP resolutions on China, as they might consider the country – similarly to Russia – a counterweight to the liberal US and EU-led western order they reject both politically and economically.

Fourth, Beijing can and will seek to build personal relationships with individuals, such as MEPs Jan Zahradil and István Ujhelyi.<sup>34</sup> These efforts at building personal relationships have only limited potential for China, as Beijing is unlikely to reach enough MEPs who are willing to engage with the regime this way to be able to meaningfully influence EP decisions as well. Thus, they will likely continue focusing their efforts on the national level. The EP, overall, showed with the CAI vote that it is considerably more resilient than the sum of all member states, even when it makes policy decisions with substantial consequences. And it needs to remain resilient, as Roland Freudenstein says, since the incumbent German chancellor and the Commission “have not given up hope,” and refuse to give up on the CAI completely even though its ratification seems impossible “under current circumstances.”

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34 For more information on their cases, see the section entitled ‘Not everyone considers China the land of economic opportunities.’

## PUTIN IS MORE POPULAR THAN XI JINPING IN EUROPE

While the European Parliament has viewed China with increasing concern during the period examined, Russia has remained a more frequently addressed topic in plenaries. Parliamentarians have expressed their views on Russia's narratives on World War II, its persecution of Lithuanian judges, the 'Foreign Agents' law, the Kremlin's actions in Ukraine, Alexei Navalny's situation, and the explosion in Vrbetice, among others.<sup>35</sup>



In general, at least two-thirds of European parliamentarians voted critically of the Kremlin's domestic and international actions. The one exception was the amendment to insert a reference to the Magnitsky Act into a text on the situation of environmental activists and Ukrainian political prisoners,<sup>36</sup> which was approved by only 54% of MEPs. It must be noted that, for instance, one Green MEP indicated to Political Capital that she supports the creation of a European human rights violation sanctions regime, and is only against naming it after the particular person in question.<sup>37</sup>

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35 For the full description and results of Russia-related votes, please see: [https://www.politicalcapital.hu/authoritarian-shadows\\_in\\_the\\_eu/votes.php](https://www.politicalcapital.hu/authoritarian-shadows_in_the_eu/votes.php)

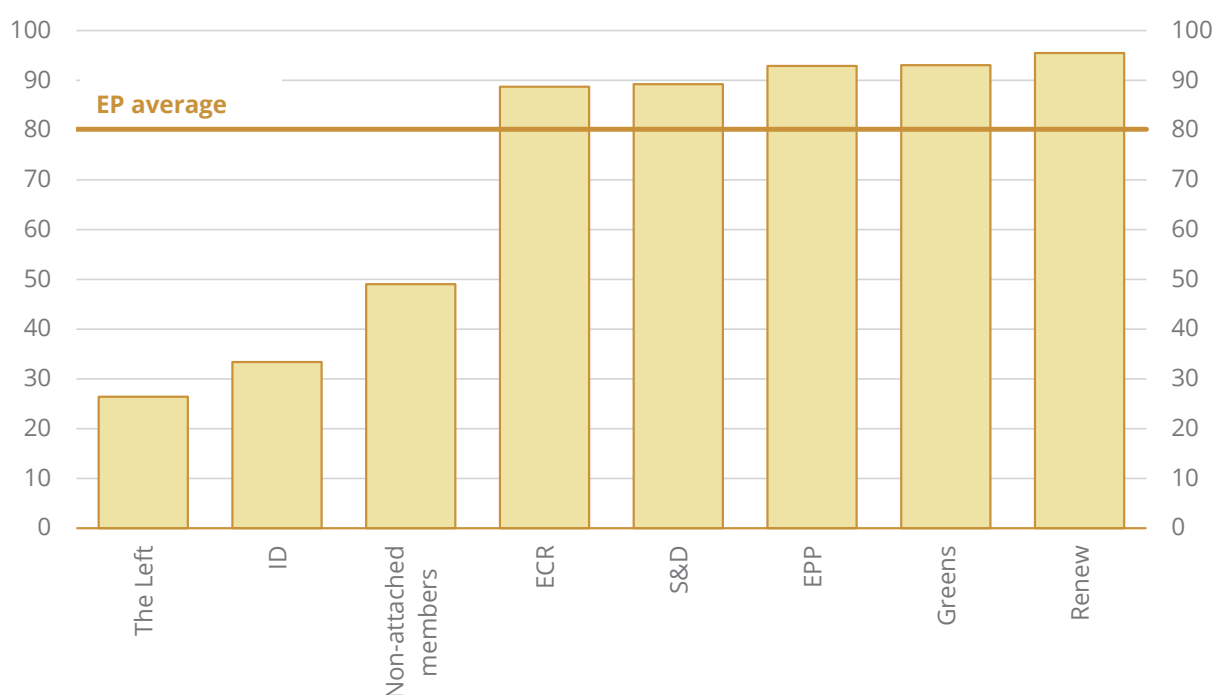
36 European Parliament. (2019). Russia, notably the situation of environmental activists and Ukrainian political prisoners. Accessed: 2021.06.08. Link: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2019-0006\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2019-0006_EN.html) The amendment is available here: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/RC-9-2019-0012-AM-001-001\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/RC-9-2019-0012-AM-001-001_EN.pdf)

37 *Authoritarian Shadows in the European Union*

The EP's three calls to immediately halt the construction of the Nord Stream 2 natural gas pipeline proved to be somewhat contested, obtaining the support of "only" 66-69% of MEPs casting a vote.<sup>38</sup> The main reason for this is that several mainstream, generally rhetorically Kremlin-critical and pro-sanctions, MEPs voted against or abstained on these specific parts, including most members of the Austrian ÖVP, the German CDU-CSU, and the Czech ANO 2011, possibly due to economic interests. Interestingly, the part of a text demanding a stop to Rosatom's controversial European nuclear project was supported by a much wider margin (80%),<sup>39</sup> likely because Rosatom's European presence does not concern the interests of western EU member states with larger EP delegations.

Figure 4 below shows that the five mainstream EP groups' Kremlin-critical Index scores are in the 88-95 range, indicating a strong resistance to Russian influencing efforts. The vast majority of national parties sitting in these caucuses are highly critical of Russia, although there are a few exceptions, such as the Les Républicains (EPP), the Bulgarian Socialist Party (S&D) and the Slovak Smer-SD (S&D), the Latvian Russian Union (Greens) and the Estonian Center Party (Renew), which are the worst-performing political forces from these groups, all with a score under 70.<sup>40</sup>

**Figure 4. The Kremlin-critical scores of EP Groups on a scale of 0 to 100. The higher value indicates a more critical stance.**



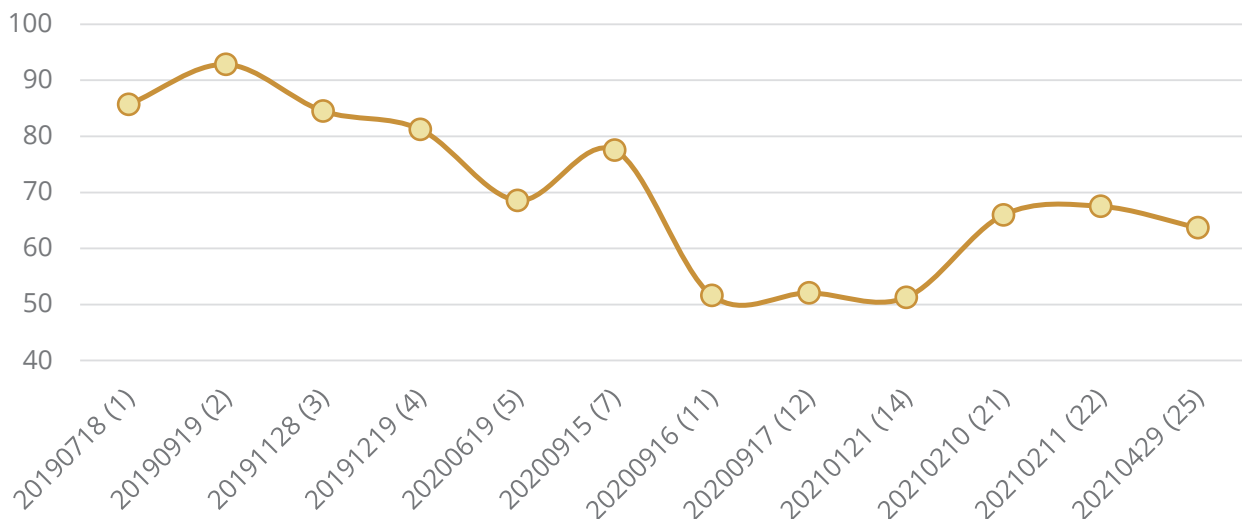
38 The texts are available here: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2020-0232\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2020-0232_EN.html) here: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2021-0018\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2021-0018_EN.html) and here: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2021-0159\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2021-0159_EN.html)

39 The text is available here: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2021-0159\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2021-0159_EN.html)

40 The case of the BSP and Smer-SD is explained in the section entitled 'Russia's charm in the EU7: energy, personal benefits, ideology'.

Figure 5 below shows that the Les Républicains' score has declined steadily over the research period, with two substantial breaks in the trend: one is in September 2020 due to their rejection of two pro-Russian amendments to the implementation of the EU-Georgia Association Agreement,<sup>41</sup> and one in January 2021 due to their votes on the report on the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement<sup>42</sup> and some amendments proposed by GUE/NGL.<sup>43</sup>

**Figure 5. The cumulative KCI score of Les Républicains between 2 July 2019 and 20 May 2021. The number in parentheses represents the cumulative number of votes.**



Roland Freudenstein highlighted multiple reasons for the position of the French party. First, there is a longstanding tradition in the French political elite of a feeling of special friendship with Russia as well as of deeply engrained anti-Americanism. Second, one needs to see the domestic trajectory of the party, as it has moved to the right politically and, parallel to that, they have gotten much smaller on the national level, losing both political substance and human resources to Emmanuel Macron's movement, including their most centrist, Western-minded politicians. The case of the Baltic parties lagging behind is slightly more trivial: they are generally more popular among their respective nations' Russian-speaking minority.

**Unlike in the case of China, the five mainstream political groupings are followed by a large gap to ID and GUE/NGL, which have scores very close to each other; 34 and 26, respectively, as shown in Figure 4 above. Both groups voted in support of the Kremlin's interest over 50% of the time. Thus, both ID and GUE/NGL may be considered highly vulnerable to Russian influencing efforts. Besides their votes, they regularly recite pro-Kremlin disinformation narratives in plenaries.**

41 The amendments in question (2 and 3) can be found here: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-9-2020-0136-AM-002-003\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-9-2020-0136-AM-002-003_EN.pdf)

42 European Parliament. (2021). EU Association Agreement with Ukraine. Accessed: 2021.07.06. Link: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2021-0050\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2021-0050_EN.html)

43 Amendments 33, 38, 45, 46, 52, 56 can be found here: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-9-2020-0219\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-9-2020-0219_EN.html)



In the debate on the resolution concerning the explosions in Vrbetice with the involvement of GRU agents,<sup>44</sup> Ivan David (Party of Freedom and Direct Democracy, Czechia) – ID’s speaker – claimed that the Czech government had not presented any evidence of Russian involvement, and hinted at the possibility of another state’s actions designed to blame the explosion on Russia in order to hurt its relationship with Europe.

**Ivan David**

Party of Freedom and Direct Democracy, Czechia

In the same discussion, GUE/NGL’s Mick Wallace (Independents 4 change, Ireland) lamented why the EP never talks about how Ukraine was destabilized by the West in the first place, as the United States had spent USD 5 billion on regime change before 2014. When the plenary discussed the poisoning of Alexei Navalny, ID’s speaker, Thierry Mariani, who has visited Russia-occupied Crimea several times, stated he wished the Russian opposition leader a speedy recovery, while arguing that “warmongers” should wait with calling for new sanctions until a “real investigation” is performed.

**It must be added that far-left MEPs have tabled numerous amendments to texts that are in line with the Kremlin’s interests.** Mick Wallace, for instance, proposed an amendment to the resolution on Georgia stating that the EU-Georgia Association Agreement was instrumentalized to provoke confrontation between Georgia and its neighbors.<sup>45</sup> The same MEP wanted to amend the report on the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement, adding that the events on Maidan square in 2014 amounted to a Western coup,<sup>46</sup> and that the MH17 investigation is still ongoing,<sup>47</sup> and to demand that unilateral sanctions on Russia are lifted<sup>48</sup> – among others.

**There was a substantial change in Lega’s behavior on Russia-related issues in late 2020**, until which the leading force of ID had consistently represented Russian interests in the EP, as shown in Figure 6 below. In September 2020, all Lega members voted against a resolution condemning the poisoning of Alexei Navalny and calling for sanctions as a consequence of the Kremlin’s actions. However, as Figure 6 shows, their attitudes towards Russia soon changed. **In January 2021, all but one MEP of the Italian party approved a text criticizing Moscow for arresting the Russian opposition leader**

44 David Hutt. (2021). How a tiny Czech village was caught up in a huge Russian spy case. Euronews. Accessed: 2021.07.01. Link: <https://www.euronews.com/2021/05/19/how-a-tiny-czech-village-was-caught-up-in-a-huge-russian-spy-case>

45 European Parliament. (2020). Amendment 2. Accessed: 2021.06.08. Link: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-9-2020-0136-AM-002-003\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-9-2020-0136-AM-002-003_EN.pdf)

46 European Parliament. (2021). Amendment 33. Accessed: 2021.06.08. Link: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-9-2020-0219-AM-029-038\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-9-2020-0219-AM-029-038_EN.pdf)

47 European Parliament. (2021). Amendment 38. Accessed: 2021.06.08. Link: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-9-2020-0219-AM-029-038\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-9-2020-0219-AM-029-038_EN.pdf)

48 European Parliament. (2021). Amendment 46. Accessed: 2021.06.08. Link: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-9-2020-0219-AM-039-048\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-9-2020-0219-AM-039-048_EN.pdf)



and calling for sanctions against Russia, similarly to the text that they rejected in September 2020. Moreover, in May 2021, they all voted for a resolution condemning Moscow for the Vrbetice explosions, its actions in Ukraine and the case of Navalny. Although the votes cast by Lega became much more critical of the Kremlin after late 2020, they still abstained on the report on the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement, approved by the EP in February 2021.

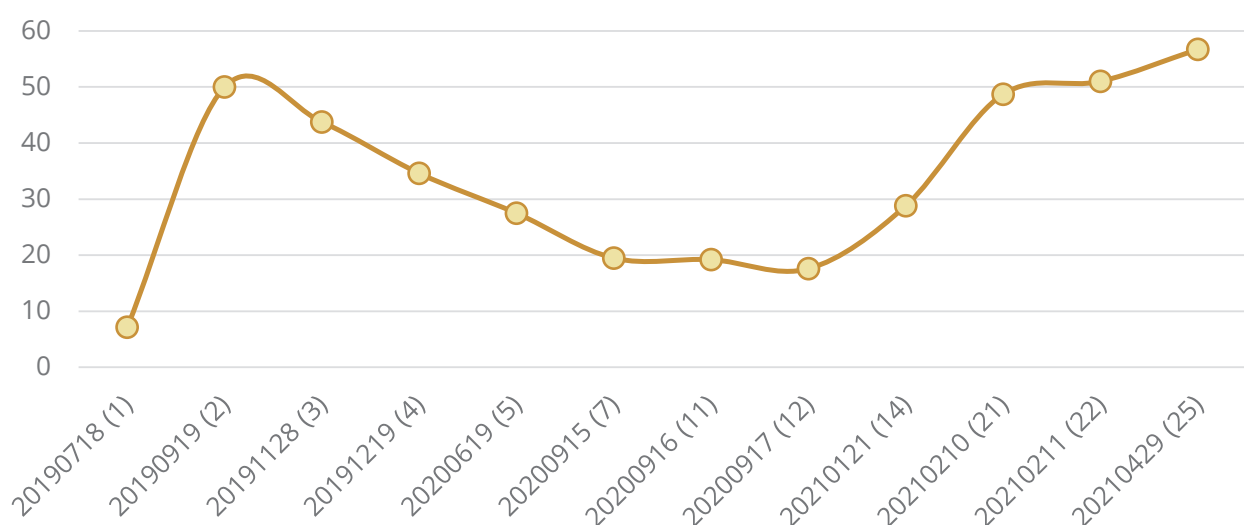


In the Vrbetice debate, Susanna Ceccardi described Russian troop movements near the Ukrainian border as a “tough signal” for the West and condemned the continuation of the construction of Nord Stream 2. This narrative constitutes a considerable about-face in comparison to earlier statements, for instance by party chair Matteo Salvini, who in 2015 said about sanctions that “you have to be an idiot to play at going to war against Russia.”<sup>49</sup>

**Susanna Ceccardi**  
Lega, Italy

Lega’s turn can likely be explained by domestic political factors, according to Roland Freudenstein. “Lega wants to become more of a legitimate, and more acceptable party to the political center, and thereby maintain and extend its leading role in this coalition of three parties forming on the Italian center right” – he said, adding whether they actually believe in this new line is a matter of secondary importance.

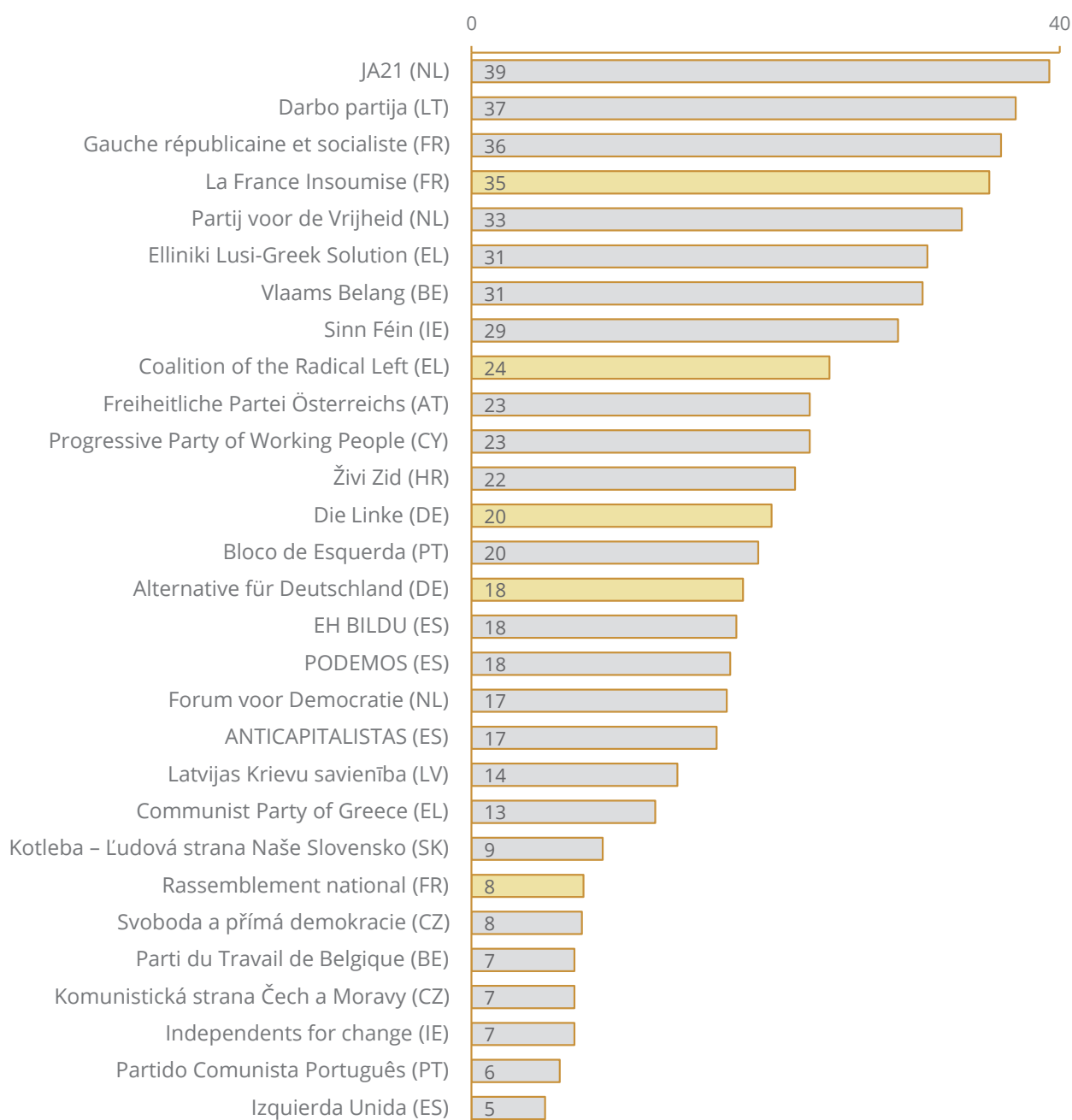
**Figure 6. The cumulative KCI score of LEGA between 2 July 2019 and 20 May 2021. The number in parentheses represents the cumulative number of votes.**



49 Sputnik News. (2015). Italian lawmaker put on Putin t-shirt at EU Parliament session. Accessed: 2021.06.09. Link: <https://sputniknews.com/europe/201506091023150628/>

The analysis of the voting behavior of national delegations in the EP outlines a group of five national delegations (Italy, Ireland, Cyprus, France, Greece) which can be labelled rather vulnerable to Russian influencing efforts. MEPs from these five countries voted critically of Russia less than 65% of the time (between 46% and 65%), well below the results of other delegations (71%-99%). In all cases, their vulnerability comes partially from the presence of relatively large far-right or far-left groups among the delegation; and many are featured on the list of worst-performing parties depicted in Figure 7. The problems are somewhat more widespread, however. In Greece, which has by far the lowest score, there is one mainstream party, PASOK, which also has a relatively low KCI score (70). France suffers from the same issue due to the increasingly pro-Russian attitudes of Les Républicains. In Italy, three of the top four political parties in public opinion polls, Lega, M5S and FdI all scored under 70.

**Figure 7. National parties with a Kremlin-critical score under 40. Only includes parties whose MEPs cast at least five votes. Parties with at least 5 MEPs are highlighted in yellow.**



Data therefore shows the following. First, that **there is a much broader spectrum of political forces Russia can appeal to due to its non-ideological approach to influencing efforts.** Far-right members of the EP may be enticed by Russia's model of governance, particularly its anti-migration, anti-LGBTQ, and anti-liberal authoritarian agenda.<sup>50</sup> Additionally, both extremes of the political spectrum often see the Kremlin as a serious counterweight, balancing out the alleged dominance of the United States and the West. So, while Russia's soft power efforts can be more successful than those of China, the Kremlin also relies on sharp power.<sup>51</sup> **Its information operations often aim to depict Russia as economically, militarily, and politically more powerful than it really is, which is partly the reason why extremist forces on both the left- and right side of the political spectrum see Russia as a pillar of resistance against Washington.** This is, in fact, best proved by The Left, which often start discussing the allegedly malign actions of the United States when the EP talks about Russia. Russia's successful influencing efforts concerning its power are also one reason why even members of mainstream political parties might, in some cases, argue for a rethinking of the relationship with Russia.

**The Kremlin can use its financial and natural resources to weaken European resistance or disrupt EU unity, the results of which can be seen in the CDU/CSU's and ÖVP's refusal to criticize the Nord Stream 2 project.** It must be added that – as Roland Freudenstein highlighted – there are members of, for instance, the German EPP delegation who understand that supporting the project is a geopolitical mistake. On the individual level, the Russian regime can be an exciting prospect for some politicians in terms of their own future after politics: ex-German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder has joined the board of Russian oil company Rosneft<sup>52</sup> and former French PM Francois Fillon has recently been named to the board of Russian state oil company Zarubezhneft.<sup>53</sup>

Moreover, Russia financed Marine Le Pen's 2014 presidential campaign<sup>54</sup> and tried to support Lega's 2019 EP election campaign,<sup>55</sup> while also consistently providing other forms of backing, for instance in the form of media support, to extremist forces. Aymeric Chauprade, a former MEP and advisor to Marine Le Pen, was rather clear what Russia's goals are with their support. "Every time you have a political leader who says we should change our policy regarding Russia [...] they are interested in

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50 Political Capital. (2014). The Russian connection: The spread of pro-Russian policies on the European far right. Accessed: 2021.07.01. Link: [http://pdc.ceu.hu/archive/00007035/01/PC\\_Russian-Connection\\_2014.pdf](http://pdc.ceu.hu/archive/00007035/01/PC_Russian-Connection_2014.pdf)

51 Sharp power may be defined as geopolitical means employed by state actors to manipulate target audiences abroad through the use of disinformation, as opposed to "soft" power, based on attraction, or "hard power," based on coercion via military, financial or other means. For more, please see: [https://www.politicalcapital.hu/russian\\_sharp\\_power\\_in\\_ee/research\\_results.php?article\\_read=1&article\\_id=2391#\\_edn8](https://www.politicalcapital.hu/russian_sharp_power_in_ee/research_results.php?article_read=1&article_id=2391#_edn8)

52 Warsaw Institute. (2020). Russia's German Connection: Schroeder re-elected Rosneft's board chairman. Accessed: 2021.06.21. Link: <https://warsawinstitute.org/russias-german-connection-schroeder-re-elected-rosnefts-board-chairman/>

53 France 24. (2021). Former French PM Fillon joins Russian state oil company board. Accessed: 2021.07.06. Link: <https://www.france24.com/en/france/20210703-former-french-pm-fillon-joins-russian-state-oil-company-board>

54 Gabriel Gatehouse. (2017). Marine Le Pen: Who is funding France's far right? BBC. Accessed: 2021.07.01. Link: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-39478066>

55 Jason Horowitz. (2019). Audio suggests secret plan for Russians to Fund Italy's Salvini. The New York Times. Accessed: 9 June 2021. Link: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/10/world/europe/salvini-russia-audio.html>

supporting him” – he told The Washington Post.<sup>56</sup> Russia has also been building personal connections with extremist political parties. For example, politicians from parties backing Russia also get to fly regularly on paid “election observation missions” as well. One example is Thierry Mariani, who has often spoken out in plenaries in defense of the Kremlin.<sup>57</sup> These alliances do not always last forever. As highlighted above, Lega has suddenly changed its voting behavior on Russia-related matters and its rhetoric in the EP, at least up until the end of the research period. The Hungarian party Jobbik has undergone a more complete transformation over the past few years.<sup>58</sup> As noted above, there are examples for the reverse of such trends too, for instance in the case of Les Républicains. **Thus, Russia’s alliances in Europe can be changing constantly.**

Overall, Russia has relatively widespread appeal in European politics, but it has failed so far to muster considerable support for its agenda, even on the national level. **One of the main indicators of the Kremlin’s relative weakness in influencing European political decisions is that economic sanctions against Russia have been extended by EU foreign ministers every time since 2014, even when both the pro-Russian M5S-Lega and Fidesz governments were in office, so neither would have had to face responsibility for vetoing EU action alone, even though the Italian cabinet has made explicit threats to follow this line of action.**<sup>59</sup> However, the M5S-Lega government did veto adding a new name to the list of sanctioned Russian individuals,<sup>60</sup> and **there has been little talk outside of the EP about extending or strengthening sectoral economic measures, which may be considered partial achievements.** The Parliament has proved to be more resilient to authoritarian influence than individual member states in Russia’s case, too, as they are the only consistent voice in favor of strengthening sanctions, and voice their opposition to Russian energy projects.

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56 Paul Sonne. (2018). A Russian Bank gave Marine Le Pen’s party a loan. Then weird things began happening. The Washington Post. Accessed: 9 June 2021. Link: [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/a-russian-bank-gave-marine-le-pens-party-a-loan-then-weird-things-began-happening/2018/12/27/960c7906-d320-11e8-a275-81c671a50422\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/a-russian-bank-gave-marine-le-pens-party-a-loan-then-weird-things-began-happening/2018/12/27/960c7906-d320-11e8-a275-81c671a50422_story.html)

57 Anton Shekhovtsov. (2020). Moscow using far right to infiltrate EU parliament. EUObserver. Accessed 9 June 2021. Link: <https://euobserver.com/investigations/151679>

58 Authoritarian shadows in the EU

59 Gabriela Galindo. (2018). Salvini: Italy ‘not afraid’ to use EU veto to lift Russia sanctions. Politico. Accessed: 2021.06.18. Link: <https://www.politico.eu/article/matteo-salvini-italy-not-afraid-to-use-eu-veto-to-lift-russian-sanctions-crimea-vladimir-putin/>

60 Jacopo Barigazzi. (2018). Italy blocks adding name to Russia sanctions list. Politico. Accessed: 2021.06.18. Link: <https://www.politico.eu/article/italy-blocks-adding-name-to-russia-sanctions-list-ukraine/>

## A LITTLE HELP FOR IDEOLOGICAL “FRIENDS”: DOUBLE STANDARDS WITHIN THE EP

We tried to measure whether MEPs are willing to protect EU values in third countries, outside of Russia and China, based on their votes on resolutions ranging from the condemnation of the authoritarian actions of the Maduro regime through human rights violations in Belarus to the arrest of former Bolivian President Jeanine Anez.<sup>61</sup> While the majority of the 38 votes in this category were approved by well over 80% of MEPs casting a vote, some were more controversial. For instance, only 57% of representatives approved a resolution on concerns about the rule of law in Cuba,<sup>62</sup> declaring the 2020 Venezuelan parliamentary elections to be illegitimate<sup>63</sup> and the arrest of the former Bolivian head of state.<sup>64</sup>

Renew and the EPP Group have shown themselves to be the most willing to advocate for European democratic values in third countries with scores of 96 and 93, respectively, as indicated in Figure 8 below. No members of the groups have cast votes openly supporting authoritarian actions even a single time (although they did abstain in some cases). The S&D (89), the Greens (84) and the ECR (81) were more willing to support some authoritarian regimes, as they seem to have opposed resolutions based on ideological considerations. For instance, the resolutions on Cuba and Bolivia were rejected by the vast majority of the S&D and the Greens. Most S&D members abstained on the resolution on the 2020 Venezuelan elections, while the Greens mostly rejected it. Meanwhile, the right-oriented groups were more likely to abstain on (EPP, ID) or reject (ECR) a proposal on the situation of Ethiopian migrants in detention centers in Saudi Arabia. The result was similar in the case of the human rights situation in Egypt, but in that case, it was the ECR that leaned towards abstaining, and ID preferred to reject it.

The arguments of mainstream parties against some of the resolutions listed here are unclear. Concerning Cuba, no S&D member indicated their opposition to the text,<sup>65</sup> and few EPP members noted why they would abstain on the resolution on Saudi Arabia or Egypt.<sup>66</sup> In fact, the MEPs speaking on behalf of these groups were rather supportive in their speeches. In contrast, in the debate on the 2020 Venezuelan parliamentary elections, the speakers of both the S&D and Greens argued that the resolution failed to recognize all political actors in the country. The Greens' Jordi Solé added that there is nothing to be gained by not talking to Nicolás Maduro's regime, as the situation requires constructive action in Venezuela.<sup>67</sup>

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61 For the full description and results of votes concerning third countries outside of Russia and China, please see: [https://www.politicalcapital.hu/authoritarian\\_shadows\\_in\\_the\\_eu/votes.php](https://www.politicalcapital.hu/authoritarian_shadows_in_the_eu/votes.php)

62 Available here: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2019-0073\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2019-0073_EN.html)

63 Available here: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2021-0019\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2021-0019_EN.html)

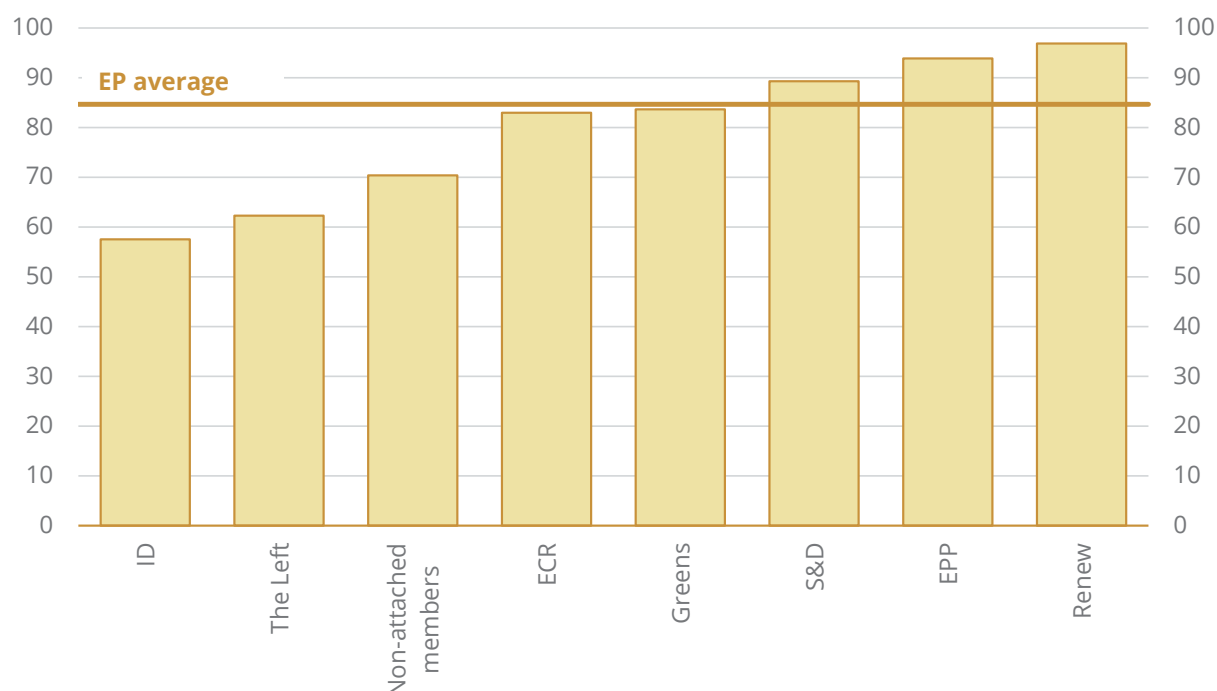
64 Available here: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/PV-9-2021-04-29-RCV\\_FR.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/PV-9-2021-04-29-RCV_FR.pdf)

65 European Parliament. (2019). Cuba, the case of José Daniel Ferrer. Accessed: 2021.06.09. Link: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-9-2019-11-28-ITM-003-02\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-9-2019-11-28-ITM-003-02_EN.html)

66 European Parliament. (2020). The situation of Ethiopian migrants in detention centres in Saudi Arabia. Accessed: 2021.06.09. Link: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-9-2020-10-08-ITM-008-03\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-9-2020-10-08-ITM-008-03_EN.html)

67 European Parliament. (2021). The latest developments in the National Assembly of Venezuela. Accessed: 2021.06.09. Link: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-9-2021-01-19-ITM-015\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-9-2021-01-19-ITM-015_EN.html)

**Figure 8. The Authoritarian-critical scores of EP Groups on a scale of 0 to 100. The higher value indicates a more critical stance.**



Some MEPs, such as Tatjana Ždanoka of the Latvian Russian Union (Greens), claimed the EU was not a credible actor on the rule of law. She stated in the debate on Kazakhstan that, among others, seven journalists had been charged with a criminal offense in Latvia “just for the fact of working for certain media,” which is proof that the EU cannot teach Kazakhstan about democracy.<sup>68</sup> What she did not mention was that (a) those under investigation were journalists working for Kremlin-backed media outlets and (b) they were charged with the allocation of economic resources to a person under EU sanctions,<sup>69</sup> not for where they were working. **Interestingly, she voted for, among others, the resolution on the human rights situation in Egypt, so – it would appear at least – that she supports the EU “teaching” countries about democracy if they are further away from Russia’s immediate sphere of influence.** This is a clearly visible pattern in her case: she voted against texts on Syria and Belarus, but approved ones on Myanmar or Turkey.

The situation in the case of the two EP groups that are the least likely to condemn authoritarian third countries is somewhat similar: the ID is more willing to defend right-wing regimes or causes, while The Left members were less critical when it came to abuses committed by leftist governments. **However, there are differences compared to mainstream caucuses: the main reasons why ID and GUE/NGL achieved lower scores than the mainstream, 62 and 56, respectively, are that (a) they did not support some resolutions that mainstream forces did (e.g., the Nicaraguan Foreign Agents Law)**

68 European Parliament. (2021). Human rights situation in Kazakhstan. Accessed: 2021.06.16. Link: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-9-2021-02-11-ITM-006-02\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-9-2021-02-11-ITM-006-02_EN.html)

69 Bnn-News. (2020). State Security Service suspects seven of breach of international sanctions. Accessed: 2021.06.16. Link: <https://bnn-news.com/state-security-service-suspects-seven-of-breach-of-international-sanctions-219480>



and (b) their caucuses are less disciplined than those of others, so even when the official party line was anti-authoritarian, there would be proportionally large groups diverging from it. In this category, there are once again large differences between the national parties sitting in these groups. For instance, Lega accumulated a score of 87, while the AfD's score is 10. As for The Left, the Portuguese Communist Party scored 39, while France Unbowed reached 75. The justifications explaining their decisions also tended to follow the own ideological priorities of The Left and ID.



In the debate on Cuba in November 2019, Mick Wallace declared that José Daniel Ferrer, the human rights activist arrested, was a “right-wing agitator” with “close ties to the US.”<sup>70</sup>

**Mick Wallace**

Independents 4 change, Ireland

Clare Daly (Independents 4 change, Ireland) echoed Wallace's claims and criticized her peers for “championing” US interventionism.<sup>71</sup> ID's Thierry Mariani criticized the Egypt resolution because – he stated – **Egypt was doing better in countering Islamization with President Sissi at the helm.**<sup>72</sup> In contrast, on some occasions, extremist forces argued that some resolutions did not go far enough: ID's speaker Dominique Bilde suggested in the debate on Nicaragua that their abstention is justified by the fact that the resolution misses any mention of attacks against the Catholic Church and the so-called “fake news bill” that muzzles the freedom of expression.<sup>73</sup>

## BULGARIA AND SYRIA: DO RUSSIA'S KEY FRIENDS GET DIFFERENT TREATMENT?

We need to take a closer look at two topics that touch key Russian interests – Belarus and Syria. In the research period, the Parliament approved three resolutions on Russia's neighbor dealing with implementing sanctions against Belarusian officials involved in electoral fraud,<sup>74</sup> asking to broaden the sanctions already implemented,<sup>75</sup> and tying negotiations on EU-Belarus Partnership Priorities

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<sup>70</sup> Cuba, the case of José Daniel Ferrer.

<sup>71</sup> Cuba, the case of José Daniel Ferrer.

<sup>72</sup> European Parliament. (2020). The deteriorating situation of human rights in Egypt, in particular the case of the activists of the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR). Accessed: 2021.06.09. Link: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-9-2020-12-17-ITM-008-01\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-9-2020-12-17-ITM-008-01_EN.html)

<sup>73</sup> European Parliament. (2020). The „Foreign Agents” Law in Nicaragua. Accessed: 2021.06.09. Link: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-9-2020-10-08-ITM-008-02\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-9-2020-10-08-ITM-008-02_EN.html)

<sup>74</sup> European Parliament. (2020). The Situation in Belarus. Accessed: 2021.06.09. Link: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2020-0231\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2020-0231_EN.html)

<sup>75</sup> European Parliament. (2020). Recommendations to the Council, Commission and HR/VP on Belarus. Accessed: 2021.07.06. Link: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2020-0280\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2020-0280_EN.html)

to free and fair elections in the country, respectively.<sup>76</sup> The approval rate of the resolutions grew slightly over time due to Lega and Syriza, mainly, coming around to support action against Minsk. Most other ID and The Left members remained consistent defenders of the Belarusian regime, repeating narratives familiar from pro-Kremlin media. Thierry Mariani accused the EU of declaring Svetlana Tsikhanouskaya the winner of the elections based on an online poll.<sup>77</sup> Gunnar Beck argued, in writing, that his party fully condemns human rights violations committed by the regime but still abstained because they refuse any EU interference in the affairs of third countries.<sup>78</sup> Meanwhile, Manu Pineda (Izquierda Unida, Spain), GUE/NGL's speaker at the third debate, said it was difficult to distinguish "information and propaganda" on Belarus and accused the EU of doing something wrong in its eastern neighborhood.



The resolution of the 10th anniversary of the Syrian conflict, expressing regret for the continued political deadlock in the country and calling on member states to support principled humanitarian assistance, was also opposed by the EP's far-left and far-right. It must be noted that one paragraph of the resolution condemned Russian airstrikes and involvement in the country. As in the case of the Belarus resolutions, Lega and the French and Greek far left in GUE/NGL were the most notable exceptions to the rule, as they all supported the resolution.

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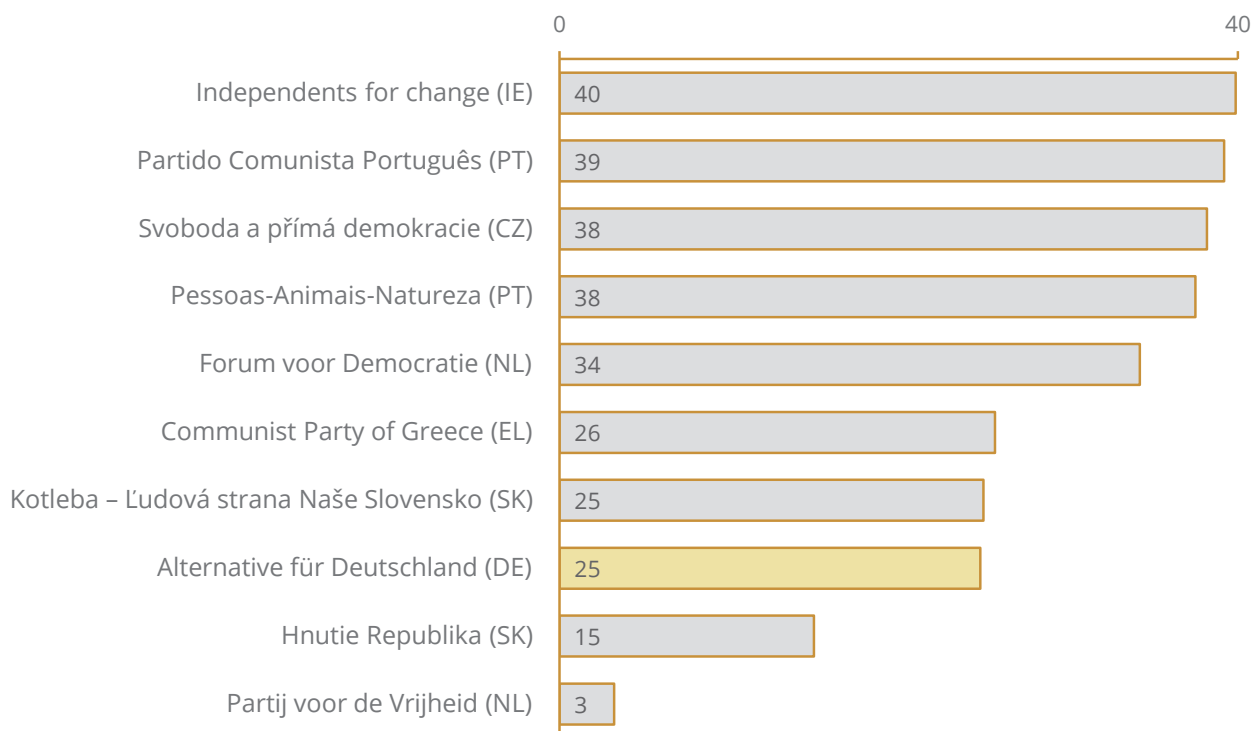
76 European Parliament. (2021). The continuous violations of human rights in Belarus. Accessed: 2021.07.06. Link: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2020-0331\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2020-0331_EN.html)

77 European Parliament. (2020). Recommendation to the Council, the Commission and the VPC/HR on relations with Belarus. Accessed: 2021.06.09. Link: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-9-2020-10-20-ITM-013\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-9-2020-10-20-ITM-013_EN.html)

78 Recommendation to the Council, the Commission and the VPC/HR on relations with Belarus

Overall, the protection of EU values in third countries is generally almost unanimous, but both sides of the political spectrum, not only its extremities, seem to be more defensive with regimes close to them ideologically or which are considered extremely important in the interest of reaching certain policy achievements; e.g., keeping migration numbers down. The number of political parties which generally refuse to approve such measures is very low, as seen in Figure 9, and none of them have more than five MEPs and thus a notable say in parliamentary affairs.

**Figure 9. National parties with a Counter-authoritarian score under 40. Only includes parties whose MEPs cast at least five votes. Parties with at least 5 MEPs are highlighted in yellow.**

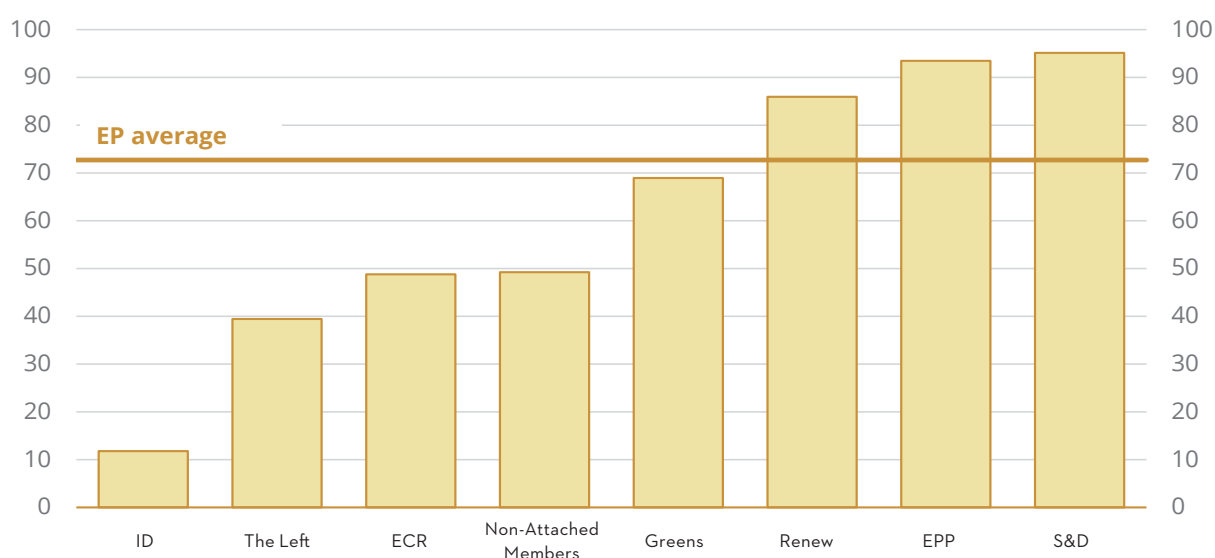


## FIGHTING DISINFORMATION: A SURPRISINGLY DIVISIVE ISSUE

During the research period, MEPs made decisions on seven important texts regarding disinformation. They, for instance, set up a now operational committee on foreign interference into democratic processes, outlined their recommendations on the EU's upcoming Digital Services Act (DSA), and aimed to convince European decision makers to – among others – increase funding on media literacy programs in the European Union.<sup>79</sup> This category includes the only amendment approved by the EP that aligns with Russian interests, as MEPs deleted a paragraph from the text on foreign electoral interference in October 2019 which called for the establishment of a special committee dealing with this issue. The motion passed with a slight majority (320 'for' vs 306 'against'). In all other cases, parliamentarians supported measures to counter disinformation with at least a two-thirds majority – including the Parliament's second attempt at setting up the foreign interference committee.

The EP's October 2020 decision on the DSA is especially important because the body is expected to make a decision on the Commission's DSA legislative proposal, and their consent is needed for it to come into force. The October 2020 report was supported by 82% of parliamentarians casting a vote. In this, MEPs stated that online platforms should be required to remove illegal content swiftly, while harmful content – which does not violate national laws – should be contained by other means, such as increased public knowledge on online disinformation, allowing users control over content proposed to them and public access to high-quality content and information. Naturally, the proposed measures target not only disinformation but other problems as well, such as cyber-bullying, which may have contributed to the measures' increased support.

**Figure 10. The Counter-disinformation scores of EP Groups on a scale of 0 to 100. The higher value indicates a higher level of agreement with EU counter-disinformation strategy.**



<sup>79</sup> For the full description and results of disinformation-related votes, please see: <https://www.politicalcapital.hu/authoritarian-shadows-in-the-eu/votes.php>

Due to the fact that these resolutions covered a wide array of topics, EP groups were more divided on this issue than on the previous three discussed in this study – as indicated in Figure 10. S&D and the EPP showed the highest level of support for the Parliament’s proposals on fighting disinformation, with scores of 95 and 93, respectively. They were followed by Renew with a score of 85. The rest of the EP groups were considerably less likely to support these initiatives: the Greens achieved a score of 69, the ECR reached 49, GUE/NGL followed with 39 and ID came last with 12.

**Figure 11. National parties with a Counter-disinformation score under 40. Only includes parties whose MEPs cast at least five votes. Parties with at least 5 MEPs are highlighted in yellow.**

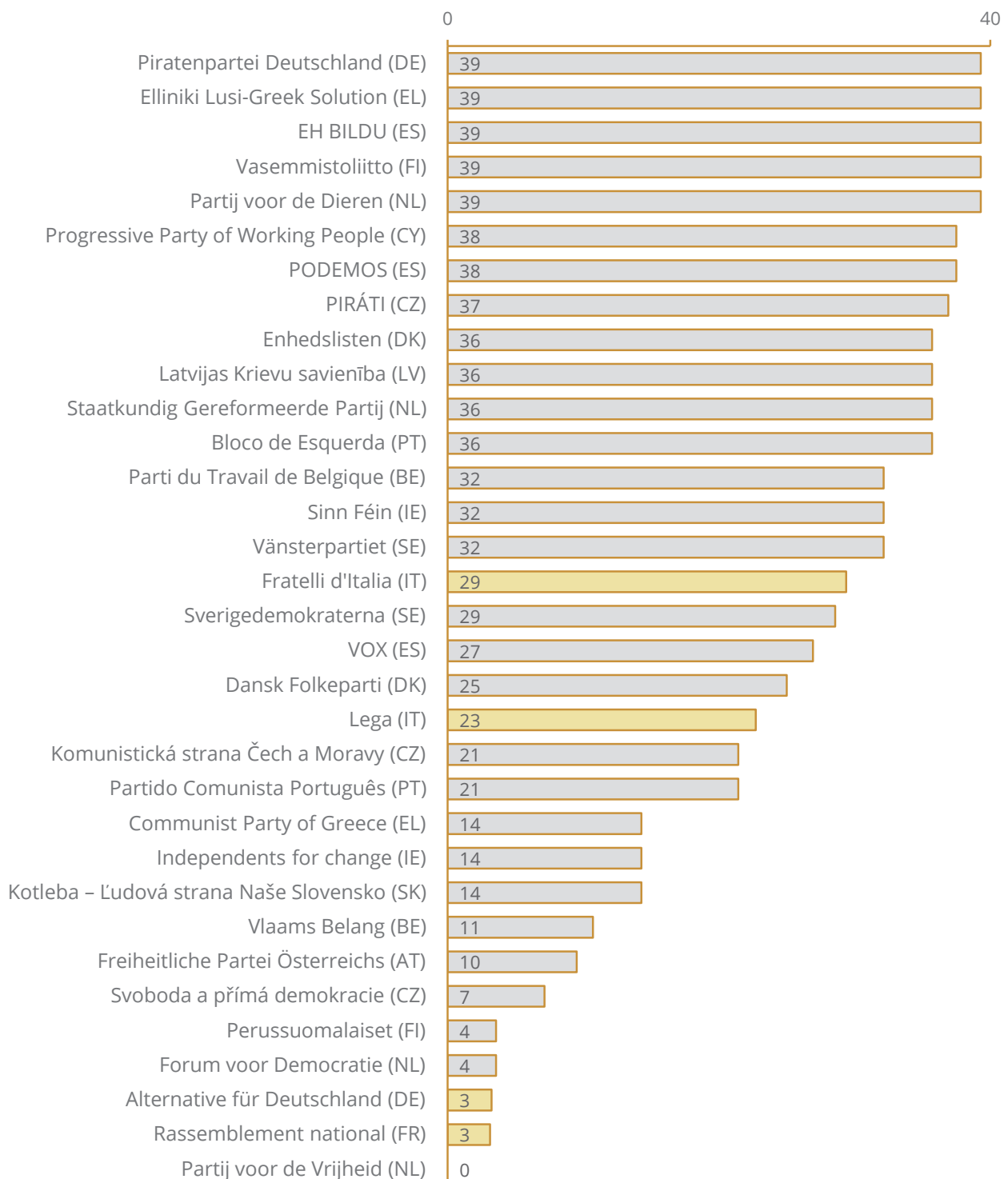




Figure 11 shows that there are a few political parties that almost completely reject any action by the European Union in this field, including the AfD, the French National Rally, The Finns and the Dutch PVV, while some, like the Italian Lega and Fdl, the Danish People's Party, the Spanish Vox or the Swedish Democrats are only slightly more supportive of disinformation-related initiatives. Lega and the Fdl only supported one resolution in this field, the EP's recommendations on the Digital Services Act.

**The German and Czech Pirate Parties have also posted low scores even though they are generally tough on authoritarian regimes. This contrast can be seen in the opposite direction as well, with parties such as the Italian M5S (75) or the Bulgarian Socialist Party (80) being more supportive of the fight against disinformation than taking action against authoritarian states.**

The reason for MEPs not supporting these proposals varied from outright rejection to more balanced policy criticism. **The first category of the explanations constitutes a clear hostility towards EU action against disinformation and the EU itself.** ID's Marco Campomenosi (Lega, Italy) claimed in October 2019 that the European Union is, in fact, seeking to "cage the internet" and curb freedoms because European decision-makers no longer understand citizens, so they are surprised by votes such as the Brexit referendum and the US presidential election.<sup>80</sup>



In the debate on the DSA, ID's Christine Anderson (AfD, Germany) disagreed with several points of the resolution, stating – among others – that fact-checkers are actually checking if the content is politically, not factually correct, and adding that the EU is anti-democratic and totalitarian for trampling the constitutions of its member states, which guarantee the freedom of speech.

**Christine Anderson**  
AfD, Germany

**Some critical remarks were more balanced, but were still rooted in ideology.** Elzbieta Kruk (PiS, Poland), while admitting the importance of combatting hate speech and disinformation, was concerned about the ideologization of the concept of hate speech, as even those that simply disagree with certain viewpoints can be censored, thus allowing truth to become the new hate speech. Therefore, she said, instead of censorship, she prefers building resilience via education.<sup>82</sup>

80 European Parliament. (2019). Foreign electoral interference and disinformation in national and European democratic processes. Accessed: 2021.06.10. Link: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-9-2019-09-17-ITM-011\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-9-2019-09-17-ITM-011_EN.html)

81 European Parliament. (2020). Digital Services Act: Improving the functioning of the Single Market Accessed: 2021.06.10. Link: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-9-2020-10-19-ITM-015\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-9-2020-10-19-ITM-015_EN.html)

82 European Parliament. (2020). Strengthening media freedom: the protection of journalists in Europe, hate speech, disinformation and the role of platforms. Accessed: 2021.06.21. Link: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-9-2020-11-23-ITM-019\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-9-2020-11-23-ITM-019_EN.html)

**The Greens have raised other concerns with the EU's action on disinformation; for instance, regarding its effect on the freedom of speech.** In the DSA debate, Gwendoline Delbos-Corfield noted that it needs to be clarified who decides how problematic content is removed from platforms, highlighting that introducing the 'legal but harmful' category could lead to online censorship (although she did not explain how exactly this would occur). The Greens would also favor a larger focus on the education of citizens to help them identify dis- and misinformation.<sup>83</sup>

Overall, the EP's initiatives concerning disinformation are still supported by a considerable majority. However, unlike in the case of resolutions on individual authoritarian regimes, there are visible differences between the proposed policies of S&D, the EPP and Renew, and those favored by the Greens and the ECR. **Some of the ECR's concerns might be rooted in the fact that the proposals run counter to their domestic political actions, such as turning media outlets into pro-government mouthpieces, as the PiS has done in Poland.** It would be key to focus more on detailing the Parliament's recommendations on media literacy improvement to better involve members of the Greens and the ECR in joint thinking about disinformation – since this seems to be their preferred solution. **Bringing these two caucuses on board to a larger extent could be crucial to put more pressure on the Council to take action.**

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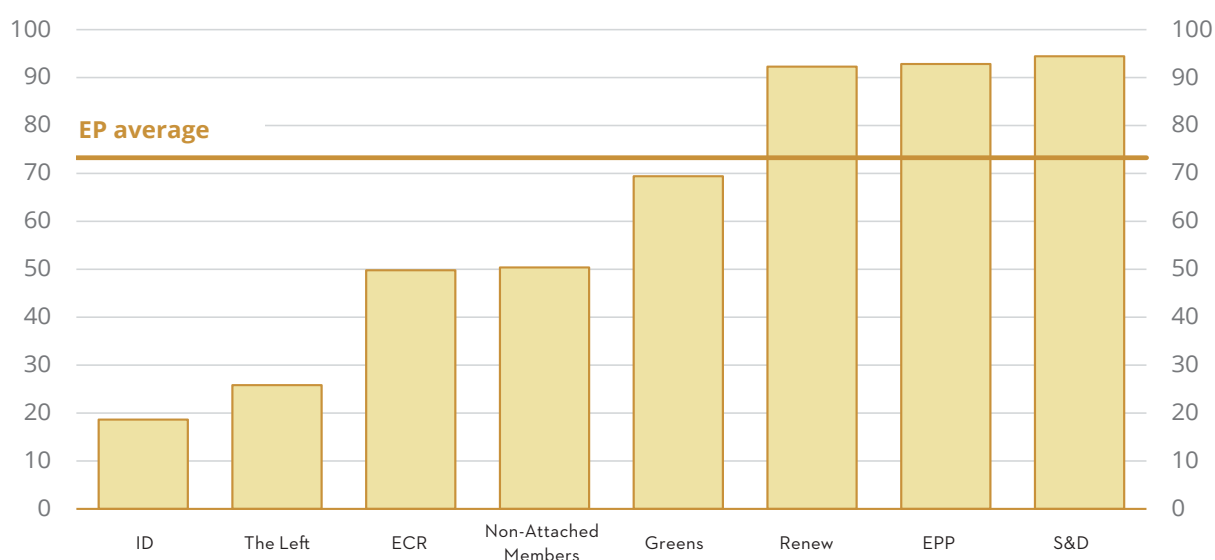
83 Digital Services Act: Improving the functioning of the Single Market

## A COMMON EU FOREIGN POLICY SEEMS TO BE FAR AWAY

The European Parliament has approved 17 reports concerning a common EU strategy on foreign policy matters. They voted on two reports each on the implementation of the Common Foreign- and Security Policy (CFSP), Common Security- and Defense Policy (CSDP), and the situation of human rights in the world. They also detailed their views on EU-Asia, EU-Africa and EU-India relations, energy and nuclear non-proliferation policies – among others.<sup>84</sup> Some reports proved to be fairly strongly contested, with several of them being approved by just around 50% of MEPs casting a vote, particularly the 2019 and 2020 CFSP and CSDP reports (with recommendations on how the EU should approach its relations with powers like Russia, China or Iran, as well as how the European Union's foreign policy could become more effective). The key recommendation of the EP was moving to qualified majority voting in the fields of CFSP and CSDP.

As Figure 12 shows, Renew Europe, the EPP and the S&D are all strong supporters of unifying the EU's global foreign policy strategy. Some individual national parties in their ranks achieved below-average scores, such as the Les Républicains party (EPP), the Bulgarian Socialist Party (S&D) and ANO 2011 (Renew Europe).<sup>85</sup> Their main disagreements concerned the foreign policy reports calling for qualified majority voting in the field instead of unanimity, which would mean that member states had to transfer a part of their sovereignty to the EU level. The EPP, S&D and RE are followed by the Greens (67) and the ECR (51), who were still supportive of some of these initiatives.

**Figure 12. The Common Foreign Policy scores of EP Groups on a scale of 0 to 100. The higher value indicates more agreement with overarching strategic questions of EU foreign policy.**



84 For the full description and results of votes related to EU foreign policy action in general, please see: [https://www.politicalcapital.hu/authoritarian\\_shadows\\_in\\_the\\_eu/votes.php](https://www.politicalcapital.hu/authoritarian_shadows_in_the_eu/votes.php)

85 For more information on the BSP and ANO, as well as other CEE national parties, see the section entitled 'The same patterns apply to disinformation and a common EU foreign policy.'

**Their voting patterns show both overlaps and differences.** They all largely rejected the CFSP and CSDP reports. In contrast, unlike the ECR, the Greens could mostly support the reports on human rights in the world, texts on EU-Asia and EU-Africa relations, as well as the one on energy system integration. The reasons behind the criticism of these initiatives by the Greens and the ECR were widely different.

In the debate on the 2020 CFSP annual report, the Greens' Reinhard Bütikofer (Bündnis 90/Die Grünen, Germany) explained that his group could vote in favor of the report if the amendments tabled by the Greens were approved, such as the one on supporting the UN nuclear weapons agreement, and the deletion of an "unnecessary" commitment to the Mercosur agreement – but these were swept aside by the EP majority.<sup>86</sup> The ECR, according to Witold Jan Waszczykowski's (PiS, Poland) speech, abstained on the report because, he said, the EU has failed to solve any conflicts in the past 30 years, and it lacks solidarity in foreign policy. He argued that qualified majority voting would only mean that the interests of many EU countries are marginalized. This is a notable contradiction, since both the EP and the ECR would require the EU to do more on a variety of global issues, while the latter would also hamstring its ability to project global power on procedural grounds rooted in national politics and ideology.

Regarding the 2020 CSDP report, the Greens' Thomas Waitz (Die Grünen, Austria) explained that he rejects the inclusion of a paragraph that – he believes – tries to apply NATO's 2% military spending target onto the entire EU, which includes non-NATO members as well. According to Waitz, every Euro should rather be spent on saving human lives and jobs.<sup>87</sup> The ECR's argument, similarly to the CSFP report, was that the European Union is debating "interesting resolutions" but does nothing to realistically oppose China or Russia; they even cooperate with the latter in the form of Nord Stream 2.

**The main issue for the ECR was that the report on human rights in the world in 2019<sup>88</sup> never once mentioned the rights of Christians, while it mentioned LGBT people 26 times.** While this was true for the original proposal, the final text noted that Christians are the most persecuted religious group in the world, the physical attacks against Christian communities "come close to meeting the international definition of genocide," and highlighted the need to pay special attention to the situation of persecuted Christians around the world. **In the case of the EU-Africa report, the ECR had ideological issues with it, such as the EP trying to "force" liberal democracy onto the continent.**<sup>89</sup>

The far-right and far-left EP groups are the most rejective of common EU foreign policy initiatives, with average scores of 16 and 25, respectively; parties from these groups made up the majority of the list of worst-scoring political forces, as shown in Figure 13. Some ID and The Left members seem

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86 European Parliament. (2021). Implementation of the Common Foreign and Security Policy - annual report 2020. Accessed: 2021.06.10. Link: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-9-2021-01-19-ITM-011\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-9-2021-01-19-ITM-011_EN.html)

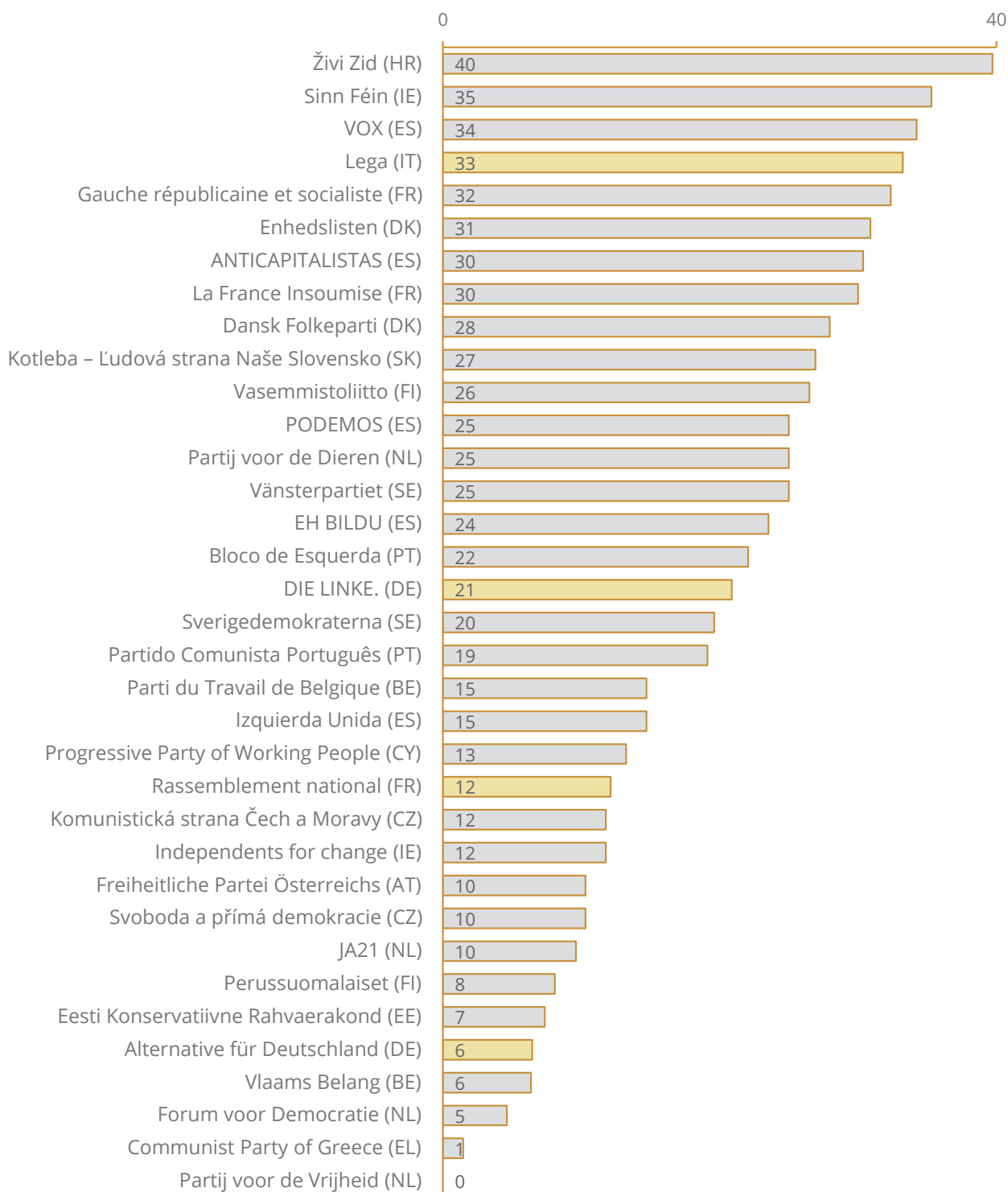
87 Implementation of the Common Foreign and Security Policy - annual report 2020

88 The text is available here: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2021-0014\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2021-0014_EN.html)

89 European Parliament. (2021). New EU-Africa Strategy. Accessed: 2021.06.11. Link: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-9-2021-03-24-ITM-025\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-9-2021-03-24-ITM-025_EN.html)

particularly unwilling to supporting any EU efforts to counter authoritarian influences via common EU global action. Lega must be highlighted in this case, as they achieved an above-average score for ID members. They often diverged from the majority stance of ID and abstained (CFSP and CSDP 2020 reports) or voted for (e.g., EU-India relations) texts instead of voting against.

**Figure 13. National parties with a Common Foreign Policy score under 40. Only includes parties whose MEPs cast at least five votes. Parties with at least 5 MEPs are highlighted in yellow.**



Arguments often pushed by the Kremlin once again formed a part of the arguments of extremist forces in plenaries. ID's Thierry Mariani argued in the 2020 CFSP debate that the EU is an international dwarf because it is incapable of action, and it abandons its principles as soon as the Atlantic alliance demands it. He also suggested that submission to NATO was enshrined in EU treaties.<sup>90</sup> ID's main issue with the EU Security Union Strategy was that it was full of references to "leftist ideologies," such as disinformation and the role of NGOs.<sup>91</sup> Meanwhile, GUE/NGL argued that the EU is focusing on creating a militaristic security and defense policy to benefit the United States and NATO, while the EU itself is not under attack.<sup>92</sup> These fringe arguments, apart from representing frequently disseminated pro-Kremlin narratives, present deeply Eurosceptic views, criticizing the EU for not representing the interests of member states and being incapable of real action.

**Overall, the formulation of a common EU policy will prove to be the toughest challenge, and also the most important: with unanimity voting in place, the European Union will presumably remain unable to follow actions proposed by a wide range of parliamentarians against Russia, China and other authoritarian regimes.**



Roland Freudenstein believes *"there is now a kind of stalemate [on QMV]: France and Germany would probably support it in some very limited contexts, and on the other side of the spectrum there is Poland and Hungary that are dead set against it. The decisive element that might still change this stalemate would be the Conference on the Future of Europe."*

**Roland Freudenstein**

EU policy director, Wilfried Martens Center

The Martens Centre's EU policy director highlighted the fact that the conference was launched with much fanfare, so it must be made into a worthy exercise. Therefore, *"especially if it does not lead to treaty change, it must lead to more changes in practice, and the one foreign policy area where the conference might lead to a concrete takeaway is the limited use of qualified majority voting. If that becomes an official takeaway, it will be much harder for member states to completely reject it."* However, he also noted that it might be impossible to push for a more hawkish stance vis-à-vis Russia even in a qualified majority voting situation.

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<sup>90</sup> Implementation of the Common Foreign and Security Policy - annual report 2020

<sup>91</sup> European Parliament. (2020). EU Security Union Strategy. Accessed: 2021.06.11. Link: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-9-2020-12-16-ITM-013\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-9-2020-12-16-ITM-013_EN.html)

<sup>92</sup> Implementation of the Common Foreign and Security Policy - annual report 2020



## REGIONAL OUTLOOK: THE EAST IS NOT AS VULNERABLE AS IT SEEMS

MEPs from the countries in the focus of our research – namely the V4, Austria, Bulgaria and Romania (hereinafter referred to as EU7) – have proven to be at least somewhat more supportive of EU foreign policy priorities in all five categories than the EU as a whole.<sup>93</sup>

Country	Diplomats expelled after Skripal	Diplomat expelled after Vrbetice	Diplomatic relations with Russia	Diplomatic relations with China
Hungary	1 (after agreement with Moscow) <sup>94</sup>	0	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Regular arguments against the EU's sanctions policy</li> <li>Paks II Nuclear Power plant is being built by Rosatom, financed by Russia</li> <li>International Investment Bank moved headquarters to Budapest</li> <li>Sputnik V vaccine deal with Moscow</li> <li>Joint railway car production project targeting the Egyptian Market (Dunakeszi Járműjavító, involving Russia and Kristóf Szalay-Bobrovniczky<sup>95</sup>)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Regular vetoes of joint EU texts on China; business ties should take precedence over human rights</li> <li>Budapest-Belgrade, Fudan campus in Hungary built by Chinese companies, using Chinese funding</li> <li>Sinopharm vaccine deal with Beijing</li> </ul>
Czechia	3	30 (as well as 93 other employees of the Russian Embassy)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Greatly influenced by Vrbětice</li> <li>Russia excluded from tender for Dukovany Nuclear Power Plant</li> <li>Mutual expulsion of diplomats, degrading mutual diplomatic presence to a minimum.</li> <li>Previous conflict related to the removal of General Konev's statue</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Deteriorating</li> <li>Influence by both President Zeman's more cautious approach towards China and Vystrčil's visit to Taiwan</li> <li>Opinion of the country is very low among Czech citizens</li> </ul>

<sup>93</sup> For more information on the individual countries, please see the country sections available here: XX For a quick summary of diplomatic relations between the countries and Russia/China, see the Appendix.

<sup>94</sup> Szabolcs Panyi (2018). Russia and Hungary seemed to clash over the Skripal poisoning. In the background, it was a different story. Direkt36. Accessed: 2021.06.17. Link: <https://www.direkt36.hu/en/latszolg-osszeugrottak-a-magyarok-es-az-oroszok-a-szkipal-mergezes-miatt-de-a-hatterben-valami-mas-tortent/>

<sup>95</sup> Szalay-Bobrovniczky is a former VP of the pro-government think tank Századvég and a former Hungarian ambassador to London. See: <https://24.hu/kozelet/2020/07/28/szalay-bobrovniczky-kristof-dunakeszi-jarmujavito/>

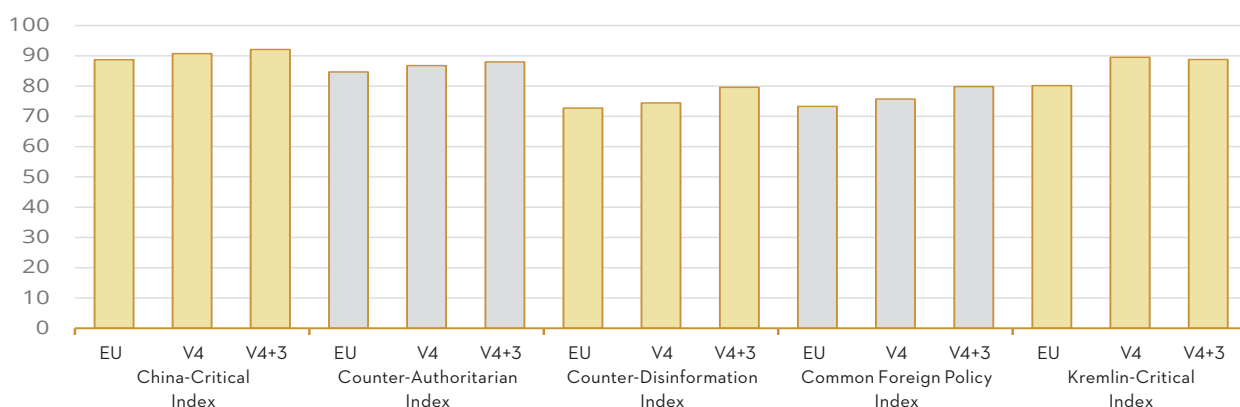
Country	Diplomats expelled after Skripal	Diplomat expelled after Vrbetice	Diplomatic relations with Russia	Diplomatic relations with China
Romania	1	0 (While Romania did expel a Russian diplomat right after Czechia did so, they did not link it to Vrbetice, pointing to the diplomat's spying activities in Romania, instead	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Romania-Russia relations can be described as “cold” and even “hostile” in some cases.</li> <li>• There are irreconcilable differences between the two countries, generated by Russian military presence and political involvement in the Transdnistria region of Moldova. The Kremlin's constant interference with Moldovan politics represents a point of contention in itself.</li> <li>• There are harsh tensions between the two sides in the security and defence domain. Romania is hosting the US Aegis Ballistic Missile Defence System, something the Kremlin regards as a threat.</li> <li>• Low level of economic ties (Romania is virtually energy independent)</li> <li>• Romania is one of the most vocal opponents of Russia's aggressive behavior in the Black Sea region. Romania constantly opposes any attempts at lifting part of the EU-mandated sanctions on Russia.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Officially, Romania has a “special diplomatic relation” with China, mostly defined by its historical engagement during the communist era. Romania supports the “One China” policy. Romanian-Chinese relations, nevertheless, can be better described as “formal.”</li> <li>• In the last few years - coinciding with China's human rights abuses and infractions on civil liberties, but formally not linked to them - Romania took a number of measures limiting China's economic access to its market. The country has denounced a contract signed in 2015 for receiving assistance in building nuclear power capacities; has approved new regulations on granting public tenders for critical infrastructure (roads, power grid, etc.) that make it impossible for Chinese companies to partake.</li> <li>• Romania is still maintaining its formal interest in being part of the 17+1 format. Nevertheless, only limited diplomatic efforts are invested into identifying common interests that can be developed in this framework. Nevertheless, only limited diplomatic efforts are invested into identifying common interests that can be developed in this framework.</li> </ul>

Country	Diplomats expelled after Skripal	Diplomat expelled after Vrbetice	Diplomatic relations with Russia	Diplomatic relations with China
Bulgaria	0	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Since 2019 Bulgaria has expelled 7 Russian diplomats: 6 on espionage charges (in the fields of military, trade, and energy) and 1 in relation to the Vrbetice explosions.</li> <li>In March 2021 in the midst of the election campaign, Bulgarian authorities exposed an espionage network involving Bulgarian military intelligence operatives, who allegedly divulged secret NATO information to Russian diplomats.</li> <li>Bulgaria has not sought to buy Sputnik V. There was a parliamentary debate on the matter, primarily initiated and supported by the BSP, which called for the purchase of Russian and Chinese vaccines. This did not gain wide parliamentary approval.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>In 2018, Bulgaria became the first EU member state to extradite a former Chinese local official wanted by the Chinese authorities on suspicion of corruption.</li> <li>In 2018, Sofia hosted the 16+1 summit.</li> <li>In 2019, Chinese President Xi Jinping and Bulgarian President Rumen Radev upgraded Chinese-Bulgarian relations to a 'strategic partnership.'</li> <li>In 2020, Bulgaria joined the United States' Clean Network Initiative.</li> </ul>
Austria	0	0	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Strong Economic relationship with Russia; therefore, critical of sanctions</li> <li>Planned a Sputnik V deal, but has not gone through with it yet</li> <li>Major government scandal involving a "fake" Russian oligarch's niece, discussing corruption with former far-right leader Strache</li> <li>Former top politicians taking up leadership positions in Russian state companies</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Target of "panda" diplomacy through the Vienna Zoo</li> <li>Money lending by Chinese state bank ICBC</li> <li>Government has been trying to strengthen trade ties with China</li> </ul>

Country	Diplomats expelled after Skripal	Diplomat expelled after Vrbetice	Diplomatic relations with Russia	Diplomatic relations with China
Poland	4	5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Critical of Russia's actions, support for EU sanctions, and demands for stopping the construction of Nord Stream 2</li> <li>• Solidarity with Czechia, support for Ukraine and democratic forces in Belarus</li> <li>• Support for strengthening US military presence in Central Europe</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Generally tries to stick to the EU's China policy</li> <li>• Polish authorities are interested in economic cooperation with China</li> <li>• Government is against Chinese investments in strategic sectors, such as the 5G network</li> </ul>
Slovakia	0	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Critical assessment of Russian activities, support for EU sanctions</li> <li>• Solidarity with Czech Republic</li> <li>• Support for Ukraine, democratic forces in Belarus</li> <li>• Sputnik V vaccine deal with Moscow, though the vaccine has rarely been used</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Low profile in bilateral relations</li> <li>• Policy in accordance with EU line</li> <li>• Formal participation in 17+1 format</li> </ul>

As shown in Figure 14, in three cases – that of Russia, disinformation and foreign policy integration – the difference is noticeable in terms of scores. **The research, nevertheless, suggests that neither these seven countries, nor the V4 alone can be treated as a unified block, and various countries might be willing to move forward with different policy proposals.** Our evaluation will offer additional information on where the region's key vulnerabilities and strengths against foreign influence lie, supplemented by an analysis also of the domestic political arena.

**Figure 14. Comparison of EU, V4 and V4+3 (Austria, Bulgaria, Romania) average China-critical (CCI), Counter-authoritarian (CI), Counter-disinformation (CDI), Common Foreign Policy (CFPI), and Kremlin-critical (KCI) Index scores.**



## CHINA AND THE CEE: VULNERABLE SPOTS

Romania (97), Poland (96) and Austria (95) are above the EU average on the China-critical Index (CCI), Slovakia matches it (89), while Bulgaria (87), Czechia (86) and Hungary (83) are below it. Not all Central-Eastern-European countries treat China as a land of unlimited economic opportunities, but some are willing to block EU initiatives against it to potentially gain ground in their relationship with Beijing. CEE states with more China-friendly political forces in government – mainly Hungary – seem to be more vulnerable to Chinese influence.

The larger Hungarian ruling party, Fidesz, achieved a CCI score of 77 (see the CCI scores of the national parties of the EU7 on Figure 16 below), one of the weakest among mainstream parties. **The country is planning to carry out at least two large joint projects with Beijing: the Budapest-Belgrade railway renovation<sup>96</sup> and the construction of the new campus of Fudan University in Budapest,<sup>97</sup> both financed by Chinese loans.** The Budapest-Belgrade railway is estimated to cost EUR 1.76 billion,<sup>98</sup> while the cost of the Fudan campus in Budapest is estimated to be EUR 1.4 billion.<sup>99</sup> A company connected to PM Viktor Orbán's close friend and now the richest Hungarian, Lőrinc Mészáros, is part of the consortium that won the tender for the Budapest-Belgrade railway, together with two Chinese companies.<sup>100</sup> **Therefore, there is reason to believe that the incumbent government would try to offer favors to China to keep these projects going, and potentially launch new ones for their own financial benefit. This might be one of the justifications for the country's regular decisions to block EU statements on issues that Beijing considers to be red lines, such as Hong Kong.**

Fidesz MEPs struck down the text freezing the CAI ratification process, which is the main reason for their low CCI result, as indicated on figure 15, showing that they are considerably less likely to approve China-critical statements with tangible consequences. **In their statement to the online portal Index, the EP Group of Fidesz argued that the CAI was a “positive development” for Hungary and other EU members, and “Hungary's interest is that the EU-China investment agreement comes into**

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96 Kester Eddy. (2020). Will the EUR 4 billion Belgrade-Budapest rail upgrade be a benefit or burden? Euronews. Accessed: 2021.07.01. Link: <https://www.euronews.com/2020/10/06/will-the-4bn-belgrade-budapest-rail-upgrade-be-a-benefit-or-burden>

97 Szabolcs Panyi. (2021). The Fight Over Fudan: A Chinese University in Budapest Sparks Reckoning for Sino-Hungarian relations. China Observers. Accessed: 2021.07.01. Link: <https://chinaobservers.eu/the-fight-over-fudan-a-chinese-university-in-budapest-sparks-reckoning-for-sino-hungarian-relations/>

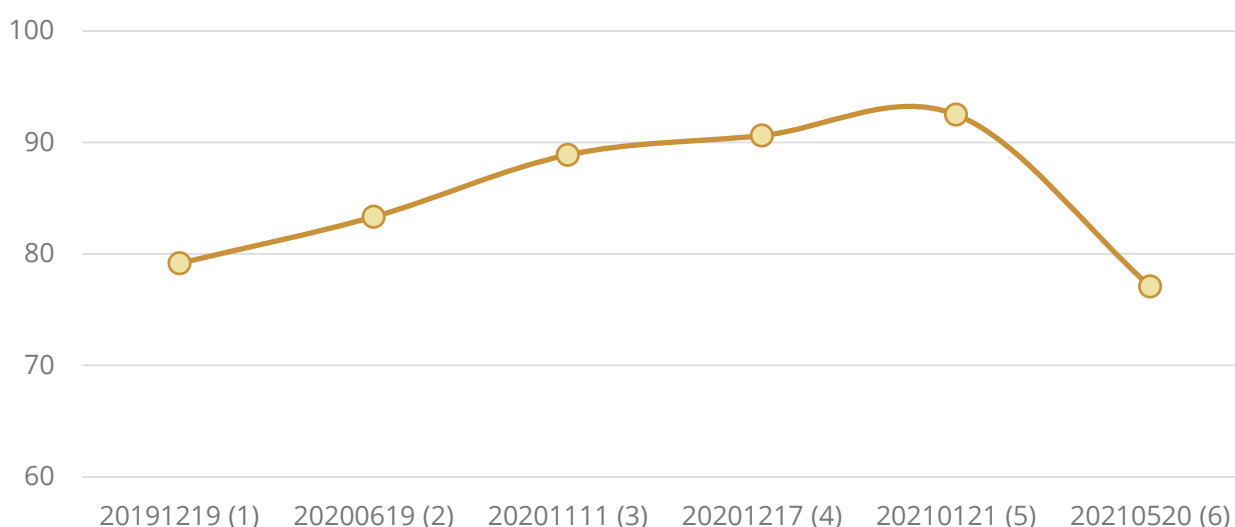
98 Krisztina Than and Anita Komuves. (2020). Hungary, China sign loan deal for Budapest-Belgrade Chinese rail project. Accessed: 2021.07.11. Link: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-hungary-china-railway-loan-idUSKCN226123>

99 The fight over Fudan: A Chinese University in Budapest Sparks Reckoning for Sino-Hungarian relations.

100 Securing Democracy. (n.d.) Chinese money flows to friend of Hungarian PM Orban in contract for Budapest-Belgrade railway. Accessed: 2021.07.01. Link: <https://securingdemocracy.gmfus.org/incident/chinese-money-flows-to-friend-of-hungarian-pm-orban-in-contract-for-budapest-belgrade-railway/>

**force.”<sup>101</sup>** They added that “political problems cannot be solved by suspending commercial relations and making life harder for our companies.”<sup>102</sup> Approving the resolution would, in fact, have been in conflict with the government’s long-running Eastern Opening Policy narrative, which claims that the West should cooperate with eastern regimes to help economies grow, instead of scolding them about democracy. This narrative is used partly to cover up Fidesz-KDNP’s clientelism by securing joint projects with eastern autocrats, and thereby giving them a source of funding that – unlike EU subsidies – comes with absolutely no strings attached in terms of financial oversight.

**Figure 15. The cumulative CCI score of Fidesz between 2 July 2019 and 20 May 2021. The numbers in parentheses represent the cumulative number of votes.**



Opening towards China is not an idea exclusive to Fidesz in Hungary, as bilateral relations with Beijing were first put at the forefront of Hungarian foreign policy by former socialist-backed PM Péter Medgyessy (in office between 2002 and 2004). **These roots sometimes remain visible in the Hungarian Socialist Party even today: the party’s sole MEP, István Ujhelyi, was the only notable opposition politician expressing support for the construction of a Fudan University campus in Hungary, although he did criticize the financing scheme behind the project.**<sup>103</sup>

<sup>101</sup> Index used to be one of the most popular independent news sites in the country, but in 2020, a businessman with close ties to the ruling party purchased a stake in the company. After editor-in-chief Szabolcs Dull was fired, over 80 journalists resigned from the portal. Most of its staff went on to create a new online news site, Telex. See: <https://www.voanews.com/press-freedom/down-not-out-hungarys-journalists-react-shrinking-freedoms>

<sup>102</sup> Viktor Buzna. (2021). Most a Fidesz EP-képviselői álltak ki Kína mellett. Index. Accessed: 2 June 2021. Link: <https://index.hu/kulfold/2021/05/23/eu-kina-cai-fta-magyarorszag-ep-fidesz/>

<sup>103</sup> Ádám Bákonny. (2021). Ujhelyi István támogatja a kínai campust. Accessed: 2021.06.21. Link: <https://magyarnemzet.hu/belfold/2021/04/ujhelyi-istvan-tamogatja-a-kina-campust>





Responding to an inquiry by Political Capital, Ujhelyi said that “*based on the multipolar world order of today, the real cooperation of the two crucially important world actors [the EU and China], where both sides understand their cultural, social and economic differences, is key.*” He added that there is a visible trend in the case of political statements approved by the European Parliament that emphasis has been moved from highly important human rights issues to “*resolutions simplifying complex problems, sometimes not based on fully objective facts, giving primacy to politically motivated economic- and trade policy interests.*” Ujhelyi noted that he did not want to partake in a futile political back-and-forth between the EU and any global actors, which is why he decided not to cast a vote on the CAI-related resolution.

István Ujhelyi

Hungarian Socialist Party, Hungary

**Ujhelyi is one of the MEPs with considerable connections to China, as – for instance – he helped found the Confucius Institute in Szeged.**

The MSZP is not the only party with a potential vulnerability. Democratic Coalition MP Lajos Oláh, co-chair of the *Nagy Fal Magyar-Kínai Barátság Egyesület* (Great Wall Hungary-China Friendship Association), has extensive contacts with Chinese officials and businessmen working in Hungary,<sup>104</sup> and he met Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi when the latter was on an official visit in Budapest in 2019, although Oláh claimed they spoke of issues that mostly concerned his “private life.”<sup>105</sup>

In Czechia’s case, the extreme left-wing Communist Party of Czechia and Moravia (KSČM) and the extreme right-wing Freedom and Direct Democracy Party (SPD) are tolerant or sympathetic towards Beijing domestically and on the European level, too, while President Miloš Zeman represents openly pro-Chinese attitudes rather often. One notable event in Czechia was the official visit of Czech Senate President Miloš Vystrčil to Taiwan, fulfilling the last plan of the late Senate President Jaroslav Kubera, who died before he could go through with the visit himself.<sup>106</sup> **Vystrčil visited Taiwan to the outrage of Chinese officials; the foreign minister labelled the act one of “international treachery,” challenging the One China principle, and proclaimed that the Senate head would “pay a heavy price” for it. Most Czech politicians and officials rejected these unprecedented Chinese threats**

<sup>104</sup> András Szabó & Blanka Zöldi. (2019). A DK támadta a kormány kereskedőházait, egy képviselőjük mégis több szalon kötődik az üzlethez. Accessed: 2021.06.19. Link: <https://444.hu/2019/09/13/a-dk-tamadta-a-kormany-kereskedohazait-egy-kepviselojuk-megis-tobb-szalon-kotodik-az-uzlethez>

<sup>105</sup> Marianna Hutter. (2019). Miért nem büszkélkedik a DK azzal, hogy politikusok is találkozott a kínai külügyminiszterrel? Megkérdezzük Oláh Lajost! Accessed: 2021.06.18. Link: [https://azonnali.hu/cikk/20190730\\_miert-nem-buszkelkedik-el-a-dk-azzal-hogy-talalkozott-politikusok-a-kina-kulugyminiszterrel-megkerdeztuk-olah-lajost](https://azonnali.hu/cikk/20190730_miert-nem-buszkelkedik-el-a-dk-azzal-hogy-talalkozott-politikusok-a-kina-kulugyminiszterrel-megkerdeztuk-olah-lajost)

<sup>106</sup> CT24. (2020). “Předseda Senátu Kubera byl před smrtí pod silným tlakem Číny, říkájí pozůstalí”. Accessed: 2021.05.22. Link: <https://ct24.ceskatelevize.cz/domaci/3084965-predseda-senatu-kubera-byl-pred-smrti-pod-silnym-tlakem-ciny-rikaji-pozustali>

with one notable exception: President Zeman. He had been protesting against the visit even before it took place and, afterwards, he stated that he would no longer invite Miloš Vystrčil to regular meetings of the highest government officials, which the head of the Senate is entitled to attend.<sup>107</sup>

Another key Czech actor who shows vulnerability to Chinese influence is MEP Jan Zahradil from the Civic Democratic Party (ODS), a member of the ECR Group, which is otherwise not overtly anti-European. **Zahradil was, however, recently investigated due to suspicions that he did not properly disclose financial support received from the Chinese Mission to the EU.**<sup>108</sup> These allegations are especially severe in Zahradil's case, as he has been widely known to be a supporter of Chinese economic activities in Europe.<sup>109</sup> **Jan Zahradil has often voted in line with Chinese interests in the EP, achieving a China-critical Index score of 54, while the other three MEPs representing the ODS all reached 100. This indicates that building personal relations with politicians could be an effective way for authoritarians to influence European decisions.**

The Bulgarian Socialist Party is also among the most China-friendly mainstream parties in the European Parliament, and the BSP's votes are often out of line with the S&D Group's policy preferences. BSP representatives stayed away from voting in the case of two resolutions, one on China's crackdown on Uyghurs in Xinjiang and another on Chinese actions in Hong Kong, **which is among the few times when this behavior seems to have been coordinated across members of a national party delegation.**

Currently, Slovak state policies on China are defined in line with the EU's approach in strategic documents, noting that Slovakia will evaluate China's actions as a partner in some fields, an economic and technological competitor or a systemic rival in others.<sup>110 111</sup> Most forces with ambiguous or friendly views towards Beijing cannot currently influence Slovak decision-making.

Slovak far-right MEPs were divided when it came to votes related to China, unlike in the case of Russia. **MEP Milan Uhrík was generally apologetic and almost always voted in favor of China, while MEP Miroslav Radačovský was mostly critical of the country. MEPs elected on the list of Smer-SD**

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107 CTK. (2020). Zeman kvůli návštěvě Tchaj-wanu už nebude Vystrčila zvat na porady ústavních činitelů o zahraniční politice. Accessed: 2021.07.05. Link: <https://domaci.ihned.cz/ci-66812070-zeman-kvuli-navsteve-tchaj-wanu-uz-nebude-vystrčila-zvat-na-porady-ustavnich-cinitelu-o-zahranicni-politice>

108 Laurens Cerulus. (2021). "Czech lawmaker investigated over China sponsorship: report". Politico. Accessed: 2021.07.05. Link: <https://www.politico.eu/article/czechjan-zahradil-european-parliament-czech-mep-investigated-china-sponsorship-eu-lawmaker-investigated-for-taking-china-sponsorship/>

109 Vít Vojta. (2020). "Jan Zahradil: Česká zahraniční politika by si neměla hrát na morální maják". Asiaskop. Accessed: 2021.05.22. Link: <https://www.asiaskop.cz/mezinarodni-vztahy/zahradil-ceska-zahranicni-politika-by-si-nemela-hrat-na-moralni-majak>

110 MVK. (2020) Zahraničná a európska politika Slovenskej republiky v roku 2020. Slovensko v nestabilnom svete. Accessed: 2021.07.05. Link: <https://www.mzv.sk/documents/10182/4238286/2020-Zahrani%C4%8Dna-a-europska-politika-SR-v-roku-2020.pdf>

111 MVK. (2021) Zahraničná a európska politika Slovenskej republiky v roku 2021. Slovensko a svet v čase pandémie. Accessed: 2021.07.05. Link: <https://www.mzv.sk/documents/10182/4238286/2021-Zahrani%C4%8Dna-a-europska-politika-SR-v-roku-2021.pdf>

were also divided over Beijing's actions, as Monika Beňová and Robert Hajšel voted critically of the regime, but Miroslav Číž generally abstained. Domestically, there are few actors who display an overtly pro-Chinese attitude, such as Smer-SD deputy chair and national MP Ľuboš Blaha.

**One potential vulnerability emerged in Slovakia in the wake of the country's accession to the 16+1 cooperation with China: the establishment of contacts between Slovak public universities and academic institutes, and Chinese state research and academic institutions.** Research conducted by the Central European Institute of Asian Studies (CEIAS) found that “23 public universities and the Slovak Academy of Science (SAS), including its 26 research institutes, maintain up to 113 formal and informal links with Chinese universities and other Chinese entities.” According to experts, some of these partnerships pose a security risk for Slovakia as a consequence of Chinese partners' potential connections to the military and security entities of the Communist regime. The truth of these allegations was partially proven by some of the harsh reactions of Slovak pro-Chinese actors. The head of the Confucius Institute at the Slovak University of Technology (STU) in Bratislava, Ľuboslav Štora, a former branch director of the Chinese firm ZTE in Slovakia, threatened CEIAS director Matej Šimalčík in response to the institute's abovementioned research. **Štora claimed he was outraged by parallels Šimalčík allegedly drew between Slovak academic institutions cooperating with Chinese partners and the repression of the Uyghurs.** Slovak MEP Miriam Lexmann – who has been sanctioned by China in response to the EU's punitive measures against Chinese officials and is a frequent critic of Beijing's human rights record – reacted critically and characterized Confucius Institutes as “Trojan horses” of the totalitarian regime.<sup>112</sup>

Romanian, Polish and Austrian MEPs have voted almost fully consistently against Chinese interests in the European Parliament. Romania and Poland (as well as Bulgaria, Czechia, Hungary and Slovakia) remain members of the 16+<sup>113</sup> initiative, although the two have not been “model citizens” of the initiative. Romania was among those only represented at the ministerial level at the “last minute” 16+1 summit in 2021.<sup>114</sup> At the event, Poland opposed the adoption of the post-meeting guidelines advocating for the Chinese vision on international relations.<sup>115</sup> Several members of the initiative, including Romania and Poland, have signed Memorandums of Understanding with the United States on banning actors posing a potential security threat, such as Chinese mobile manufacturing companies, from constructing 5G networks.<sup>116</sup> The Romanian government followed up on this by deciding to ban non-EU companies from participation in state infrastructure tenders, primarily targeting Chinese firms.

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112 Mirek Tóda. (2021). Spíte dobre? Mali by ste byť vo veľkom strese. Šéf čínskeho inštitútu píše slovenskému expertovi. Denník N. Accessed: 2021.07.05. <https://dennikn.sk/2361789/spite-dobre-mali-by-ste-byt-vo-velkom-strese-sef-cinskeho-institutu-pise-slovenskemu-expertovi/>

113 The 16+1 was temporarily called the 17+1, but became the 16+1 once again after Lithuania left the group.

114 Aneta Zachová. (2021). Czech president to attend online summit with China. Euractiv. Accessed: 2021.06.15. Link: [https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short\\_news/czech-president-to-attend-online-summit-with-china/](https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/czech-president-to-attend-online-summit-with-china/)

115 Marcin Przychodniak. (2021). 17+1 Summit: The crisis in China-Central Europe Cooperation. PISM. Accessed: 2021.06.15. Link: [https://pism.pl/publications/171\\_Summit\\_The\\_Crisis\\_in\\_ChinaCentral\\_Europe\\_Cooperation](https://pism.pl/publications/171_Summit_The_Crisis_in_ChinaCentral_Europe_Cooperation)

116 Andreea Brinza. (2021). How China's 17+1 Became a Zombie Mechanism. The Diplomat. Accessed: 2021.06.15. Link: <https://thediplomat.com/2021/02/how-chinas-171-became-a-zombie-mechanism/>

Some countries in the initiative found China to come up short on its promises: none of the dozen projects Romania agreed on with Beijing in 2013 have come to fruition.<sup>117</sup> Lithuanian Foreign Minister Gabrielius Landsbergis recently stated that the cooperation program with Beijing had brought the country “almost no benefits.”<sup>118</sup> However, in Romania, a new, nationalist-radical party has emerged called Alliance for the Unity of Romanians (AUR), which is strongly opposed to European values and seems to be open to informal collaboration with China or Russia.

Poland is experiencing something of a revival of relations with China, dictated – in part – by the ruling party’s conflicts with the EU and the failed re-election bid of Donald Trump. During the Trump administration, the United States had exerted pressure on Polish authorities concerning China, especially regarding a ban on Chinese investments in the country’s 5G network.<sup>119</sup> In January 2021, a key PiS deputy, Marek Suski, the chairman of the Polish-Chinese Parliamentary Group, emphasized that the geopolitical climate had changed, so Poland should diplomatically “reset” its relations with China, take advantage of the situation, and thus strengthen Poland’s maneuvering room.<sup>120</sup> In May, PiS-backed President Andrzej Duda held a phone conversation with Chinese President Xi Jinping, while Polish Foreign Minister Zbigniew Rau visited Beijing the same month. This does not, in fact, constitute a pivot towards China in Polish foreign policy, but is rather an attempt to create the impression of economic pragmatism at home. While China is often perceived as a potentially important investor in Poland, Chinese investments in the country are not considerable compared to, for instance, Hungary. The situation may be changing, however: in 2020, Poland became the largest recipient of Chinese capital in Europe after the UK, France and Germany, with investments worth USD 1 billion.<sup>121</sup> **There is a potential concern in this case that the Polish government could also step onto the path of “encouraging” Chinese investments in exchange for support for pro-China policies, by offering favors to the regime on the European political scene, as Hungary has done. This remains unlikely for two reasons, however. First, Polish foreign policy is more aligned with the United States than Hungary’s is, regardless of who governs the two nations, and it also depends more on Washington to counterbalance Russian influence. Second, Polish society is much less supportive of China than the Hungarian. According to the Globsec Trends 2021 survey, 54% of Poles see the United States as a strategic partner, and 8% feel the same about China, while in Hungary these values are 13% and 30%, respectively. The**

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117 Andreea Brinza. (2020). Central and Eastern Europe is Not in Bed With China. The Diplomat. Accessed: 2021.06.15. Link: <https://thediplomat.com/2020/07/central-and-eastern-europe-is-not-in-bed-with-china/>

118 LRT. (2021). Lithuania mulls leaving China’s 17+1 forum, expanding links with Taiwan. LRT. Accessed: 2021.06.21. Link: <https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/1356107/lithuania-mulls-leaving-china-s-17plus1-forum-expanding-links-with-taiwan>

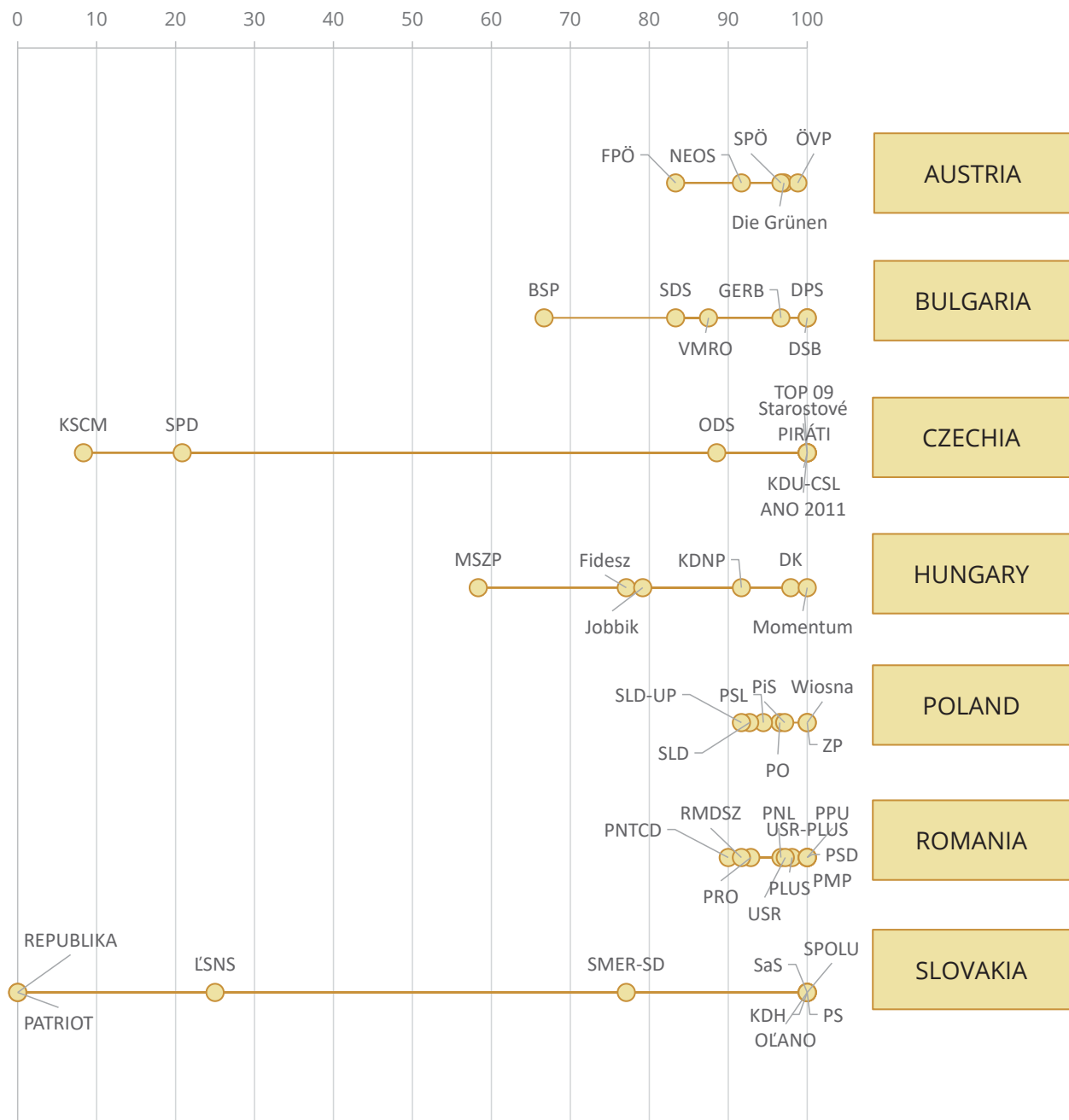
119 Włodzimierz Kaleta. (2021). Polsko-chińska współpraca gospodarcza: jest opcja rozwojowa. WNP.pl. Accessed: 2021.07.01. Link: <https://www.wnp.pl/parlamentarny/swiat/polsko-chinska-wspolpraca-gospodarcza-jest-opcja-rozwojowa,126032.html>

120 Włodzimierz Kaleta. (2021). PiS o resecie w handlu z Chinami. Czas na nowe otwarcie. WNP. Accessed: 2021.06.17. Link: <https://www.wnp.pl/parlamentarny/swiat/pis-o-resecie-w-handlu-z-chinami-czas-na-nowe-otwarcie,127031.html>

121 Maciej Kalwasiński. (2021). Padł rekord chińskich inwestycji w Polsce. Nasz kraj odbiorcą największej chińskiej inwestycji w Europie w 2020 r. Bankier. Accessed: 2021.06.17. Link: <https://www.bankier.pl/wiadomosc/Padl-rekord-chińskich-inwestycji-w-Polsce-Nasz-kraj-odbiorca-największej-chińskiej-inwestycji-w-Europie-w-2020-r-8047952.html>

situation in Romania is similar with 47% preferring the United States and 10% favoring China.<sup>122</sup> Local populations in Poland and Romania are therefore likely to pressure the elites to avoid close cooperation with Beijing.

**Figure 16 The China-critical Index scores of the national parties of the EU7.**



122 Dominika Hajdu et al. (2021). Globsec Trends 2021: Central & Eastern Europe one year into the pandemic. Globsec. Accessed: 2021.06.17. [Link: https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/GLOBSEC-Trends-2021-final.pdf](https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/GLOBSEC-Trends-2021-final.pdf)

In the case of Austria, it must be mentioned that there are some notable trade ties between Austrian politics and China. In 2019, Austrian President Alexander Van der Bellen, Chancellor Kurz and several businessmen visited China for a week to strengthen economic cooperation.<sup>123</sup> The Austrian Federal Finance Agency signed a contract with the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China, later opening its CEE headquarters in the country. Chancellor Kurz and Minister of Economy Margarete Schramböck were present at the ICBC's official opening in May 2021 together with Chinese People's Congress Chairman Li Zanshu. The bank was involved in a money-laundering scandal in Spain in 2017,<sup>124</sup> and the US Federal Reserve said it did not have enough anti-money laundering protections in place.<sup>125</sup> **Chinese financial institutions, may thus be used to extend China's clout over the Austrian economic sphere, which constitutes a long-term risk.**

Finally, while Austria is following the EU's lead on China and Chancellor Kurz has warned against a "China-centric world," the Austrian military still maintains a Chinese-language training program in the Austrian offices of the Confucius Institute, which experts regard as a tool for Chinese influence.<sup>126</sup> Austrians also prefer the United States (30%) over China (10%) as a strategic partner, so public opinion can be a barrier here, too.<sup>127</sup>

## RUSSIA AND THE CEE: IT'S COMPLICATED

The group of seven countries under closer scrutiny is much more critical of Russia than the EU average, with scores of 89 and 80, respectively. This result is the consequence of the extremely high Kremlin-Critical Scores (KCI) of the Polish and Romanian delegations, ranked 2nd and 3rd overall, respectively, but Hungary, Czechia and Bulgaria are also above the EU average. Austria and Slovakia fall below the average with scores of 77 and 76.

**In Austria, the main vulnerability seems to be the historically strong connections of local political parties with Russia.** The Social Democratic Party, for instance, has long had an almost nostalgic view of Russia; for instance, former Chancellor Alfred Gusenbauer famously kissed the ground when he visited the country in his youth. **Other former socialist chancellors pursue personal opportunities in Moscow.** Christian Kern is now a member of the board of Russia's state railway company.<sup>128</sup>

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123 Wiener Zeitung: Österreich-China: Von Pandabären bis zur Großausstellung, Wiener Zeitung, 28.4.2019, <https://www.wienerzeitung.at/nachrichten/politik/welt/2006774-Oesterreich-China-Von-Pandabaeren-bis-zur-Grossausstellung.html>

124 Angus Berwick and David Lague. (2017). How China's biggest bank become ensnared in a sprawling money laundering probe. Reuters. Accessed: 2021.07.01. Link: <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/icbc-spain/>

125 Reuters. (2018). FED orders Industrial and Commercial Bank of China to tighten AML checks. Accessed: 2021.07.01. Link: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-fed-china-idUSKCN1GP22O>

126 Christoph Zotter. (2021). Das Bundesheer und die China-Versteher. Die Presse. Accessed: 2021.07.05. <https://www.diepresse.com/5979536/das-bundesheer-und-die-china-versteher>

127 Globsec Trends 2021: Central & Eastern Europe one year into the pandemic.

128 Der Standard. (2019). Ex-Kanzler Christian Kern ist nun Aufsichtsrat der russischen Bahn. Accessed: 2021.06.28. Link: <https://www.derstandard.at/story/2000106371825/ex-kanzler-christian-kern-ist-nun-aufsichtsrat-der-russischen-bahn>



Their sometimes ambiguous approach to Russia is also confirmed by the fact that their KCI score of 80 is well below the S&D Group's average of 89 (see the KCI scores of EU7 national parties on figure 17 below). Personal gains are exploited by others, too. ÖVP's former Minister of Finance Hans Jörg Schelling became a consultant for Gazprom in 2018.<sup>129</sup> **The ÖVP strongly emphasizes business relations with Russia. President Putin, for instance, has met multiple presidents of the Austrian Chamber of Commerce,<sup>130</sup> while some of the largest Austrian companies, such as the partly state-owned OMV or the Raiffeisen Bank – traditionally close to the conservatives – have a strong presence on the Russian market.**

The far-right FPÖ, meanwhile, is one of the strongest advocates for close ties to Moscow, also backed by their KCI score of 10. The party was the first substantial European political force to have an agreement on cooperation with the ruling United Russia Party.<sup>131</sup> When the FPÖ was in a coalition government with the ÖVP between 2017 and 2019, Austria became one of the few European nations not expelling any Russian diplomats in the wake of the Salisbury attack in 2018. At the same time, then Foreign Minister Karin Kneissl – who became Rosneft's board member in 2021 – personally invited President Putin to her wedding. The downfall of the ÖVP-FPÖ coalition government was also brought about by a Russia-related scandal, when then Vice Chancellor and FPÖ member Heinz-Christian Strache was caught on tape promising lucrative contracts in exchange for media support to a fake Russian oligarch's niece, proving that he would have had no scruples over allowing Russian individuals to influence local election results.

In Slovakia, two far-right MEPs elected on the list of the L'SNS were the main supporters of Russia, voting consistently in line with Russian interests, and both ended up near the very bottom of our KCI score rankings among MEPs. The Slovak delegation's relatively low overall score had an additional component. **Only one of the three MEPs of the former ruling party Smer-SD voted critically of Russia.** Monika Beňová – to some extent – even deviated from the party's more pro-Russian foreign policy direction by being more critical towards Russia. **The other two, Miroslav Číž and Robert Hajšel, behaved differently. The former started in 2019 with mostly critical stances towards Russia but changed his approach in 2020 and rejected or abstained on resolutions on both Russia and Belarus. The latter was more “balanced” already in 2019-2020, abstaining on some Russia-related texts, but in 2021, he became less critical of the Kremlin as well.** The potential reason for this is that Smer-SD was in government early on in the 9th EP parliamentary term; thus, the MEPs leaned more towards voting in line with official Slovak state policy. Once Smer-SD was pushed into opposition in early 2020 and party leader Robert Fico stopped camouflaging his openly pro-Russian attitudes, the MEPs shifted their stances, too. Domestically, Smer-SD vice chairman and MP Ľuboš Blaha earned the nickname of “Putin's troll” for his passionate support of the Kremlin's domestic and foreign policy.

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129 Die Presse: Ex-Finanzminister Schelling wird Berater bei Gazprom. Accessed: 2021.07.05. Link: <https://www.diepresse.com/5395816/ex-finanzminister-schelling-wird-berater-bei-gazprom>

130 OTS. (n.d.) Besuch von Präsident Putin und Kanzler Kurz in der WKÖ - Mahrer: „Österreichs Wirtschaft setzt auf enge Partnerschaft mit Russland“. Accessed: 2021.06.28. Link: [https://www.ots.at/presseaussendung/OTS\\_20180605\\_OTSo228/besuch-von-praesident-putin-und-kanzler-kurz-in-der-wkoe-mahrer-oesterreichs-wirtschaft-setzt-auf-enge-partnerschaft-mit-russland-bild](https://www.ots.at/presseaussendung/OTS_20180605_OTSo228/besuch-von-praesident-putin-und-kanzler-kurz-in-der-wkoe-mahrer-oesterreichs-wirtschaft-setzt-auf-enge-partnerschaft-mit-russland-bild)

131 Dr. Bernhard Weidinger et al. (2017). Russian Connections of the Austrian Far-right. Political Capital. Accessed: 9 June 2021. Link: [https://www.politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/PC\\_NED\\_country\\_study\\_AT\\_20170428.pdf](https://www.politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/PC_NED_country_study_AT_20170428.pdf)

In the case of Hungary, the key vulnerability – as in the case of China – is the incumbent Fidesz government's intention to forge increasingly close relations with Moscow, leading to the subversion of the interests of its western allies to this goal. **Hungary's relatively high Kremlin-critical Index score is the result of two factors.** First, the ruling parties' MEPs generally vote for Russia-critical resolutions most of the time, except for some cases that constitute a red line to them, presumably as an attempt to show the "European face" of the party at the EU level and avoid being labelled as a blatantly pro-Russian force. Second, Hungary's opposition parties are strongly critical of Russia, with KCI scores between 92 and 100.

MEPs from Hungary's ruling party have rejected tightening existing sanctions against Russia, which is in line with the incumbent government's narrative claiming that the policy has caused massive economic damages to Hungary, using numbers that independent media have shown to be highly exaggerated.<sup>132</sup> The construction of the two new blocks of the Paks Nuclear Power Plant, financed mostly by a Russian loan and realized by Rosatom, could further aggravate the situation, especially because pro-government oligarchs have already profited from this particular project<sup>133</sup> and – since Rosatom is in charge of selecting its own subcontractors<sup>134</sup> – the ruling parties may need to remain on the Kremlin's good side to keep it that way. MEPs from the ruling parties did not support calls for halting the Nord Stream 2 project and Rosatom's controversial nuclear projects in Europe. The latter is, naturally, the consequence of the fact that the Russian nuclear company is in the process of building two new blocks in Hungary. The former decision is likely the result of Hungary's involvement with the Russia-backed Balkan Stream pipeline; voting against Nord Stream 2 could be interpreted as a critique of the southern project, too. Márton Gyöngyösi (Jobbik, NI) did not support these either; he abstained on Nord Stream 2 (after having voted twice against it) and on Rosatom.



In response to an inquiry by Political Capital, Gyöngyösi said that stopping Nord Stream 2, a EUR 10 billion investment, would cause massive damages to European taxpayers at this point, even if it is a serious concern in terms of the EU's energy independence. As for the Rosatom-related part, Gyöngyösi highlighted that the treaties of the new blocks at Paks are classified, so stopping the project immediately could cause more damage to the Hungarian budget than renegotiating it after a possible change of government, adding that for now, Hungary's energy mix needs to rely on nuclear energy.

**Márton Gyöngyösi**  
Jobbik, Hungary

132 István Madár. (2017). Nem hiszed el, mennyire ártanak nekünk az orosz szankciók. Portfolio. Accessed: 2021.06.19. Link: <https://www.portfolio.hu/gazdasag/20170129/nem-hiszed-el-mennyire-artanak-nekunk-az-orosz-szankciok-243200>

133 Átlátszó. (2017). A Közérdekvédelmi Központ közzétette a paksi bővítés előkészítése során kötött szerződéseket. Accessed: 2021.06.19. Link: <https://atlatszo.hu/2017/09/13/a-kozerdekvedelmi-kozpont-kozzetette-a-paksi-bovites-elokeszitesi-soran-kotott-szerzodeseket/>

134 Gábor Medvegy. (2019). Jávor: Három év garanciát vállaltak az oroszok Paks 2-re. 24.hu. Accessed: 2021.07.01. Link: <https://24.hu/belfold/2019/03/29/paks-2-szerzodes-javor-benedek/>

In Czechia, the key vulnerabilities are the far-right and far-left political parties, the Freedom and Direct Democracy Party (SPD) and the Communist Party of Czechia and Moravia (KSČM), whose rhetoric is founded on the alleged threat Western institutions pose to Czech national identity<sup>135</sup> and political sovereignty.<sup>136</sup> **In contrast, they are making efforts to improve Czech ties to other global powers, such as Russia and China, which – they say – would improve the situation of Czechia economically<sup>137</sup> and security-wise.**<sup>138</sup> Domestically, one other notable Czech pro-Russian actor is President Miloš Zeman, whose motivations are still a matter of debate.<sup>139</sup> **Supposedly, several members of the President's Office with considerable influence on the president, particularly advisor Martin Nejedlý – a former Lukoil employee –, maintain ties to Russian officials to this day.** The support of all these Czech actors for Russia was on full display after the revelation that Russian GRU agents were responsible for the 2014 explosion of the Vrbětice ammunition depot in 2014. The European Parliament adopted a resolution condemning the attack, but it was rejected by 3 of the 21 Czech MEPs, namely Hynek Blaško (SPD), Ivan David (SPD) and Kateřina Konečná (KSČM). All three voiced their doubts about the whole affair, stating that the case had not been investigated thoroughly,<sup>140</sup> there was not enough information available,<sup>141</sup> or that it could have been carried out in a manner that would falsely point to Russia.<sup>142</sup> These claims were mirrored by their national counterparts<sup>143</sup> despite the evidence provided by Czech police and the Intelligence Service;<sup>144</sup> President Zeman expressed similar doubts.<sup>145</sup>

135 Parlamentní Listy. (2021). "Filip (KSČM): Suverenita je důležitá. Jde o život!" Accessed: 2021.05.22. Link: <https://www.parlamentnilisty.cz/politika/politici-volicum/Filip-KSCM-Suverenita-je-dulezita-Jde-o-zivot-655779>

136 SPD. (2021). "Pro SPD je nezávislost a suverenita českého státu prioritou". Accessed: 2021.05.22. Link: <https://www.spd.cz/pro-spd-je-nezavislost-a-suverenita-ceskeho-statu-prioritou/>

137 Tomio Okamura. (2019). "Tomio Okamura - SPD" Accessed: 2021.05.22. Link: <https://www.facebook.com/tomio.cz/posts/2370266289650839>

138 Tomio Okamura (2018). "Tomio Okamura - SPD" Accessed: 2021.05.22. Link: <https://www.facebook.com/tomio.cz/posts/2104773386200132/>

139 Lanka Zlámalová. (2020). "Procitnutí Čínského agenta z hradu". Echo Prime. Accessed: 2021.07.05. Link: [https://echoprime.cz/a/SKKxx/procitnuti-cinskeho-agenta-z-hradu?\\_ga=2.205002069.49104657.1622445638-1213018266.1621328787](https://echoprime.cz/a/SKKxx/procitnuti-cinskeho-agenta-z-hradu?_ga=2.205002069.49104657.1622445638-1213018266.1621328787)

140 Kateřina Konečná. (2021). "Kateřina Konečná" Accessed: 2021.05.22. Link: <https://www.facebook.com/119624098506/posts/10158317547608507>

141 Parlamentní Listy. (2021). "Takto se s informacemi nenakládá. Jestli to chtějí vyhrotit, tak to fakt není sranda, obává se generál Blaško". Accessed: 2021.05.22. Link: [https://www.parlamentnilisty.cz/arena/rozhovory/Takto-se-s-informacemi-nenaklada-Jestli-to-chteji-vyhrotit-tak-to-fakt-neni-sranda-obava-se-general-Blasko-660978?fbclid=IwAR2DNhwwKcydJlZSQInf-IrHm88sJmloROTS-NVSOCeNV\\_4j\\_DnF6n-Q5Y](https://www.parlamentnilisty.cz/arena/rozhovory/Takto-se-s-informacemi-nenaklada-Jestli-to-chteji-vyhrotit-tak-to-fakt-neni-sranda-obava-se-general-Blasko-660978?fbclid=IwAR2DNhwwKcydJlZSQInf-IrHm88sJmloROTS-NVSOCeNV_4j_DnF6n-Q5Y)

142 European Parliament. (2021). "Ivan David: Rusko: případ Alexeje Navalného, posilování vojenské přítomnosti na ukrajinských hranicích a ruský útok v České republice (rozprava)". Accessed: 2021.05.22. Link: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-9-2021-04-28-INT-3-149-0000\\_CS.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-9-2021-04-28-INT-3-149-0000_CS.html)

143 Novinky. (2021). "Filip a Okamura zjištěním o Vrbětících zatím nevěří". Accessed: 2021.05.22. Link: <https://www.novinky.cz/domaci/clanek/filip-a-okamura-zjistenim-o-vrbeticich-zatim-neveri-40357435>

144 Vojtech Blazek. (2021). "Agenti podle BIS pronikli přímo do Vrbetic. Zeman tvrdil, že to není jisté". Accessed: 2021.05.22. Link: <https://www.seznamzpravy.cz/clanek/agenti-podle-bis-pronikli-primo-do-vrbetic-zeman-tvrdil-ze-to-neni-jiste-152733>

145 Radio Prague International. (2021). Czech president causes outrage as he questions Russian involvement in Vrbetice explosion. Accessed: 2021.06.15. Link: <https://english.radio.cz/czech-president-causes-outrage-he-questions-russian-involvement-vrbetice-8715886>

Bulgaria is home to one of the most pro-Russian mainstream parties of the European Parliament, the Bulgarian Socialist Party – the successors of the country’s communist-era rulers. **While they have grudgingly come around to support Bulgaria’s Euro-Atlantic integration (particularly the EU), they remain strongly in favor of closer political, economic and cultural ties to Russia**, which is evident in their EP voting record as well. The BSP’s case is somewhat special in that they did not vote on Russia-related issues the majority of the time, avoiding the formulation of any opinions on European initiatives regarding the Kremlin at all. Their actions indicate that the Kremlin can still, in certain cases, rely on its old, Soviet-era influencing networks in eastern EU member states.

The former coalition partner of the Bulgarian GERB, the Bulgarian National Movement (VMRO), generally takes radical national and often anti-EU stances, although they follow anti-Russian positions, too, indicated by their score of 80. Thus, while they generally voted in favor of European initiatives against Russia in the EP, they regularly abstained on calls for strengthening EU sanctions against the Kremlin, including a paragraph asking for the freezing of European assets of corrupt individuals identified by Alexei Navalny’s foundation.

**There is a significant disparity between the public rhetoric and behavior of the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF) on the European and national scenes.** The MRF’s honorary chairman regularly espouses pro-Russian positions and its party members have alleged ties to Russian groups and interests, while the party’s MEPs uniformly and consistently vote in favor of Kremlin-critical positions (89). It must be added that the Bulgarian political scene is under transformation, as two new parties have emerged as challengers to the establishment: There is Such a People and Standup. BG Thugs out! **Their foreign policy preferences remain ambiguous, but they show readiness for accommodating Russia.** The former calls for the establishment and reinvigoration of relations with strategically important countries outside the EU,<sup>146</sup> while the latter places an emphasis on the development of pragmatic dialogue and economic ties with Russia, while also observing common EU values and positions.<sup>147</sup>

Meanwhile, Polish and Romanian MEPs’ votes indicate that they stand firmly against Russia, rarely missing a chance to vote for any EU initiatives against the Kremlin. **In Romania, the main concern remains the emergence of the AUR, whose anti-EU values are aligned with Russia’s and China’s, although the party firmly rejects any cooperation with Moscow or Beijing**, declaring itself firmly pro-EU and advocating for unification with Moldova. The problem is that other mainstream parties are racing to recapture the nationalistic, anti-liberal, ultraconservative electorate of AUR and unwillingly find themselves serving as ‘useful idiots’ implementing the Kremlin’s divisive agenda.

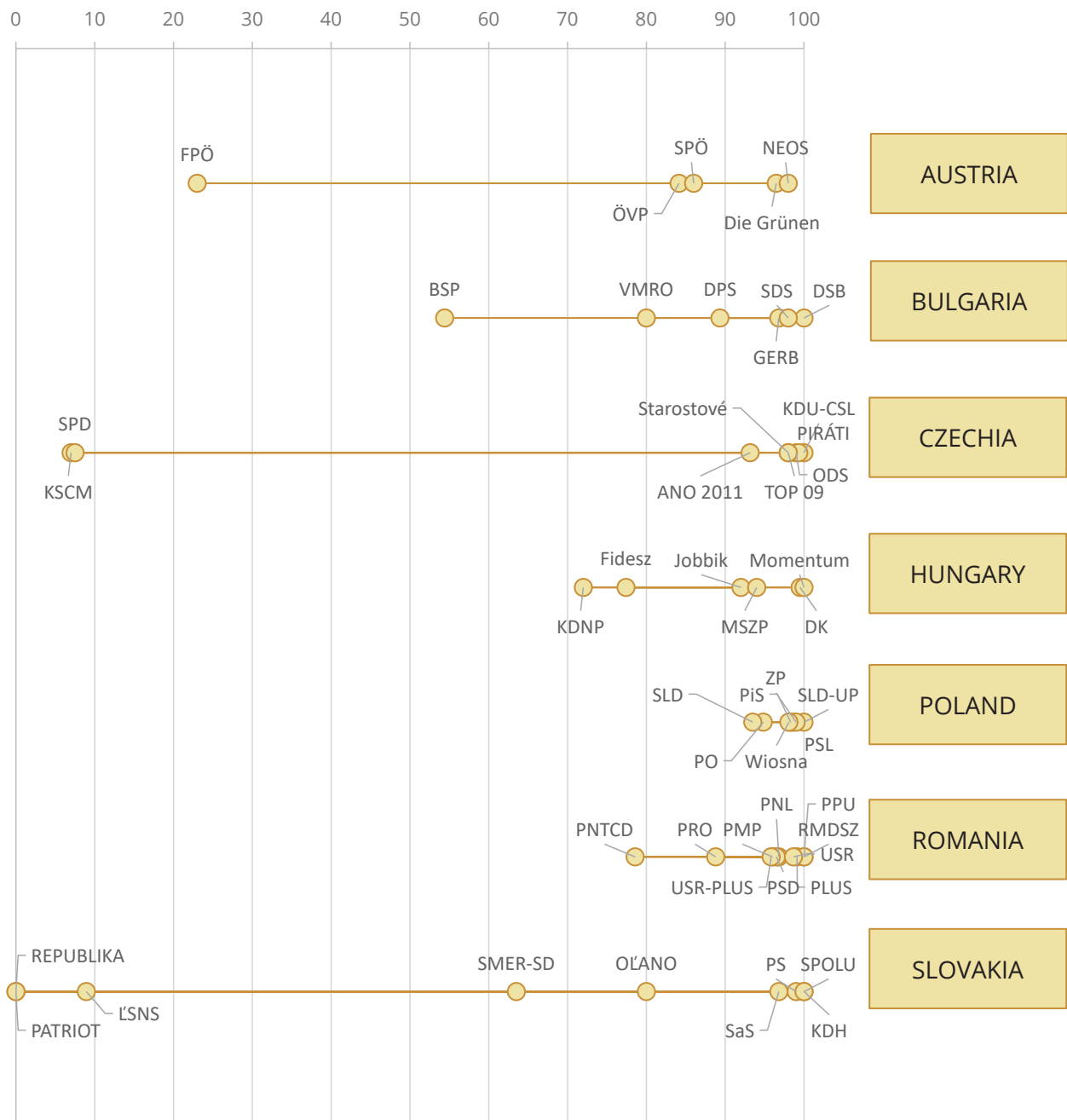
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<sup>146</sup> There is Such a People, Външна политика (Foreign Policy). Accessed: 2021.06.15. Link: <https://pp-itn.bg/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/%D0%92%D1%8A%D0%BD%D1%88%D0%BD%D0%Bo-%D0%BF%D0%BE%D0%BB%D0%B8%D1%82%D0%B8%D0%BA%D0%Bo.pdf>

<sup>147</sup> Standup.BG Thugs out!, Програма 2021-2025, (2021-2025 Platform). Accessed: 2021.06.15. Link: <https://izpravise.bg/programa-2021-2025/>

Although the PiS rejects any form of cooperation with Russia and even dialogue with Moscow, it often uses arguments converging with propagandistic Russian narratives on the European Union. This is especially true of ideological issues or criticism of the EU as an ineffective community or one that disallows the pursuit of national interests. Therefore, PiS's narratives are also somewhat similar to those of pro-Russian parties.

**Figure 17 The Kremlin-critical Index scores of the national parties of the EU7.**



## INCREASING EMPATHY TOWARDS AUTHORITARIANISM IN SOME CEE COUNTRIES

All EU7 countries are at or above the European average score on the Counter-authoritarian Index. **EU7 representatives have voted against resolutions protecting European values in third countries almost only in cases when they believe their countries have particular interests in a given third country.**

One such state is Turkey. **The Polish ruling PiS party, for instance, has made “pragmatic” choices regarding the Erdogan regime, turning a blind eye to issues of human rights and democracy when it is necessary to do business with the country.** One potential reason for the PiS’s ambiguous approach towards Turkey is President Andrzej Duda’s highly publicized visit to Ankara in May 2021, where he signed an agreement for the purchase of Turkish Bayraktar TB2 strike drones worth over USD 270 million. Second, **the defeat of former US President Donald Trump in the 2020 US presidential election might have prompted the ruling party to be concerned about future US engagement in security issues in Central and Eastern Europe, mainly as a consequence of the United States’ growing focus on the Pacific region.** Moreover, the relations between the PiS and the Biden administration have not been ideal from the very beginning, and ruling party politicians are expecting to gradually lose the trust of the new president. Since PiS also considers European security policy to be weak, it may start looking for other potential partners, such as Turkey – which, pro-government analysts say – pursues a policy of containment against Russia (e.g., in Syria, Libya, Ukraine). They have thus abstained on multiple Turkey-related votes, such as the resolution on the persecution of Sellahattin Demirtas, as well as the one concerning Turkey’s close ally, Azerbaijan, calling on the country to release Armenian war prisoners.

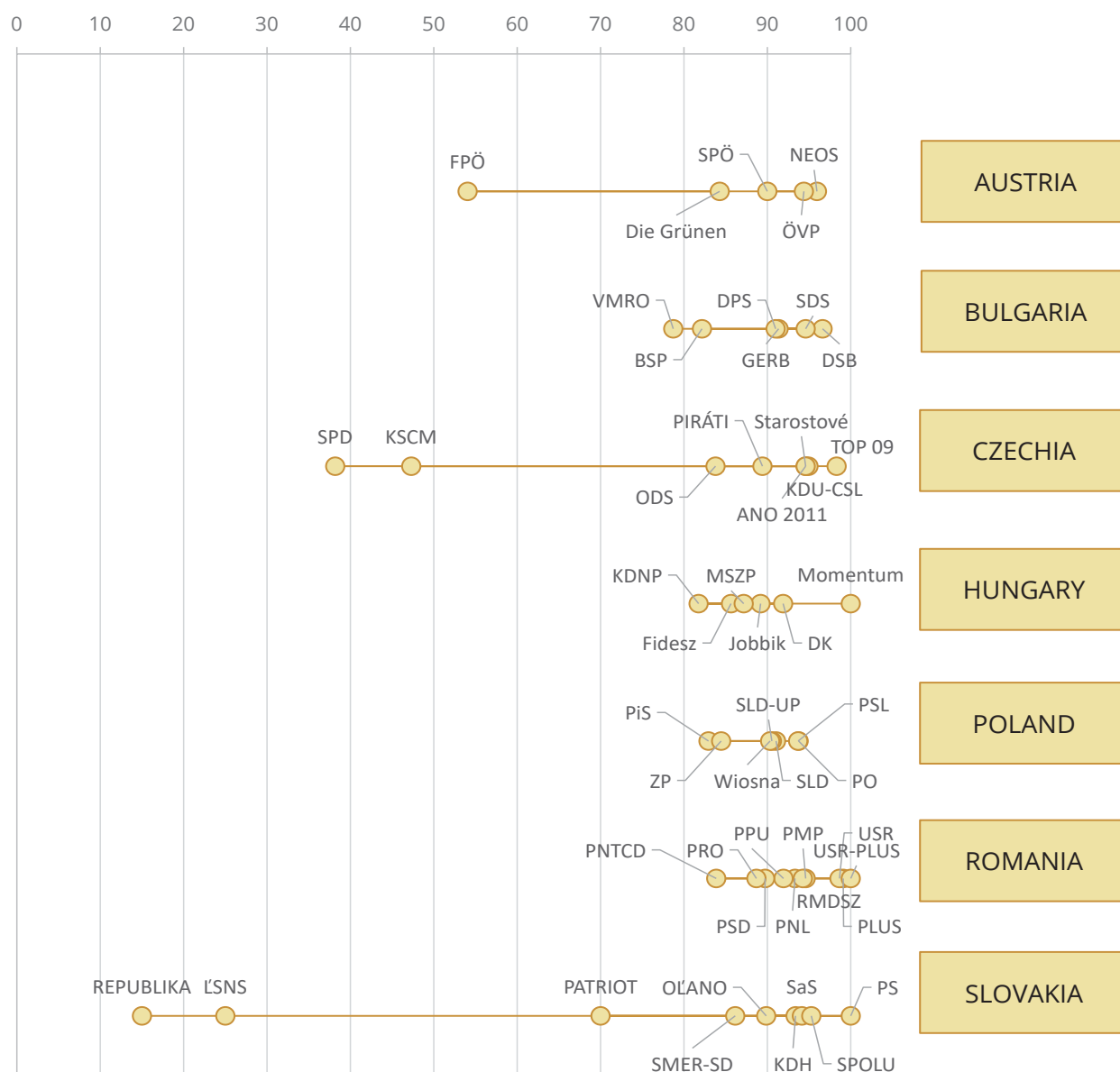
**The Hungarian ruling parties have also refrained from approving some resolutions regarding regimes the Hungarian cabinet has a good relationship with;** namely, a text on the human rights situation in Kazakhstan, Armenian war prisoners as well as the Sellahattin Demirtas resolution. The “odd one out” in this regard is a resolution on the human rights situation in Cambodia, on which they likely abstained due to migration-related issues.

In Bulgaria’s case, **it is the MRF** – drawing its support mostly from the ethnic Turkish constituency in the country – **that is less eager to condemn Turkey for its human rights record and international actions.** They abstained on both Turkey-related resolutions (escalating tensions in Varosha and Sellahattin Demirtas), as well as the one on Armenian war prisoners in Azerbaijan.

Overall, resolutions on the protection of EU values in third countries outside of Russia and China show most accurately that some MEPs are selective on where human rights should be protected, and refrain from doing so if the regime in question has close political, economic and cultural ties to their EU member state.



Figure 18 The Counter-authoritarian Index scores of the national parties of the EU7.



## DISINFORMATION IN CEE: DIFFERENT MEANING FOR DIFFERENT PLAYERS

The Counter-disinformation Index shows that the EU7 was more likely to support EU action against the phenomenon than other EU members on average, but Czechia is clearly an odd one out in this regard (see the Counter-disinformation Index scores of EU7 national parties below on Figure 19).

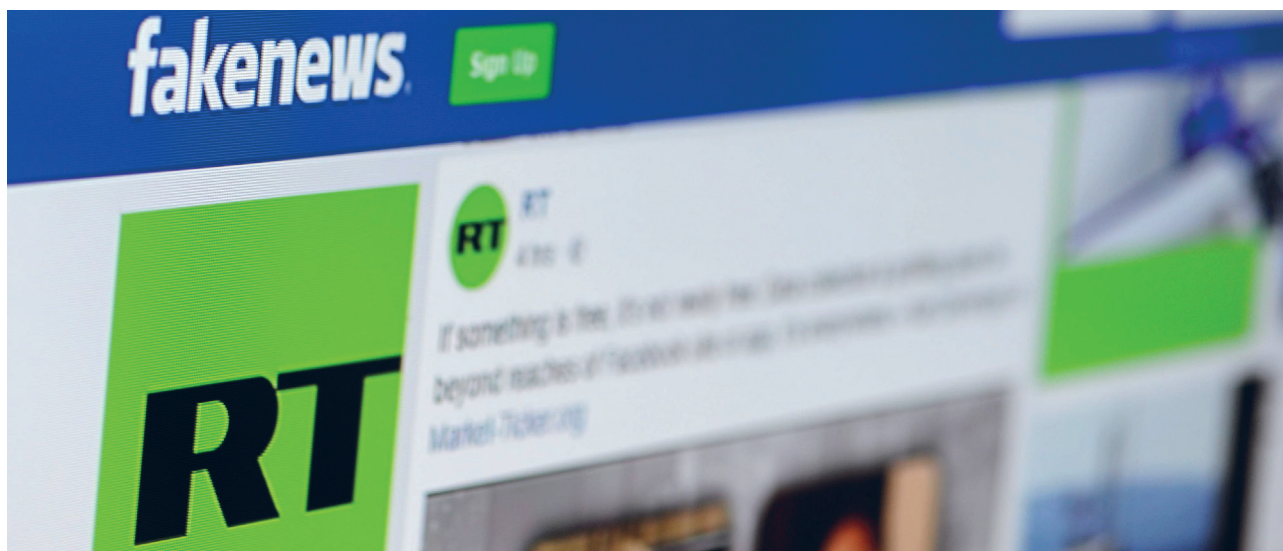
Several mainstream parties in the region that are generally critical of authoritarian regimes, such as the PiS, ANO 2011, the ODS and the Czech Pirate Party (CPP), have voted for the amendment striking a recommendation to establish a special EP committee on foreign interference,<sup>148</sup> together with Fidesz; the CPP abstained on a later resolution attempting to set up such a committee<sup>149</sup> –

<sup>148</sup> See amendment 11 here: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/B-9-2019-0108-AM-004-011\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/B-9-2019-0108-AM-004-011_EN.pdf)

<sup>149</sup> See: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/B-9-2020-0190\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/B-9-2020-0190_EN.pdf)

unlike the majority of the Greens/EFA Group. Moreover, the Czech Pirates did not support a 2019 resolution on foreign electoral interference condemning foreign attempts to influence elections in Europe,<sup>150</sup> once again in contrast with the majority of their EP caucus. **The decision, however, is not a result of their aversion to recognizing disinformation as a threat:** Marketa Gregorová, who abstained, said in the resolution's debate that technologies that allow behavioral prediction and mass manipulation also threaten free and fair elections, so legislation must be updated to protect European citizens and democratic principles.<sup>151</sup> The Czech Pirate Party, and specifically its members currently sitting in the EP, are very strong supporters of the freedom of speech, the rights of internet users and internet privacy. Thus, they presumably believe that the counter-disinformation proposals discussed by the Parliament could have unforeseen negative effects on these values.

The Czech ODS and the Bulgarian VMRO – both ECR members – voted against a paragraph stating that disinformation is an evolving challenge negatively influencing democratic processes,<sup>152</sup> even though they are generally critical of authoritarian regimes and actions. Neither followed the PiS's lead in this case, which fully approved the paragraph in question. As for VMRO, there have been significant concerns at home about its embrace of anti-democratic, racist and misogynistic propaganda. Parallel to that, the party proposed a controversial legal bill envisioning heavy fines for the dissemination of coronavirus-related disinformation.<sup>153</sup> Moreover, they themselves have been disseminating disinformation narratives in Bulgaria.<sup>154</sup>



150 See: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2019-0031\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2019-0031_EN.html)

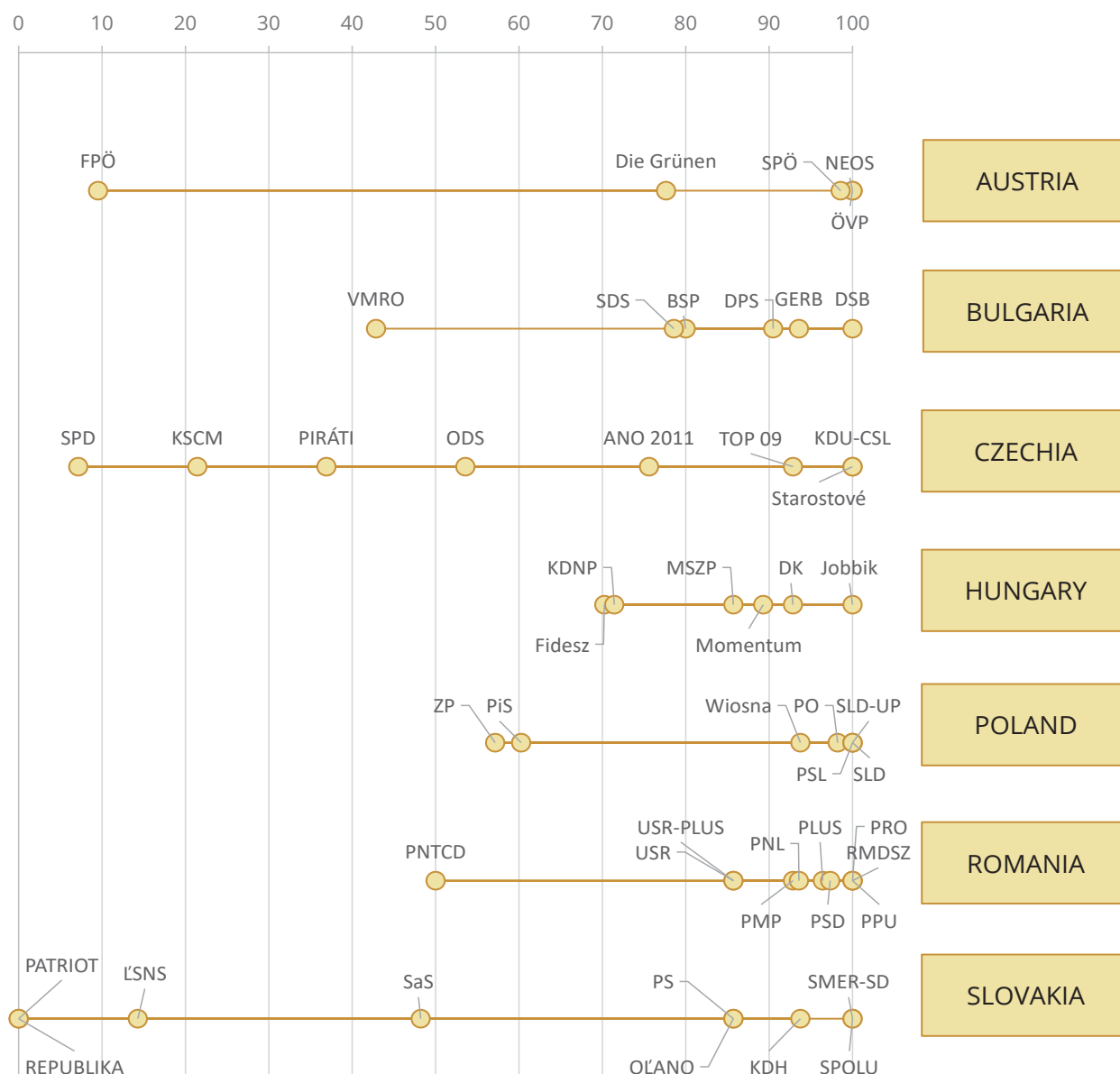
151 European Parliament. (2019). Foreign electoral interference and disinformation in national and European democratic processes. Accessed: 2021.06.19. Link: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-9-2019-09-17-ITM-011\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-9-2019-09-17-ITM-011_EN.html)

152 See paragraph 12 here: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2020-0307\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2020-0307_EN.html)

153 For more on this, please see: Svobodna Evropa. (2020). Европарламентът и шумът около Истанбулската конвенция - въпросите и отговорите'. Accessed: 2021.06.22. Link: <https://www.svobodnaevropa.bg/a/30884308.html> and Rumena Filipova. (2020). *The Shrinking Space for Media Freedom in Southeast Europe in the Midst of COVID-19 Pandemic and State of Emergency*. Center for the Study of Democracy/Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung. Accessed: 2021.06.22. Link: <https://csd.bg/publications/publication/the-shrinking-space-for-media-freedom-in-southeast-europe/>

154 Political Capital. (2020). Nothing is more permanent than a temporary solution. Accessed: 2021.06.22. Link: [https://politicalcapital.hu/news.php?article\\_read=1&article\\_id=2540](https://politicalcapital.hu/news.php?article_read=1&article_id=2540)

Figure 19 The Counter-disinformation Index scores of the national parties of the EU7.



As in the case of the VMRO, there is a limit to what the Hungarian and Polish ruling parties would accept under the umbrella of fighting disinformation, since they are both building media empires that answer only to them and are using it to spread manipulative narratives to their own populations.<sup>155</sup> In the case of Hungary, these pro-government outlets also offer very favorable coverage of Russia, China and other authoritarian states, while they regularly attack the European Union and the West. Anti-EU and anti-Western narratives (e.g., migration, “gender lobby”) are also highly prevalent in Polish media space. It is thus questionable if the two countries would fully back EU action, for instance in the field of media literacy, as the two cabinets would then – essentially – be working against their self-defined domestic political interests. One key difference, however, must be highlighted: Poland would be much more likely to go further in supporting action against

<sup>155</sup> Naturally, VMRO has not had the kind of influence over Bulgarian decision-making as the Hungarian and Polish ruling parties, so the Bulgarian party has not had an opportunity to implement its ideas to a similar extent.

pro-Kremlin geopolitical disinformation than Hungary, where Russia is treated as an important bilateral partner. In Poland, Russia is frequently discussed as a powerful source of disinformation aimed against Polish interests. Polish pro-government media, in fact, often accuse the opposition and independent media of somehow collaborating with or supporting Russian disinformation campaigns. For instance, in June, e-mails from leading government politicians (e.g., Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki, Chancellery Chief Michał Dworczyk) were leaked by anonymous profiles on Telegram, containing confidential information. The government claimed the e-mails were hacked by Russian hackers, while – at the same time – pro-government media suggested that the opposition is deliberately using the leaks to attack Poland, in concert with Russian disinformation. The key problem, in this case, besides the fact that it depicts the opposition as a security threat to the country, is that making Russian disinformation a part of the daily political competition could discredit counter-disinformation measures in the eyes of the general population, potentially lowering support for such initiatives.

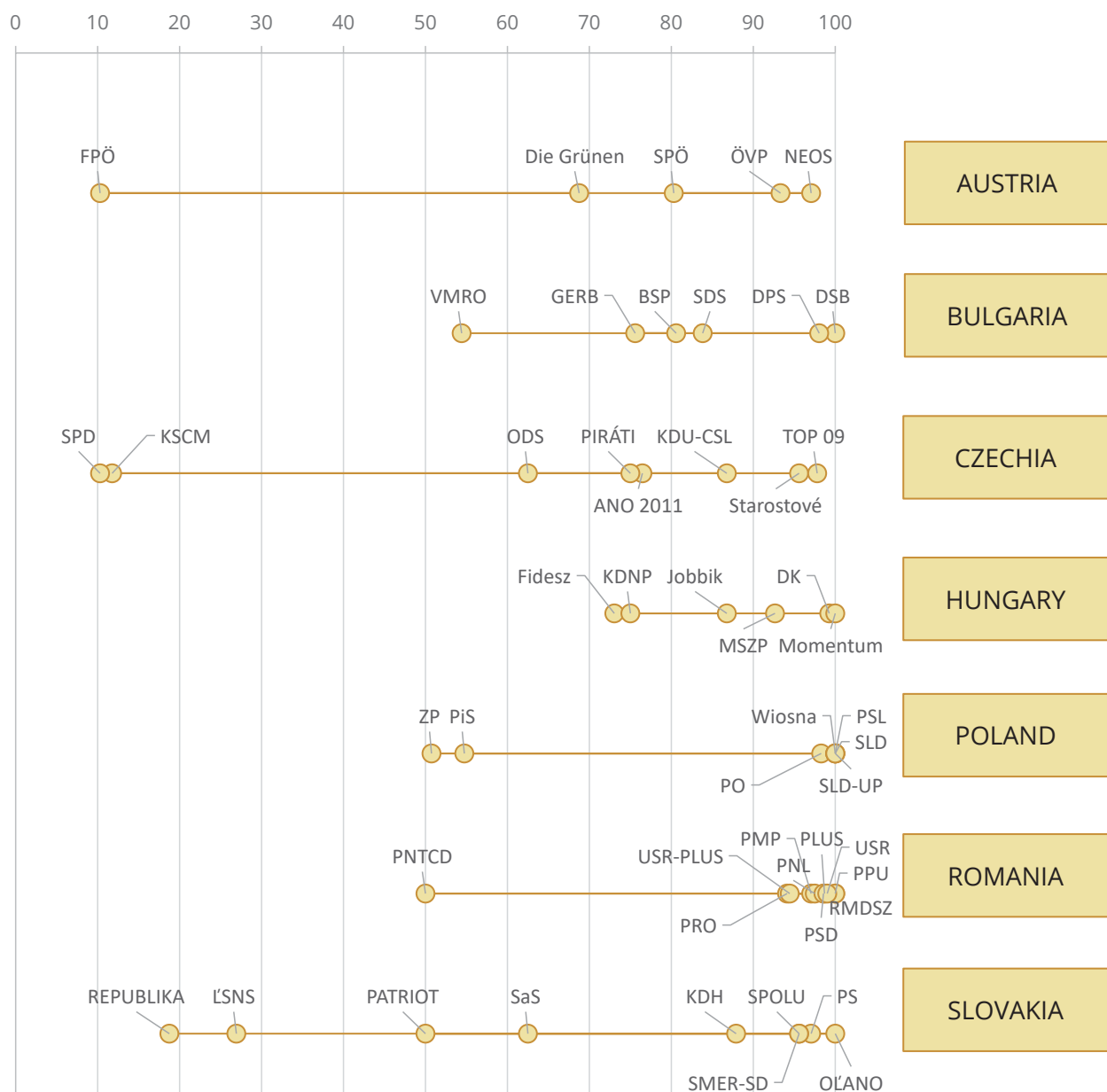
## COMMON FOREIGN POLICY IS REJECTED IN THE CEE

Regarding calls for the EU to move towards qualified majority voting in foreign affairs to make decision-making swifter and more effective, there are two key parties in the region which are vocal opponents of making such a change – Fidesz and PiS (see the Common Foreign Policy Index scores of EU7 national parties below, on Figure 20). The Hungarian cabinet has frequently vetoed EU statements against authoritarian regimes, including three attempts to condemn China for restricting democracy in Hong Kong in April-May 2021. As these can be considered to be favors to Hungary's partners outside of the European Union in the hope of further advancing economic ties with them, Budapest's efforts would be hindered by a move to QMV voting in foreign policy. **As for PiS, however, the efforts seem to be mainly ideological – the rejection of further EU integration – since there are no media reports about the ruling party blocking EU foreign policy initiatives.** Consequently, it seems like PiS's opposition to moving to QMV in the field is in fact preventing the EU from becoming a substantial actor in global affairs – which the same party often voices as a criticism regarding the European Union. In any case, both these parties regularly argue that QMV would seriously lessen smaller member states' chances of representing their interests in the Foreign Affairs Council. According to Roland Freudenstein, the Polish government is using this initiative *“to mobilize against France and Germany. Especially in the case of Germany, it is a deep-seated element of political identity for PiS.”* **Thus, he concluded, one reason for the PiS's opposition is that QMV is apparently being pushed mainly by the German foreign minister.**

It must be added that PiS presents itself in a far more radical way in Poland than how it pursues politics in Brussels. This approach is often criticized by the right-wing, nationalist Confederation Party (which is currently not represented in the EP, only in the national parliament, with its position on the Polish right getting stronger). The party is increasingly perceived as a threat by PiS politicians, because the Confederation is taking away their radical electorate. The latter is critical of PiS's alleged submission to the EU, which also strengthens the anti-EU rhetoric of the ruling party.

The two reports on the implementation of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) had only minimal support in the traditionally Eurosceptic Czech Republic. The 2020 report was, for instance, approved by six MEPs, all from the EPP; it was met with 13 abstentions (ANO, ODS, Pirates), and was rejected by both the far right and far left. Interestingly, the reports on Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP) enjoyed widespread approval among Czech mainstream parties. The main difference, at least in the case of the 2020 CSDP implementation report, was that it did not mention QMV. Thus, EP voting behavior suggests that mainstream Czech parties in the EP, except for the center-right, are cautious regarding further EU integration in international affairs. It must be noted that the Czech center-left is much more supportive of the country's EU integration, but they lost their European parliamentary representation in 2019.

**Figure 20 The Common Foreign Policy Index scores of the national parties of the EU7.**



The claim above certainly seems to be true for the largest Czech ruling party and the ODS. ANO's rejection is likely the result of the fact that it has taken a very cautious approach to the European Union and may have viewed the CFSP report as too pro-EU. The party's policy is often dictated by public opinion, so their position may change in a very short period of time depending on what the party's public relations department recommends. As for the ODS, they have long been against deeper EU integration, especially in the field of foreign policy, where they advocate for a larger role for member states. However, the Czech Pirates, based on the party's statements, are open to further European integration, even in the realm of foreign policy, so it is entirely possible that the reason for their abstention was the EP majority's refusal to approve amendments tabled by the Greens caucus.

## THE CEE REGION CAN BE AN IMPORTANT RESOURCE

**Overall, MEPs in the CEE region show a more critical attitude towards authoritarian regimes in general, and are somewhat more willing to support joint EU action in foreign policy and against disinformation. This, in part, can be the result of the presence of a smaller proportion of extremist parties in their ranks, who generally vote against any initiative proposed by the European Parliament. Moreover, it is likely a consequence of newer EU members' desire to conform to the European mainstream in the Parliament.**

Nevertheless, the region cannot be treated as a unified block. For instance, Czech representatives – even though the majority of them are firmly opposed to authoritarian practices – are the least likely to support joint EU action against disinformation and a united EU foreign policy. The Czech delegation as well as the Polish ruling party are reluctant to support such initiatives even if they would help fulfill their own foreign policy priorities, such as decisive action against Russia and China, which creates a vulnerability in terms of their influence. Hungary's main issue lies in the ruling party's pro-East foreign policy preference and the cabinet's decision to favor its relations with the East over the interests of its western allies, in part due to hopes of personal economic gains. In Austria, business interests and personal interests of political actors could also constitute a vulnerability. Efforts to build illiberal political systems in EU member states are also problematic, as they can limit governments' willingness to take action in certain fields, such as disinformation, as exhibited by the Hungarian and Polish ruling parties.

**In addition, authoritarian states can exploit the fact that most CEE states lag behind the West economically. This holds true especially for China, which is still seen by some EU7 governments as the land of economic opportunity; they could, in turn, offer favors to Beijing by advocating for Chinese interests in Western institutions and alliances. Heightened corruption risks in newer member states increase authoritarian regimes' influencing potential, as indicated by the case of Hungary's joint projects with Russia and China.**

Some of the EU7 member states, particularly Poland and Romania (as well as other Eastern European nations) are in close geographic proximity to Russia, so they (a) consider the Kremlin to be a larger threat than others and (b) are more willing to align with US foreign policy goals, which often happen



to be in line with the European Parliament's proposals (e.g., Huawei 5G ban). This alignment is also relevant to China policy. Joint ventures and cordial relationships with authoritarian regimes are possible because the Western alliance, especially the EU, has often been unable to speak with one voice and convince members to make a definite choice between the East and the West, allowing them to try to "balance" between the two sides.

Some states, however, seem to have recognized that joint projects agreed with China rarely materialize in their promised form or are often beneficial only to Beijing. In Romania, for instance, the elite seems to have recognized that. Moreover, even as nationalistic feelings and sentiments of dissatisfaction with the EU are growing in the country, both a majority of Romanians and the establishment consider Romania's EU integration as the one and only existential choice for the country. Even if the values by which politicians conduct themselves are not in line with this principle, the pro-European position is still considered the only "politically correct" one. This might result in some MEPs keeping themselves aligned with the EU mainstream even if their personal views differ. Rares Bogdan and Gheorghe Falcă of the PNL, for instance, belong to the party's nationalist, conservative, deeply Orthodox wing, yet they mostly support the European majority, just like Carmen Avram, Dan Nica or Rovana Plumb from the PSD, who backed the Socialist Party's efforts to restrict the rule of law in Romania. The reason for their support of the safe pro-EU middle ground is that, first, they have no immediate interest in pushing any Eurosceptic ideology or policy agenda, and the low level of Romanian support for the Eurosceptic narrative means that diverting from being pro-EU would bring no political benefits.

**Overall, the Central and Eastern European region, especially states from the former Soviet bloc, could be a resource in the fight against authoritarian regimes worldwide, as long as authoritarian political tendencies in the region can be curbed, the young democratic institutional framework is upheld, and the local population and political elite remain convinced that belonging to the West offer them clear advantages as opposed to close ties with authoritarians.**

## **THERE IS HOPE FOR EUROPEAN FOREIGN POLICY, BUT SIGNIFICANT HURDLES REMAIN AS WELL**

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**There is a broad majority in the European Parliament favoring tough policy action against Russia, China and other authoritarian states, such as Belarus.** The action proposed by the Parliament, such as stopping Nord Stream 2, Rosatom's nuclear energy projects in Europe, banning Chinese firms from the construction of European 5G networks, or freezing the ratification of the EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI) are in line with the democratic interests and values of Washington as well, indicating that there is certainly room for cooperation between the EP and the US Congress. The CAI vote showed that the EP is willing to act even in cases when their decisions led to immediate, tangible outcomes.

**The voting results we analyzed indicate that China has an even more negative image among Parliamentarians than Russia, and that there is a somewhat broader segment of MEPs who are willing to express harshly critical opinions of Beijing.** For instance, the group of "*Sovereignist balancers*," made up primarily of right-wing parties, is extremely and consistently critical of China, but they often vote in line with Russian interests. We also see in the case of resolutions not concerning Russia and China that MEPs were more willing to defend regimes that are ideologically closer to them. For instance, left-wing parties – including even center-left ones – have a tendency to refrain from supporting resolutions condemning leftist regimes, such as Cuba, while right-wing parties do not necessarily condemn right-wing ones, especially for their record on migration. This is not a widespread trend, though, as such decisions are made only occasionally.

**The key to the Kremlin's relative success in contrast with China is its geographic and cultural proximity to Europe, significant economic power intertwined with ideological flexibility and the remnants of former Soviet influencing assets in Europe, especially in the CEE region, allowing it to sell Russia as a non-ideological power. To these ends, it gathers support from both the left- and right-wing of the political spectrum.** The Kremlin has been especially adept at using sharp power, particularly disinformation, to create the perception of Russia as a larger-than-life power that seems to be stronger economically, politically and militarily than it really is. In addition, Russia's energy resources remain a key tool of influence in Europe that is also important for mainstream parties. **Meanwhile, Beijing – since its "blind" supporters come almost solely from the relatively unpopular far left – is likely to lean even harder on a combination of sharp and hard power potential, combining efforts to leverage its economic prowess, create a perception that it is beneficial for states to support its interests in the West, and offer benefits to local elites economically via joint projects and people-to-people contacts.**

**Since neither Russia nor China seem to be able to gain a considerable following on the European level, they will both continue focusing on bilateral relations with individual states, especially where pro-Russian or pro-Chinese political parties have influence over a country's foreign policy decisions.** Even in these cases, their success could be limited: Fidesz has not vetoed sanctions

against Russian or Chinese officials in the FAC; the M5S-Lega coalition only vetoed adding a new name to the list of sanctioned Russian individuals and entities one time; and pro-Russian former Slovak Parliament Speaker Andrej Danko only managed to temporarily block the adoption of the country's pro-Western security- and defense strategy, not the government's approval of anti-Russia sanctions. **Nevertheless, these governments have been able to limit the EU's potential maneuvering room in terms of punitive measures in response to human rights and international law breaches, as their rhetoric and actions likely limit what proposals European officials can table to keep them adoptable.**

The picture is slightly different in the case of countering disinformation. **The Greens, for instance, often abstain on these resolutions not because they do not assess disinformation as a threat but due to policy concerns regarding the contents of these resolutions.** Thus, in their case, with more negotiations seeking to create unity, the majority in favor of fighting disinformation in the EP could be broadened. The ECR, meanwhile, often argues that the Parliament's proposals could potentially infringe upon the freedom of speech by declaring certain opinions differing from mainstream views to be disinformation. They have also highlighted the need for the EU to focus more on media literacy training. **In the latter case, the EP could also possibly include such proposals in its policy recommendations, with a greater emphasis.**

Changing the current EU status quo in foreign policy is turning out to be a more problematic undertaking, primarily moving away from unanimous voting in the field towards qualified majority voting. This could ensure that authoritarian third countries are not able to influence Foreign Affairs Council (FAC) decisions via their bilateral relations with individual EU member states, potentially increasing EU resilience considerably. However, the majority in support of this issue is relatively small even in the Parliament. The largest group of MEPs, slightly over 350 of them, prefers the European Union to have a joint approach to international issues and a change in the voting requirement in the FAC. However, there is a further group of around 170 MEPs who are almost equally tough on authoritarian regimes, but only agree on some overarching strategic questions, with many explicitly stating their opposition to anything but unanimity voting in the FAC, citing concerns about the limitation of smaller member states' influence. **This is going to be a key topic during the Conference on the Future of Europe: a concrete takeaway mentioning the need for change would make it harder for member states and potentially some political forces in the EP to reject it outright.**

Our research has also shown that there are differences between the populist parties. **It does not seem impossible at all to cooperate with some of them on certain issues; e.g., Lega seems to be more than willing to take action against China.** In contrast, some populists, like the AfD and the National Rally, as well as the Czech far left and far right, refuse to engage on practically any foreign policy issue on the EU level and refrain from criticizing essentially all authoritarian regimes throughout the world. To them, China – despite ideological differences – could be a balancing force against the “liberal Western order” they reject, similar to Russia.

Overall, there is hope for creating a more effective European foreign policy, but there are significant hurdles to overcome, particularly decision-making in the Council and creating a broader majority for common EU action in the European Parliament. **The European Parliament will likely continue carving out an even greater role for itself in foreign policy by further pressuring the Council to follow its recommendations in EP resolutions backed by a large majority.**

## METHODOLOGY

We analyzed 92 votes cast by Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) between 2 July 2019 and 20 May 2021. We categorized these votes into the following groups (the number of votes included in each category indicated in parentheses):

- Counter-authoritarian (35): votes condemning authoritarian practices in third countries outside of Russia and China, and efforts to uphold European values in these nations.
- Kremlin-critical (25): votes condemning the authoritarian practices of the Russian regime and its aggressive foreign policy.
- Foreign Policy Integration (15): votes advocating for more united and effective EU foreign policy and strategies vis-à-vis third countries.
- Counter-disinformation (7): votes advocating for stronger action in countering the information operations of third countries.
- China-critical (5): votes condemning the authoritarian practices of the Chinese regime and its aggressive foreign policy.

In each case, we categorized a resolution or report based on which of the indices the majority of its content fit the best. For instance, reports on the implementation of EU foreign and security policy touch upon several topics (e.g., Russia, China, disinformation), but they mostly deal with making EU foreign policy more united and effective.

MEPs can vote in three different ways: they can vote ‘for’ or ‘against’ a proposal, or they can abstain. We also included instances when MEPs did not vote on a given proposal or when they were no longer/not yet representatives in the EP.

Categorizing the votes allows us to analyze how representatives, national parties, countries, and EP party families votes on resolutions or reports addressing similar issues, and we can see whether they support or disapprove of proposals. To help us better understand trends, we created indices from the results. Each category received a separate index, but all were constructed with the same methodology. Calculating the indices was done using the following steps:

1. In each case, we decide what type of vote can be considered critical (because it supports proposals seeking to condemn the practices of authoritarian regimes, the fight against disinformation or stronger foreign policy integration etc.) and what can be considered a vote that, in contrast, supports authoritarian regimes. In most cases, ‘for’ was the critical and ‘against’ was the supportive decision. However, in some cases, this was the other way around (generally in the case of amendments proposed by a far-right or far-left party). This does not affect abstentions or missed votes (‘did not vote’); they are all evaluated the same in each case.
2. We aggregate the number of critical votes, supportive votes, abstentions and missed votes. The result is the number of potential votes. During the aggregation, we take into account what MEPs were active at the time of the vote, as well as what national party and EP group they sat in at the time. We can ensure the accuracy of this by following all changes during the cycle.

3. When calculating index scores, we assign a point value or weight to every single vote. Critical votes are worth one point, supportive ones are worth zero, missing a vote is assigned a value of 0.5, and abstentions are worth 0.25. In the case of missing a vote, we seldom know the reason for that or how an MEP would have voted had they taken part, so we positioned its value halfway between critical and supportive votes. At the same time, we believe that abstentions should rather be considered weak supportive votes, so we weighted this halfway between a supportive vote and a missed vote.
4. The actual score of a given level (individual MEP, national party, country, party family) is the weighted aggregate of the total number of votes, and the potential score is the highest score possible. This would be achieved if all votes are critical (worth one point). The actual value of the index is the quotient of the actual score and potential score in percentage points. (For instance: assume that the number of potential votes is 10, and the votes cast are: 4 critical, 1 supportive, 3 abstentions, 2 missed votes. The actual score would thus be  $4 \cdot 1 + 1 \cdot 0 + 3 \cdot 0.25 + 2 \cdot 0.5 = 5.75$ . Potential score is 10. The index value would thus be  $5.75/10 = 0.575 = 57.5\%$ ).
5. The higher the index score, the more critical a voting pattern is in the given topic. An MEP or group would have an index score of 0% if they took part in all votes and voted supportively. It would be 100% if they took part in all votes and voted critically.

We changed the methodology applied compared to the approach used in the previous phase of our project. Thus, this study also covers the 19 votes we analyzed during the previous phase as well. Our previous results are not comparable with the ones included in this study.



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