

“Toxic Friends:

**Democratic Backsliding and Populist Radical Right cooperation
after the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine”**

After the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the democratic backslider parties in Hungary (Fidesz) and Poland (Law and Justice) took conflicting positions on Russia, putting their ongoing cooperation in the Rule of Law (RoL) conflict and within the broader alliance of populist radical right (PRR) parties in question. Building on and advancing the theoretical framework of democratic backsliding, PRR party cooperation and authoritarian diffusion, we assess the impact of exogenous shocks triggered by external authoritarian actors on these types of cooperation. We examine the voting patterns of Fidesz, Law and Justice and other PRR parties in the European Parliament (EP), considering their assertiveness towards Russia and the RoL conflict before and after the full-scale invasion. We find that although the invasion made the PRR parties converge on their levels of assertiveness towards Russia, it remains a divisive issue. Moreover, the invasion did not influence the dynamics of democratic backsliding.

Keywords: Russian invasion of Ukraine, assertiveness towards Russia, democratic backsliding, Rule of Law, Populist Radical Right, EP voting, Poland, Hungary.

1. Introduction

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 is the culmination of a conflict that started in early 2014, when the Putin regime invaded the Crimean Peninsula, backed separatists in parts of Eastern Ukraine and forced the European Union (EU) and its member states to rethink their vulnerability to autocratic influence. The recent full-scale attack had even more profound effects on the EU raising existential security and energy concerns. Moreover, the conflict between Ukraine and Russia has been framed as a clash between liberal democracy and autocracy. In this sense, it also turned into a stress test for the democratic backsliding coalition between Hungary and Poland and for broader cooperation among Populist Radical Right (PRR)¹ parties in Europe.

Since the invasion, Hungary and Poland, two backsliding states ruled by PRR parties, took conflicting positions. The Hungarian Civic Alliance (Magyar Polgári Szövetség/Fidesz) and the Polish Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość/PiS) diverged in questions of sanctions against Russia, the military and financial help for Ukraine and the perception of Russia as a military threat. Consequently, while Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán tried to counterbalance the EU and the Putin regime, the Polish government became one of Kyiv's most vocal advocates. Since both parties cooperate within the EU structures in a backsliding coalition (Holesch & Kyriazi, 2020), protecting each other in the Rule of Law (RoL) conflict with the EU, the conflicting positions could compromise the future of the alliance (Jaraczewski & Theuns, 2022).

Both parties are also essential players in the unification effort of PRR parties in the European Parliament (EP). In the past, some of the PRR parties – especially Fidesz and the French National Rally – were Putin's "strange bedfellows" (Polyakova, 2014) in helping

¹ The PRR party label (Mudde, 2007) usually includes the political groups in the EP right of the mainstream, such as the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) or the Europe of Nations and Freedom (ENF) and their affiliated national parties until 2019 (Falkner & Plattner, 2020) or the ECR and Identity and Democracy (ID) Party Group after 2019. See also Rooduijn et al. (2019).

spreading Russian anti-democratic and illiberal narratives in the EU (Golosov, 2020). Others – especially PiS – hold strong anti-Russian stances seeing Russia as existential threat to national security, even if their ideological leaning resembled those of Putin to a certain degree. The full-fledged Russian aggression led, on the one hand, to hostile reactions (PiS and Fratelli d'Italia [FdI, Brothers of Italy]) and, on the other, to the intensification of flirting with Putin's regime (Fidesz). Therefore, after 2022, the Putin regime has become a "toxic friend", making the unification of the far right in Europe even less likely.

Building on and advancing the theoretical framework of democratic backsliding and PRR party cooperation, this article examines the impact of the threat from external authoritarian actor such as Russia on the condition of democracy in the EU, examining not only its long-term influence, but rather the consequences of the war as an exogenous shock triggered by Putin's regime. Due to its weight, we examine the engine of democratic backsliding, the Hungarian-Polish coalition, without neglecting other PRR parties, which could become essential backsliding actors in the future. Thus, against the background of the invasion, we additionally look at the support patterns for the Putin regime among the far-right parties in Europe. Considering the EU as a multi-level policy, we focus on political parties as critical strategic actors and protagonists whose between-party power dynamics can explain crucial patterns of democratic backsliding.²

We conduct this analysis by examining the voting behaviour of Fidesz, Law and Justice and other PRR parties in the EP, focusing on two issues, their assertiveness towards Russia and the RoL conflict. The evidence gathered from the Roll Call Votes (RCVs) of the Members of the

² Up to now, backsliding regimes in the EU are based on a one-party rule (Hungary) or a coalition with a majoritarian party having the final say (Poland - Law and Justice/PiS within the United Right). Therefore, this article uses the terms "backsliding parties" and "backsliding governments" as synonymous.

European Parliament (MEPs) from July 2019 to June 2022 shows that the Russian influence did not break the backsliding coalition, but it still hinders far-right unification.

In detail, considering assertiveness towards Russia, we find that the voting behaviour of Fidesz and PiS did not, as widely assumed, diverge after the invasion but instead converge due to Fidesz's turn towards more assertive stances. Also, and contrary to some pundits' claims about the 'end of the affair' between Fidesz and PiS or the 'end of Budapest-Warsaw axis' (Jaraczewski, 2022; Coakley, 2022; Tamma, 2022; Przybylski, 2022), both parties have maintained the same voting patterns in the RoL conflict, still supporting each other.

Considering the broader unification effort of the far right, these parties, taken together, became slightly more assertive towards Russia after the invasion, mainly due to the shift among the previously non-assertive parties from Identity and Democracy (ID) political group of the EP. However, stances on Russia can still be considered a wedge, which makes the unification of all PRR parties in times of war and probably after that for some years unlikely. Finally, as expected, due to the fact governments and parties usually have multi-layered approaches to international issues and defend their interests and build coalitions accordingly, the Russian aggression did not influence the voting of PRR parties on the RoL questions, where they still widely supported the backsliders.

Examining how Russian aggression of Ukraine influences both fields of cooperation is important, as it has far-reaching consequences for the EU. The failed effort of the far-right unification and a potential break-up of the backsliding coalition could substantially strengthen the condition of democracy in Europe. This article contributes to the discussions on democratic backsliding and authoritarian backlash led in at least three strands of literature. First, by examining how different levels of assertiveness towards Russia affect the votes (and not merely words) of PRR parties, we advance the theoretical understanding of the phenomenon of external influences on backsliding cooperation in the EU. Second, it gives additional insights into the cooperation of PRR parties in the EP and outside of EU institutions. Additionally, by examining

the external "shadow" of Russia and the effects of its invasion of Ukraine, we contribute to the authoritarian diffusion literature by explaining the influence of autocracies on the condition of democracy in the EU. Finally, it also offers a methodological contribution by highlighting the advantages of including abstention and non-voting in EP voting behaviour analyses.

We gather these contributions in six sections. After this introduction, we discuss the theoretical background to our study, in particular the literature on the authoritarian influence focusing on Russian long-term influence and the Russian-Ukrainian war as an exogenous shock, the research on democratic backsliding and rule of law conflict in the EU, and on the cooperation of the PRR parties. The following section develops the hypotheses. Subsequently, the data is described. In the next section, we present our empirical findings on the roll-call voting patterns considering assertiveness towards Russia and the RoL conflict. Finally, the conclusion discusses the implications of our findings for democratic backsliding in Europe and suggests avenues for future research.

2. Theoretical and conceptual discussion

Exogenous threats to democracy

At least since Gourevitch's (1978) seminal work, we know that international factors and domestic politics are strongly interconnected and should be examined concurrently. External influence can be assessed by its outcomes but also by examining interactions between domestic and external actors (Grimm, 2015), which is of interest here. While the research on democratic backsliding is still evolving and no systematic theories of this phenomenon exist (Waldner & Lust, 2018), its occurrence is usually explained by domestic factors such as executive aggrandisement (Bermeo, 2016) or growing partisan polarisation (Haggard & Kaufman, 2021). Only recently, external influence has been added gradually to the examined factors (Meyerrose,

2020; Hyde, 2020). Even less is written on the impact of authoritarian actors on backsliding cooperation.

Besides China and Saudi Arabia, scholars point mainly to Russia as the relevant authoritarian state which tries to deteriorate democracy. Geography matters, and empirical evidence shows that the Putin regime was able to weaken democratisation through extensive ethnic, economic, geopolitical, and military linkages in the post-Soviet space (Cameron & Orenstein, 2012). Especially in Central Asia, Russia acted as a regional hegemon using military interventions or threats, financial support of similar governments, norm diffusion through regional organisations and media or economic blackmail (Grimm, 2015; Jackson, 2010; Tolstrup, 2009). Lately, the Russian authoritarian shadow is growingly connected with its aggressive foreign policy in the immediate EU neighbourhood with its interventions in Georgia (2008) or Ukraine (2014-2022).

While in the 2000s, the EU still hoped to cooperate closely with Russia, at least since the 2010s, the Putin regime started openly rivalling the EU, seeing its democracy promotion as a potential threat. We find growing Russian influence in EU Member States such as Hungary or Cyprus (Orenstein & Kelemen, 2017). Russia and its ruling party, United Russia, also created authoritarian linkages with the European populist parties, in form of participation in various networks or by cooperation with different Russian agents (Futák-Campbell & Schwieter, 2020). While the Putin regime used these linkages to spread anti-democratic propaganda, which helped to undermine the EU, the PRR parties gained financial support and recognition by important global players (Krekó et al., 2015, Golosov, 2020).

Authoritarian actors can also trigger exogenous shocks, which can affect – directly and indirectly – domestic democratic development. For example, research shows that the second and third waves of democratisation started after the end of the Second World War and the end of the Cold War (Huntington, 1993). Even if there is no empirical evidence of an association between war and democracy at the international level (Gleditsch, 2009), wars can be considered

“turning points” (Widmaier et al., 2007, p.747), which also have lasting consequences on different power relations between external and domestic actors. Up to 40 states (including China and India) refrained from supporting the motion of UN General Assembly to condemn Russian aggression on Ukraine in 2022. Even if there were no European countries on that list, and despite a relatively strong and united reaction of the EU to the aggression, both the Hungarian and the Polish governments instrumentalised it to consolidate power through the ‘rally around the flag’ effect, which helped them to continue implementing illiberal policies, and – in the Polish case – to claim a cease of EU sanctions due to rule of law violations due to the unconditional support of Ukraine and model behaviour in sheltering war refugees from Ukraine.

Democratic backsliding and rule of law conflict in the EU

Autocratisation processes that lead to a full-fledged autocracy are called “democratic breakdown” (Stepan & Linz, 1978, p.1) or “democratic collapse” (Diskin et al., 2005, p.291). Democratic backsliding, however, is not a radical break but rather an irregular series of incremental actions resulting in a diminished form of democracy (Waldner & Lust, 2018). The weakening or abolition of any institutional bodies is usually state-led, with the ruling parties using executive aggrandisement or subtle strategic manipulations of elections (Bermeo, 2016).

The stretch and depth of democratic backsliding in the world are contested, depending on the definition of democracy used and its measurement (Jee et al., 2022; Haggard & Kaufman, 2021). Most studies agree that the backsliding of democracy went exceptionally far in Hungary and Poland (e.g. Cianetti & Hanley, 2021).³ The backsliding practices in both states are usually described as attacks on the RoL and the EU's liberal democratic institutions, which are defined by Article 2 TEU (Bozóki & Hegedűs, 2018; Sadurski, 2019). Therefore, in the EU context,

³ Episodes of democratic backsliding have also been identified in EU Member States such as Romania (Iusmen, 2015), the Czech Republic (Hanley & Vachudova, 2018) or Bulgaria (Rone, 2021).

democratic backsliding is best defined as moving away from Union's constitutional self-understanding (Müller, 2015).

Exogenous factors fostering democratic backsliding are relevant during two phases: the grip on power and the staying on the backsliding trajectory. Considering the former, two international crises helped the backsliders into the government. The deep economic recession after the 2008 global financial crisis was one of the reasons for the electoral win of Fidesz (Buzogány, 2017). In Poland, PiS responded to the European "refugee crisis" of 2015 with an ethnopopulist strategy based on the defence of Polish culture, nation, and religion, which helped PiS to win the same year's presidential and parliamentary elections (Vachudova, 2021).

When examining backsliding continuity, scholars focused mainly on EU institutions as the relevant external factor. Analysing Hungary, they pointed to Fidesz's friendly partisan politics within the European People's Party (EPP) (Kelemen, 2020). Also EU's role as a multi-level polity, which provided both legitimation and cohesion funding (Bozóki & Hegedűs, 2018), and the limitations of the EU's judicial mechanisms (Blauberger & Kelemen, 2017) have been found relevant. Besides that, the Commission was reluctant to punish backsliders, as it internalised a non-coherent definition of democracy (Oleart & Theuns, 2022).

An essential factor for maintaining a state on the backsliding track is the ruling party's cooperation with other mindlike parties (Kelemen, 2020). The most developed cooperation in the EU is the Hungarian-Polish backsliding coalition in the Council, which has restricted the reach of the EU to impose Art.7 sanctions on these states (Holesch & Kyriazi, 2020).

The PRR parties have supported the governing backsliders already in the past (Meijers & van der Veer, 2019; Chiru & Wunsch, 2023), even if, due to their weak relevance, their support was somewhat symbolic. Nonetheless, as PRR parties are winning elections, e.g. Fratelli d'Italia in the parliamentary elections in Italy in September 2022 and joining the Council, the weight of PRR parties is changing and worth a closer analysis.

The decisions in both fields examined here, the RoL conflict and aspects of Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), often happen behind closed doors in the Council, which leaves most mechanisms uncovered. Empirically more convincing is the analysis of the voting behaviour in the EP, which gives the relevant actors more space for manoeuvre. The EP can not only influence through debates or the adaptation of resolutions in the CSFP (Raunio & Wagner, 2020), also in questions of democratic backsliding, the EP is one of the most appropriate arenas to apply social pressure (Meijers & van der Veer, 2019).

Cooperation of PRR parties in the European Parliament

Partisanship patterns are more prominent and visible in the EP than in the Commission or the Council (Lindberg et al., 2008) and the cooperation of European parties in the EP is well examined. In general, scholarship has focused on different voting dimensions based on roll-call voting data, identifying a left-right dimension (Hix & Lord, 1997), the GAL (green/alternative/libertarian) vs. TAN (traditional/authoritarian/nationalist) dimension (Hooghe et al., 2002) or an EU integration dimension (Roger, Otjes & van der Veer, 2017) as determining the voting behaviour of MEPs.

The voting behaviour of the Members of European Parliament (MEPs) is multi-faceted as they have to balance different sensitivities from voters, their national parties as well as their European Party Groups (EPGs) (Mühlböck, 2012, Chiru & Stoian, 2019). Nonetheless, the largest EPGs such as European People's Party (EPP) or Socialists and Democracy (S&D) show high levels of party congruence (McElroy and Benoit, 2010). While EP coalitions among these actors tend to depend on the policy field, once established, they are quite constant over time (Hix & Høyland, 2013).

This is different with PRR parties, whose broader collaboration in the EP has been relatively deficient (Brack, 2017). PRR parties tend to block each other, when it comes to specific policy

reform processes (Falkner & Plattner, 2020). They are ambivalent in their positions stances and can mix soft and hard rhetoric and stances subject to different EU-related issues (Heinisch et al., 2020). As other parties also the PRR parties are inclined to avoid close contacts with infamous partners, which could negatively influence electoral success (McDonnell & Werner, 2019).

The fragmentation of the PRR parties into different party groups in the EP is another caveat for stronger cooperation. In the EP, Fidesz was a member of the EPP since 2000, but has been suspended from membership of the EPP party alliance in March 2019. Fidesz left the EPP Party Group to avoid expulsion in March 2021. PiS belongs to the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) Party Group, while most of the other PRR parties are part of the Identity & Democracy Group. PRR parties usually conduct “respectability” calculations at home when choosing coalition strategies (McDonnell & Werner, 2018, p. 747).

Besides that, there are important differences between Central and Eastern European parties and Western PRR parties. While the former are net-receivers of EU funding and are dependent on EU money for social spending, protectionism and state interventism (Buštikova, 2018), the latter are resistant to transferring funds through the EU to the poorer East (Diermeier et al., 2021). Combined with a nationalist spine, all these factors make PRR coalitions inherently instable and volatile (Heinisch et al. 2020), and can lead to fast changes in their voting behaviour.

At the same time, we witness a never-ending and permanently failed unification effort of PRR parties since the 1990s (Fieschi, 2000, Startin 2010). The latest unification wave started before the Russian invasion, when PRR leaders signed simultaneously in July 2021 in several European capitals a document calling for deep reform of the EU (Politico, 2021). Most of the signing parties (but without e.g. Finns Party and Danish People's Party) met in networking events in Warsaw (December 2021) and Madrid (January 2022). If successful, the unification of the PRR parties would create the third most substantial party group in the EP in the ninth

legislature (2019-2024) and would be able to influence stronger policy decisions in critical fields.

3. Hypothesis building: The Russian wedge in the EU

Different levels of assertiveness of the backsliders towards Russia

Not only the long-term authoritarian Russian influence, also the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine as an exogenous shock, did put these different levels of cooperation to an important test. While Fidesz and PiS cooperate closely in the EU, they are divided by vast differences in the cooperation with the Putin regime. Taking history as a yardstick, we could expect the opposite, as both states were several times victims of Russian or Soviet Union aggression. The democratic beginnings between 1989-1991 in both states started with the withdrawal from the Soviet/Russian sphere of influence, and Viktor Orbán made a career of his critics of the failing Soviet Union (Buzogány, 2017). However, in 2014, Fidesz started a Russia-friendly foreign policy under the so-called "Eastern Opening" (Végh, 2015, p.47). In the same year, Hungary signed a contract with the Russian Rosatom on the Paks II Nuclear Power Plant. The project was financed by Russia with a 10 billion Euro loan. Considering its gas and oil dependency on Russia, Hungary was already well above the EU median in 2014, and these numbers have risen since (Harper, 2022). Furthermore, during the first Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2014, while condemning Russia's annexation of Crimea, the Fidesz government emphasised its impartiality in the Ukrainian-Russian conflict. When Orbán 2014 advocated building an "illiberal democracy" in Hungary, he referred, among others, to Russia as a successful illiberal model (Orbán, 2014). All these factors led to the diminutive description of Hungary as Putin's "Trojan horse" in the EU (Müller, 2014, p.1).

Even if the similarity of the usage of national-conservative ideas such as nation and religion, or the illiberal playbook such as the attack on LGBTIQ+ rights suggest ideological

proximity not only between Fidesz and United Russia (Ambrosio, 2020) but also between Russia and Poland, the Polish governing party has an entirely different level of assertiveness towards Russia than Fidesz (Varga & Buzogány, 2021). For centuries, Russia has been considered the greatest threat to the Polish nation (Turkowski, 2022). Since the first Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2014, both main parties, Civic Platform (Platforma Obywatelska) and PiS, developed a critical stand towards Russia. Since the death of Polish president, Lech Kaczyński during an air crash in 2010 near the Russian city of Smolensk, PiS party leader Jarosław Kaczyński went as far as accusing the Putin regime of the murder of his twin brother. Around the event, he constructed a cult with religious characteristics (Szeligowska, 2014), which became a tool for fuelling domestic political conflict and a mobilising force for the PiS voters (Markowski, 2016). Anti-Putinism has become an essential aspect of the PiS party ideology since. Poland, particularly under PiS rule, also took a different direction in its energy policy. As it was widely dependent on the Russian energy supply, it started diversification measures in 2014 to reduce that dependency - in line with the European Energy Union framework (Harper, 2022).

The different levels of authoritarian penetration and energy dependency can be seen as an essential wedge, which, when hit with an additional exogenous shock such as the Russian invasion, could weaken the cooperation. Historical evidence and recent events could lead us to expect such a pattern. During the first Ukraine crisis in 2014, PiS, at this time in opposition, reacted harshly to Orbán's approximation to Russia. Moreover, after Putin visited Orbán in Budapest in February 2015, Kaczyński refused to meet Orbán in Poland, indicating Orbán's lack of European solidarity (Rzeczpospolita, 2015). As a result, the rapprochement between both illiberal parties has been frozen.

After the recent Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, we discover the same patterns. In an interview after the invasion, Orbán defended Russian security concerns due to the possible NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organisation) enlargement. He claimed that Poland would like

to move the alliance's Eastern borders up to the Russian borders (Mandiner, 2022). Furthermore, he made Hungarian non-involvement in the war the main topic of his successful electoral campaign in the first part of 2022. The Hungarian Prime Minister also asked for an independent investigation to confirm if Russia is responsible for the war crimes in Bucha (Nepszava, 2022).

After Orbán's statements about Bucha, the reactions of leading PiS politicians put in doubt how far Hungary could still be a partner for Poland. Kaczyński said: "If Orbán does not see the crimes, he should go to an eye doctor", adding that "further cooperation with Hungary is impossible unless Hungary's approach to Russia's aggression changes" (Radio Plus, 2022, p.1). As a result, the Polish government did not congratulate Orbán on his victory in the parliamentary elections in April 2022, and the re-elected Hungarian Prime Minister refrained from his traditional first visit to Warsaw. In his July 2022 speech in Baile Tuscán, Orbán said that the cooperation with Poland had experienced a deadlock as Poles felt that the Ukrainian war was their war, which they wanted to fight against Russia (Orbán, 2022). Following our theoretical discussion, the historical evidence, and the recent rhetoric of both party leaders, we formulate the following hypotheses:

H1: In EP votes related to assertiveness towards Russia, Fidesz's MEPs vote in a non-assertive way, while PiS's MEPs vote more assertively.

H1a: The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 exacerbated this divergence.

The influence of the invasion on the Hungarian-Polish backsliding coalition

While both parties are divided over the issue of relationships with Russia, they align their policies in their permanent conflict with the EU. Both parties collaborated during the 2015

“migration crisis” within the Visegrád Group (V4), supporting each other in the question of refugee relocation quotas (Braun, 2020). They also rejected the Banking Union (Mérő & Piroska, 2016) and opted out of the European Public Prosecutor's Office (Csehi, 2021). They cooperate in the RoL conflict, where both governments defend themselves with a veto before the Art.7 proceedings, and PiS copies Fidesz's backsliding policies such as attacks on the judiciary, media freedom, or dangling with the election process and helps Hungary with internal legitimisation (Holesch & Kyriazi, 2020; Pirro & Stanley, 2022). Both parties also cooperated to prevent the “RoL conditionality”, which blocks EU funding in cases of corruption in the EU Member States (Łacny, 2021; European Court of Justice, 2022).

When, after the full-fledged Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the Hungarian government under Fidesz lived up to its name as Russia's “Trojan horse”, it became widely isolated in the EU. However, the opposite developments could be observed in the relationship between the EU and Poland, which became a model country for some Member States in handling the war. Poland made an enormous effort to receive millions of Ukrainian refugees and tried to lead EU's joint action against Russia. In June 2022, the Commission and Council “rewarded” this by approving its national recovery programs in the Next Generation recovery funding framework (Council, 2022), while putting it on hold for Hungary. Also, despite creating the foundation for starting the rule of law conditionality against both member states, the Commission ultimately triggered it only towards Hungary. Some observers went as far as suggesting not only that the invasion had weakened the illiberal axis, but it also could mean a return of Poland to “Europe's democratic fold” (Kuisz and Wigura, 2022).

However, as the shared interest of defending themselves vis-à-vis the Commission is key for the democratic backsliding in both countries and the connections developed between them since 2015 in the matter of RoL conflict are far-reaching, one could also argue that there is not enough evidence that the Russian invasion could influence PiS's and Fidesz' MEPs votes. Both governments could not link these issues. Besides that, they have maintained amicable

relations regarding the Rule of Law and more confrontational ones regarding the assertiveness towards Russia already since the first Russian aggression in 2014. While the invasion indeed pushed Polish-Hungarian relations to a low point, what it did not alter is precisely the tactical cooperation over rule of law (Szczerbiak 2022) and it is due to their shared commitment to dismantling it why the relationship could persist. Therefore, we formulate the following hypotheses:

H2: Fidesz and PiS's MEPs vote similarly in EP votes on the issue of the Rule of Law.

H2a: The Russian invasion of Ukraine did not affect the voting of Fidesz's and PiS's MEPs on the issue of the Rule of Law.

The Putin regime and the PRR parties' unification

Besides examining the influence of Russia on EU Member States, the scholarship also focused on Russian connections to far-right parties (Polyakova, 2014; Umland, 2017).⁴ Since the 2010s, the Dutch Party voor de Vrijheid (PVV), French Front national, Austria's Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (FPÖ) and the German Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) looked to win the Putin regime as an ally (Futák-Campbell & Schwieter, 2020). Russia provided financial support to many of them, with financing the Front national being the most well-known case (Orenstein & Kelemen, 2017).

In general, prior to the first Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2014, European parties have paid relatively little attention to Russia and they had mostly positive views of Russia (Onderco, 2019). Putin sympathizers can be found across different (left and right) party families (Snegovaya, 2022). Considering the votes in the EP, between 2004 and 2012 the EP's stance

⁴ The first links can be found in 1993, when Front National leader, Jean-Marie Le Pen, sought to establish bonds with the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR), led by far-right politician Vladimir Zhirinovskiy (Mudde, 2007).

towards Russia was everything but unitary. MEPs' voting positions towards Russia are determined by their partisan affiliations, while the effect of nationality remains marginal (Braghioli, 2015). Most of the PRR parties have shown low levels of assertiveness towards Russia, i.e., the ENF (Europe of Nations and Freedom) group voted in 93 percent of the examined cases protecting Russian interests (Braghioli, 2015). Between 2014-2019, the PRR parties were much more divided than the members of other party groups. However, the differences became smaller, when the vote was divided between parties from the "East" and "West", also on questions of economic relations with Russia (Diermeier et al. 2021). Before the invasion, large FDI inflows from Russia to EU member states had risen the likelihood of MEPs voting against policies supporting Ukraine (Norrevik, 2021).

Also recent historical evidence from the official statements and the cooperation of PRR parties within networking events shows that divisions over Russia hinder any unification efforts. Shortly before the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, PiS organised in December 2021 one of these far-right unifications meetings. Besides the two governing backsliders, some Western PRR parties such as the French Rassemblement national (RN), the Italian Lega, Fratelli d'Italia or the Spanish Vox were invited. The meeting revealed essential discrepancies about the growing Russian-Ukrainian tensions, with RN leader Marine Le Pen arguing that Ukraine belongs to Russia's sphere of influence.

At the next meeting, held in Madrid at the end of January 2022, the Russian aggression was already tangible. Although the Polish Prime Minister Morawiecki forced through a Russia-critical reference in the conclusions, Orbán (who visited Putin in Moscow just the next day). Marine Le Pen did not sign the declaration, publishing an alternative version without the phrase critical of Putin (Rzeczpospolita, 2022). Furthermore, the leaders of the Fratelli d'Italia, Giorgia Meloni, and of Lega, Matteo Salvini, did not attend this meeting. Also their positions are conflicting. While Salvini had strong connections to Russia in the past (Futák-Campbell &

Schwieter, 2020), Meloni positioned her party during the 2022 electoral campaign as undoubtedly anti-Putin (Roberts & Leali, 2022) and pro-NATO.

While these meetings and statements revealed a division over Russia among PRR parties, does it withhold empirical scrutiny? Did the Russian aggression produce any shifts in the voting behaviour of MEPs from these parties? Preliminary evidence suggests that, after the invasion, there is more consensus in the EP on the issue of Russia, with some parties traditionally more accommodating towards Moscow having moderated their positions (members of ID among them) (Hix et al., 2022). Besides that, political actors do not want to get tainted by international actors tangled up in affairs with dubious reputation (McDonnell and Werner (2019), which could make them come closer. Again, we look at how the MEPs of these parties vote on relations with Russia, and we formulate the following hypotheses:

H3: Among PRR parties in the EP, there is a significant divergence in the levels of assertiveness towards Russia of the votes of their MEPs.

H3a: The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 reduced this divergence.

The influence of the invasion on the rule of law voting in the EP

Even if not only PRR parties pursue democratic backsliding (see the Romanian Social Democrats [Iusmen, 2015]), and not all PRR parties attack the RoL and the institutions of liberal democracy, the actors engaged in processes of democratic backsliding and those pushing the unification process of the PRR parties overlap widely (Chiru & Wunsch, 2023). We find few episodes of democratic backsliding in Western Europe, as there were not many parties in power, which could backslide a Western European democracy. Nonetheless, the inclusion of the FPÖ in the governing coalition in 2000 led to unilateral sanctions of the EU-14 against Austria and the refinement of the Art.7 proceedings (Sadurski, 2009). We also find other episodes of far-

right co-rule in other Western EU member states, such as Italy, with the most recent win of Fratelli d'Italia in September 2022.

Some scholars examined the voting of EP parties and their stand on the backsliding question in the EP. Cooperation was detected only in EPGs, but even there important voting discrepancies in the RoL questions can exist (Chiru & Wunsch, 2023). For instance, there were some differences within the EPP, when Fidesz was still member (Herman et al., 2021). Other analyses of the MEPs' replies to democratic backsliding in Poland and Hungary revealed that parties with traditional-authoritarian-nationalist (TAN) ideological positions reduced the importance of democratic backsliding and voted against sanctions for Hungary and Poland (Meijers & van der Veer, 2019). Even if democratic backsliding did not act as a catalyst for PRR parties' unification in the EU, certainly these parties are "sympathetic to backsliders irrespective of their orientation, for both ideological and strategic reasons" (Chiru & Wunsch, 2023: 67). Given that the convergence of PRR parties regarding Euroscepticism is high (Caiani 2018: 573; Santana et al. 2020), and it is through these lenses through which PRR sees the conflict over RoL with the EU, we do not have reasons to believe that the Russian invasion should affect their positions. Consequently, we hypothesize that:

H4: The MEPs from PRR parties will vote similarly in EP votes on the issue of the Rule of Law.

H4a: The Russian invasion of Ukraine did not affect the voting of PRR parties on the issue of the Rule of Law.

4. Data

We examine these hypotheses by analysing the voting patterns in the EP between 2019 and 2022. Using data from Vote Watch EU (2022), we have developed original measures of "defence of RoL" and, following Hix et al. (2022), "assertiveness towards Russia" from all available Roll Call Votes (RCVs) in the EP from the start of the ninth parliamentary term in

July 2019 until June 2022.⁵ From more than 13.000 votes, containing final votes on resolutions and individual votes on paragraphs and amendments (including split votes when significant), we selected votes related to assertiveness towards Russia and the RoL (see Tables A6 and A7 in the Online Appendix for the complete list of votes considered). In our analysis, we distinguish votes cast before and after the Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24 2022, to spot the possible shifts among the involved actors. Following our discussion in section 2, we define the Russian invasion of Ukraine as an external shock affecting all actors' behaviour with measurable effects.

Regarding the assertiveness towards Russia, only proposals whose policy direction can be determined without ambiguity (either in favour or against an assertive approach towards Russia) have been included. As a result, the final selection comprises 304 votes, of which 270 assertive votes are those in favour and 34 against.⁶ 199 votes related to assertiveness towards Russia were cast before the invasion (167 in favour and 32 against) and 105 after (103 in favour and 2 against).

⁵ Even if the use of roll-call voting data in the EP has been criticised due to a possible selection bias, as they constitute only about one-third of all votes cast in the EP (Carrubba et al., 2006), scholars see this caveat as exaggerated. For example, Hix (2002: 693) argues that there is no “empirical evidence to prove that roll-call voting is systematically biased towards a particular EP party or set of issues.” Following this argumentation, we assume these votes produce a reasonably accurate picture of voting behaviour in the EP.

⁶ The votes in favour are mainly related to the human rights situation in Russia (particularly the case of Aleksei Navalny), the situation in Belarus (after the elections and during the migration crisis on the Polish border), the EU Association Agreement with Ukraine, the direction of EU-Russia political relations, the foreign interference in democratic processes in the EU, and to the Russian aggression against Ukraine. The votes against are primarily amendments proposed by The Left, particularly by the Irish MEPs Clare Daly and Mick Wallace, in which sanctions against Russia and EU's interference in third countries (Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine) are criticised.

Considering the RoL, we define "the key principles of the rule of law [that] are common to all Member States" with "legality, legal certainty, prohibition of the arbitrary exercise of executive power, effective judicial protection by independent and impartial courts respecting fundamental rights in full, the separation of powers, permanent subjection of all public authorities to established laws and procedures, and equality before the law" (European Commission 2021). However, only votes related directly to the RoL in the strictest sense have been included, leaving votes related to human rights aside. This decision was made consciously for issues such as migration or LGBTIQ+ rights, which are important for PRR parties, not to blur the picture. Altogether, 151 votes were selected (82 in favour and 69 against) as votes on the RoL.⁷ 128 votes related to the RoL were cast before the invasion (76 for and 52 against) and 23 after (10 for and 13 against).

By pooling and averaging relevant votes together, we created two indexes. The first one is *Assertiveness towards Russia*, which takes values between 0 and 1, where 0=Full compliance with the position of Russia and 1=Full assertiveness towards Russia. The second index is *Defence of the Rule of Law*, and it takes values from 0=Attack on the RoL to 1=Defence of the RoL. We also created two additional subindexes for each of the indexes considering only the votes before and after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. To create all of these indexes, votes in favour (or against, where relevant) are coded as 1= assertiveness towards Russia / defence of the RoL, and votes against (or in favour, where relevant), abstentions, and not voting are coded as 0 (leaving aside those MEPs who were absent). We argue that not voting or abstaining might be considered at least non-assertiveness towards Russia or the non-defence of RoL. However, we also perform a robustness check recording the votes differently, considering only votes in

⁷ Most of these votes were related to the ongoing hearings regarding article 7(1), the risk of a severe breach of the Rule of Law in Poland and Hungary (but also Bulgaria), the EU mechanism on Democracy, Rule of Law and Fundamental Rights and the Rule of Law conditionality.

favour vs against (or vice versa), leaving aside all other categories (abstention, absent, did not vote, see Tables A2 and A3 in the Online Appendix). To account for the relevance of the votes, we also rerun the analysis considering only final votes, leaving aside individual votes on paragraphs and amendments (see Tables A4 and A5 in the Online Appendix).

5. Results

Assertiveness towards Russia

Figure 1 (see also Table A1 in the Online Appendix) plots the scores of the index of assertiveness towards Russia by party membership of MEPs of essential players in ECR and ID, together with the independent ones from Fidesz. We selected parties that were present at the Warsaw and Madrid summits and had more than two MEPs (thus, excluding the Bulgarian VMRO, the Estonian EKRE, the Lithuanian LLRA, the PiS's satellite party Solidarna Polska Zbigniewa Ziobro in Poland and the Romanian PNT-CD). For the sake of interest, we have also included the German AfD, which still stays outside these structures.

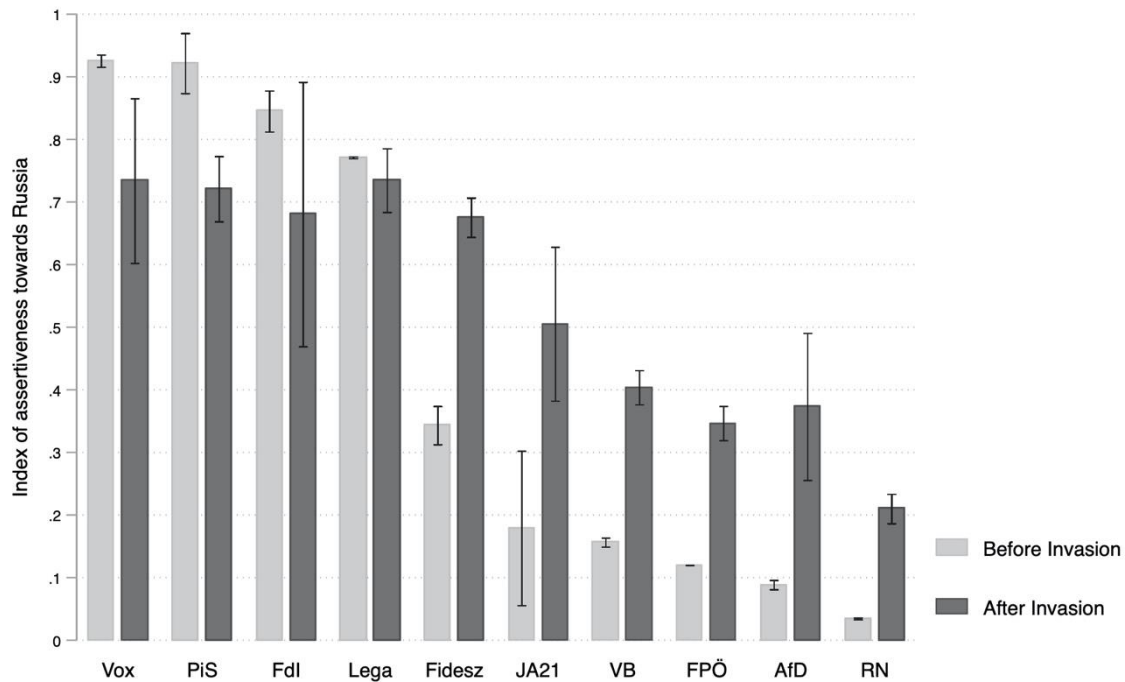
Overall, as Figure 1 shows, the MEPs of these parties were strongly divided on the issue of Russia before the invasion. A division that ran from the most hawkish positions of Vox, PiS, and Fratelli d'Italia (means of 0.925, 0.921, and 0.844, respectively, on a 0-1 scale, where 1 is full assertiveness towards Russia) to the MEPs of FPÖ, AfD, and RN who voted compliant with Russian interests most frequently (0.120, 0.088, 0.034, respectively). Hungarian Fidesz was the most assertive one from the non-assertive group of parties (0.331).

Although the overall difference in means of assertiveness of MEPs of PRR parties before and after the invasion is non-significant, with only a slight increase in the mean (from 0.530 to 0.574), the differences between positions among single parties are substantial. While

PiS's and Vox's assertiveness has decreased⁸, Fidesz's more than doubled (from 0.331 before the invasion to 0.675 after). These findings are contrary to our expectations, as we hypothesised a divergence of positions of these parties concerning assertiveness towards Russia. From what we can deduct from EP votes, not only did the Russian aggression of Ukraine in 2022 not produce more division between PiS and Fidesz, but it actually – and contrarily to the rhetoric – brought these parties together. The same goes for the division over Russia in the PRR “family” considered here. Particularly the French RN and the German AfD saw their level of assertiveness towards Russia increase after the invasion. Altogether, the standard deviation has also fallen considerably (from 0.371 to 0.235), reflecting higher consensus. Figure 1 demonstrates that the Russian invasion has diminished the pre-existing differences among the EU far-right parties on relations with Moscow. To be sure, these differences were vast before and remain considerable after the aggression. However, our analysis shows that Russia is a less divisive issue for the PRR parties after the invasion. Importantly, it also seems to have bridged the gap between the hawkish ECR and more accommodative ID party groups in the EP.

Figure 1. Assertiveness towards Russia before and after the invasion of Ukraine among PRR parties, EP Roll Call Votes, July 2019 – June 2022)

⁸ We do not have a conclusive explanation for this decrease in assertiveness in PiS and Vox. These parties indeed parted from the most assertive party positions among the ones analysed here. Thus, they remain strongly assertive after the invasion. One explanation for the case of PiS is that the response of the EU to the Russian invasion might be insufficient in the eyes of PiS MEPs.



Source: Own elaboration based on Vote Watch EU (2022). Notes: Means of the index of assertiveness from Table A1 in the Online Appendix (0=full compliance; 1=full assertiveness towards Russia); Votes in favour (or against, where relevant) are coded as 1=assertiveness, and votes against (or in favour, where relevant) together with abstentions and not voting are coded as 0; CI at 95%.

Hence, we find support for H1, as Fidesz's MEPs vote in a rather non-assertive way. In contrast, PiS's MEPs vote more assertively. We also find support for H3, there is a significant divergence in the levels of assertiveness towards Russia in the votes of MEPs of PRR parties. However, while H3a finds empirical proof (PRR parties converged after the invasion on the issue of Russia), we need to reject H1a, as the division between PiS and Fidesz seems smaller rather than larger after the invasion.

We run two robustness checks, recoding the index of assertiveness alternatively, i.e. leaving abstentions and non-voting aside (see Table A2 in the Online Appendix), and replicating the analysis only for final votes in the EP (see Table A4 in the Online Appendix). Regarding the former, if only votes for vis-à-vis votes against are considered, the picture is quite similar for most parties, with Vox, PiS, and in this case, also Fratelli d'Italia reducing their most hawkish positions after the invasion and RN, AfD, FPÖ, Vlaams Belang, JA21, and in this case, also Lega (the most assertive party after the invasion) seeing an increase in their

assertiveness towards Russia. Altogether, the mean assertiveness is significantly higher than when accounting for non-votes and abstentions (0.674 versus 0.540), and it has increased significantly after the invasion to 0.726.

Concerning the latter, if only final votes are accounted for, the overall level of assertiveness is lower compared to including also less important votes, and it slightly decreases after the invasion. While the direction of changes in assertiveness due to the impact of the invasion remains the same for most parties considered, the statistically significant ones are restricted to only three: PiS's decrease and RN's and Lega's increases in assertiveness.

What is striking is the discrepancy in the results gathered in Tables A1, A2, and A4 regarding Fidesz. Looking only at voting "yes" or "no", Fidesz seems to hold very hawkish positions both before and after the invasion (0.886 and 0.808, respectively). However, as we have seen, if abstention and non-voting are considered non-assertiveness, these scores are substantially different (0.331 before the invasion and 0.675 after). Considering only final votes blurs the picture even further, as there is a significant *decrease* in the assertiveness of Fidesz (0.600 before the invasion and 0.292 after). How to explain this?

A closer look at Fidesz MEPs' behaviour points to the different use of absenteeism, abstention and non-voting before and after the invasion. Before the invasion, non-voting was used to a great degree by Fidesz's MEPs to hide their non-assertiveness towards Russia (up to 100% of Fidesz MEPs fall into the category of 'non-voting' at nearly half of the votes considered before the invasion). This was the case until March 2021, when this party was part of the EPP group with more assertive stances towards Russia. After the invasion, Fidesz MEPs seem to have switched their strategy to either voting assertively in less important votes or being absent (up to 50% of Fidesz MEPs did not show up at some plenaries) and to voting non-assertively in key final votes. Notably, this is particular to Fidesz and this delicate subject for this party. This puts some constraints on our rejection of H1a. In the case of final votes, the

distance in assertiveness between Fidesz and PiS indeed increased after the invasion, as we have previously hypothesised.

Rule of Law

Table 1 gathers the mean scores of PRR parties on the defence of the Rule of Law index. These parties are unsurprisingly far from defending the RoL (mean of 0.096 on a scale from 0 to 1 where 1=defence of RoL). Fratelli d'Italia and FPÖ in Austria stand out as the ones that attack the RoL slightly less frequently, in that they defended it 19.6% and 14.1% of the time, respectively. In comparison, Fidesz is the party that attacks the RoL the most (defending it in only 4.5% of the cases). It seems that the invasion brought these numbers down even further (the mean after the invasion for all parties considered is 0.002).

Table 1. Defence of the Rule of Law before and after the invasion of Ukraine among PRR parties, EP Roll Call Votes, July 2019 – June 2022

Party	Country	EPG	MEPs	Overall		Before invasion		After invasion		Difference Before-After	
				Mean	Std.	Mean	Std.	Mean	Std.	Mean	Std.
Fratelli d'Italia	IT	ECR	8	0.166	0.182	0.196	0.215	0.000	0.000	-0.196*	0.215
FPÖ	AT	ID	3	0.120	0.000	0.141	0.000	0.000	0.000	-0.141	0.000
Vox	ES	ECR	4	0.100	0.001	0.118	0.001	0.000	0.000	-0.118***	0.001
PiS	PL	ECR	24	0.085	0.003	0.101	0.004	0.000	0.000	-0.101***	0.004
Vlaams Belang	BE	ID	3	0.079	0.000	0.094	0.000	0.000	0.000	-0.094	0.000
AfD	DE	ID	9	0.077	0.013	0.089	0.014	0.010	0.019	-0.079***	0.021
Lega	IT	ID	24	0.074	0.003	0.087	0.003	0.004	0.012	-0.083***	0.013
RN	FR	ID	19	0.073	0.009	0.086	0.011	0.000	0.000	-0.086***	0.011
JA21	NL	ECR	3	0.067	0.047	0.063	0.054	0.000	0.000	-0.063	0.054
Fidesz	HU	EPP/None	13	0.045	0.010	0.056	0.005	0.003	0.012	-0.053***	0.014
Total			110	0.082	0.054	0.096	0.064	0.002	0.009	-0.094***	0.065

Source: Own elaboration based on Vote Watch EU (2022). Notes: Defence of the Rule of Law (0=Attack on RoL; 1=Defence of RoL); Votes in favour (or against, where relevant) are coded as 1=defence of the RoL, and votes against (or in favour, where relevant) together with abstentions and not voting are coded as 0. For alternative coding with only votes in favour vs against (or vice versa) considered, see Table A3 in the Online Appendix. For only final votes, see Table A5 in the Online Appendix. For the complete list of votes considered, see Table A7 in the Online Appendix. All parties from ECR and ID with at least 3 MEPs considered, together with Fidesz. Paired t-test significance: *0.05, **0.01, ***0.001.

These results should be taken with caution, given the small number of votes on RoL after the invasion. However, the tendency is clear: PRR parties (PiS and Fidesz among them) have their backs regarding breaking the RoL, and the invasion did not substantially influence this issue. If anything, it brought these parties closer regarding the democratic backsliding in some EU member states. These results are robust to the alternative specification of only votes for vis-à-vis votes against (Table A3 in the Online Appendix). If only final votes are considered (see Table A5 in the Online Appendix), the impact of the invasion is null. As already before, PRR parties voted against the resolutions that defended the RoL.

6. Conclusions

The Russian invasion of Ukraine is part of an augmented and ever-increasing movement towards weakening democracy and the liberal international order. Democracy in the EU is attacked from the outside, with non-democracy promoters such as Russia trying to weaken it by different mechanisms such as authoritarian linkages with PRR parties. Democracy is also assaulted from within by backsliding governments and PRR parties, which often collaborate in their attacks on the RoL. How these external and internal mechanisms interplay and influence the backsliding dynamics in the EU has been widely under-researched until now.

The full-fledged Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, which we interpret as an exogenous shock, has created an entirely new situation, which affected the levels of assertiveness towards Russia and backsliding cooperation between the backslider parties and their associates among the PRR family. By analysing the voting behaviour in the EP regarding assertiveness towards Russia and defence of the RoL, we can deduct from EP votes that the Russian invasion did not produce more division between the backsliding parties, Fidesz and PiS. Even more, it actually – and contrarily to the rhetoric – brought these parties closer

together. Also the democratic backsliding coalition between these two parties remains untouched.

While mostly united in RoL voting, the far-right camp remains divided on assertiveness towards Russia. Whilst French RN, the German AfD, and the Austrian FPÖ occupy the pro-Russian camp, the closest hawkish allies of PiS seem to be the Spanish Vox, the Italian Fratelli d'Italia and (somewhat surprisingly) Lega. However, we demonstrated signs of convergence among this group concerning the Putin regime. Parties most compliant with Russian interests, such as the French RN and German AfD, moderated their pro-Russian stances. The invasion has bridged at least part of the Russian gap between the members of ECR and ID party groups in the EP, marking the Putin regime as a toxic friend.

These findings have important theoretical and methodological implications. Exogenous events and strategic interactions between domestic and external actors in the European multi-level polity are relevant for democratic backsliding in the EU. First, the military aggression by Russia changed the voting patterns of PRR parties in the EP but was not enough to disintegrate the backsliding cooperation. The Hungarian-Polish alliance is more robust than expected, e.g. in the discourse of Orbán and Kaczyński or claims of its end by pundits. Second, the military intervention of anti-democracy promoters in the EU's neighbourhood does weaken existing authoritarian diffusion processes. While the Putin regime cultivated "Trojan horses" in the EU and developed some support among the PRR parties in the past, the war in 2022 has weakened its influence. While Orbán is presented as the Russian ally in the EU, his party's voting in the EP seem to speak differently.⁹ Third, while the bigger salience of the RoL conflict is enough to tap discrepancies towards the Putin regime in bilateral backsliding relations between Fidesz and PiS, the different levels of assertiveness towards Russia hinder the already tortuous PRR

⁹ With the caveat that, when considering only final votes on resolutions, Fidesz MEPs seem to have adopted more pro-Russian stances after the invasion.

cooperation. However, the different positions towards Russia do not affect the support of PRR parties for the backsliders.

The fourth contribution is methodological. When examining the voting in the EP, we confirm the findings of Hix et al. (2007, p. 92) that including abstention and non-voting is necessary, and not only the yea votes as opposed to the no votes should be considered. Also, the relevance of the vote should be accounted for. As we have shown, before or after the invasion, Fidesz MEPs were usually more assertive towards Russia than one could expect from party leaders' discourse. However, what changed after the invasion is that significantly fewer Fidesz MEPs refrained from voting on subjects related to Russian interests. While before the invasion Fidesz MEPs used to hide their non-assertiveness under non-voting, afterwards, they seem to have switched their strategy to voting assertively in less important votes or simply being absent and voting non-assertively only in the key final votes. Hence, in delicate subjects with opposing interests, MEPs might resort to absenteeism or non-voting and vote differently depending on vote salience.

This analysis opens multiple avenues for future research. First, we have only examined the first votes after the Russian invasion. Future voting should be monitored, also in case of possible tiredness with the war. Second, the surprising changes in the voting patterns in some parties after the invasion could be looked closer on by examining the speeches of the MEPs or interviewing the involved MEPs. Third, if the Russian invasion brought PRR parties closer together, it remains to be examined whether this will translate into increased collaboration among these actors in other policy areas relevant across PRR spectrum.

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