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THE POPULIST RADICAL RIGHT AND RUSSIA: FRAMING A RELATIONSHIP

How Has the Framing And Rhetoric Of Partij Voor De Vrijheid And Vlaams Belang Towards Russia Changed After the Russian Invasion Of Ukraine?

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It is clear that since the outbreak of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 most political, societal and business actors in Europe have turned their backs towards Russia and instead focussed on supporting Ukraine. This support comes in the form of financial or military aid, but also in discursive backing and pro-Ukrainian rhetoric. Yet, do we see the same discursive patterns and rhetoric from the side of the populist radical right (PRR) in Europe, with their long and entangled history with Russia? This paper aims to find the evolution of such parties, with the Dutch Partij Voor de Vrijheid (PVV) and the Belgian Vlaams Belang (VB) taken as examples. More specifically, it aims to find an answer to the following central research question: “How has the framing and rhetoric of Partij Voor de Vrijheid and Vlaams Belang towards Russia changed after the Russian invasion of Ukraine?”. By regarding PRR parties as independent actors who have the capability of forming their own discourse and rhetoric instead of being Russian puppets destabilizing the west,

this study adds to the academic literature and builds further on the upcoming study of foreign policy and populism.

In order to adequately answer the research question, this paper uses the following structure. First, it establishes a review of the relevant literature. The established literature consists of a definition of the PRR, their foreign policy and recent history of the PVV and VB involving Russia. Afterwards, the methodology and scope are introduced followed by a discussion of the analysis. Finally this paper will present its main conclusions next to possible venues for future research.

The Populist Radical Right

The paper uses the ideational approach of Mudde in which five words describe the PRR family: nativism, authoritarianism, populism, radicalism and right-wing.¹ Nativism refers to an ideology which desires that states are solely inhabited by

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the native people, while non-native people or ideas are a threat to that homogenous state and should therefore be excluded. The second term, authoritarianism is closely linked to nativism since authoritative figures from the in-group are glorified and out-group persons should be punished.² This loyalty or obedience is not absolute, and the PRR figure will deviate from it, if required. Thirdly, the most discussed term, populism, is defined as *“an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the Volonté Générale (general will) of the people”*.³ This ideology however is not a full ideology like socialism or liberalism, but rather a thin-ideology which connects its core concepts of ‘the people’ vs ‘the elite’, to another ideology. Fourthly, the term radicalism is defined as *“opposition to some key features of liberal democracy”*.⁴ This opposition is not against democracy in and of itself, although PRR parties can be or become anti-democratic, yet their opposition is mostly focussed on constitutional protection of minorities and political pluralism. Finally, right wing is understood as a *“belief in a natural order with inequalities”*.⁵ If and only if a party entertains these terms can they be considered as a populist radical right party. There are some clarifications though. All PRR parties are nationalist but not all nationalist parties are PRR parties, elitist nationalists are therefore excluded. Even though a populist actor might be part of an elite, if they utilize a people-oriented anti-elite discourse, they are still populist.

By dissecting the definition of the populist radical right, this paper avoids any misconceptions on the used terminology and creates its own boundaries. Moreover it shows the core ideology of this group as well as their discourse, making it possible to use these concepts in the later content analysis.

Populist radical right foreign policy

Most scholarly work on populist actors has been focussed on the domestic frontier.⁶ While this is a

logical decision, since the PRR emphasises the importance of a certain people in the context of a nation(-state), it is no longer sufficient. Firstly, according to the work of Verbeek and Zaslove, populism was born out of a reaction to international political evolutions.⁷ The fall of the Soviet Union brought forward the monopoly of (liberal) democracy and with it the fundamental tenet of who belonged to the ‘demos’ or in populist terminology ‘the people’, was put into question. Additionally, globalisation and regional integration forced national governments to balance between responsible and responsive government.⁸ On the one hand coalition parties have the responsibility to abide by already existing and future binding rules from international institutions, such as the European Union (EU). On the other hand, they must respond to a fragmented and volatile electorate, whose demands usually do not align with those international actors. Secondly, the Rokkanian cleavages have been surpassed in importance by the demarcation-integration cleavage.⁹ Voters focus more on how open or closed society should be instead of the church vs state, urban vs rural, owner vs worker and centre vs periphery cleavages. Third of all, populist actors want foreign policy decision making power, just like all other processes, to be in the hands of the people.¹⁰ Moreover, their anti-elitism makes international institutions such as the EU or the International Monetary Fund prime targets for political mobilization. Fourthly, since populism is a thin-centred ideology it is inherent to these movements and parties that their associated ideology differentiates their foreign policy from other populist movements and parties. There is the populist left, the populist regionalist, the populist market liberal and the populist radical right.¹¹

There are four foreign policy topics on which the PRR differentiates itself from other populist parties. They oppose European and non-European immigration, European integration and multilateral deployment of military forces on foreign land and they believe in protectionism.¹² Following Osterman and Stahl, PRR parties detest

technocratic foreign policy, which must be an expression of the will of the people.¹³ However, European PRR parties seem to be generally disunited on one foreign policy issue: their stance towards NATO and consequentially; towards the USA or Russia. There are two groups: the continental nationalists and the atlanticist nationalists.¹⁴ The former are critical of the NATO alliance and wish to alter or leave it and consists of parties such as Lega, FPÖ, AfD and RN. Moreover, such parties tend to be pro-Russian, to the degree of proposing a military alliance with Russia.¹⁵ The latter prefer the NATO framework and tend to be pro-American. Both PVV and VB can be situated in this camp. Some PRR parties can be classified as atlanticist nationalists although that does not mean they cannot be pro-Russian.

PRR relations with Russia and the Russo-Ukrainian conflict

At the time of the Crimean referendum in 2014 multiple PRR parties, VB and PVV included, did not condemn the annexation. Some, such as PVV party-leader Geert Wilders, even went so far as to blame NATO and the EU for expanding into the Russian sphere of influence.¹⁶ There are plenty of examples ranging from a cooperation agreement between the FPÖ and Russia to Lega and RN being accused of receiving Russian funds.¹⁷ Multiple scholars have studied this bizarre and almost systemic bond between the European PRR and Russia, and have come up with several theoretical models which could explain their relationship. Carlotti finds there to be a 'marriage of convenience' between the European PRR parties and Russia based on three factors.¹⁸ Firstly, the PRR parties populism results in an adoration of Putin's leadership, since he is seen as a strong figure that can unite his 'people'. Secondly, the parties ideological proximity to Putin's ideology also plays a role. The nativism and authoritarianism mixed with their critique of political correctness and so-called 'LGBT-ideology' seem to coincide with Putin's discourse and his 'United Russia' party. Thirdly, European far-right parties see Moscow as the perfect solution and ally to fight against the loss of

sovereignty due to constant European integration. Another perspective comes from Diesen who focusses more on the historical role of Russia as an international conservative power.¹⁹ According to him, western right-wing populists and Russia share the ambition to revive classical conservatism. This relationship is two-fold. On the one hand PRR parties are attracted to Russia's endorsement of a certain set of conservative beliefs. The belief in: preserving traditions, Christian heritage, national culture and identity and elevating the family as the core institution in society. On the other hand, Russia also gains from embracing and cooperating with European PRR parties as it could lend Russia more international recognition. Even though the theoretical relationship between European PRR parties, such as VB and PVV, and Russia has been laid bare, studies relating to the framing and rhetoric surrounding Russia in recent years have been sparse. This is where this study finds its relevance by applying previous theoretical frameworks in order to find a change in framing towards Russia from VB and PVV.

Since this paper looks at the change in rhetoric and framing of Vlaams Belang and Partij Voor de Vrijheid before and after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, it is important to note that the conflict between Russia and Ukraine is a long one, in which both parties have had a chance to shape their relationship with both states. According to Klapsis, the conflict offered a great opportunity for the expression of pro-Russian sentiments.²⁰ It is therefore that this paper also looks at how VB and PVV frame their relationship with Ukraine and the conflict as a whole. What follows is a short summary of the recent history between both parties and Moscow and Kiev. VB is the party with the least history with both countries especially before 2014. With the Crimean-crisis, some VB members attended the referendum as official observers. The party later distanced itself from these actions but set members did not get expelled. The figure that stands at the central of VB-Russia relations appears to be Filip Dewinter. In 2016 he saw Putin as a man with a "healthy world view" and just weeks before the Invasion

he tweeted: “Anti-Putin and anti-Russian smear does not help us. Neutrality is the message! Russia is our ally, not our enemy...”²¹ The PVV on the other hand does have some, less anecdotal and more systemic, history dealing with Ukraine and Russia. When Crimea was annexed the party did not condemn the act of aggression, moreover it blamed the west and the EU for causing the crisis. Yet this pro-Russian attitude changed four months later with the downing of flight MH17 by a Russian missile killing 196 Dutch nationals. Although party leader Geert Wilders did not specifically blame Russia for the tragedy he did claim to bring the perpetrators to justice.²² Two years later in 2016, the PVV situated itself on the ‘no’-team on the referendum on the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement. We would expect the party to use aspects of this history to explain their rhetoric towards the invasion.

Methodology

To answer the question “How has the framing and rhetoric of Partij Voor de Vrijheid and Vlaams Belang towards Russia changed after the Russian invasion of Ukraine?” a mixed-method approach is used, applying both a quantitative and a qualitative content analysis next to a framing analysis. The content analysis consists primarily of a deductive content analysis, in which a pre-determined and theoretical codebook is applied in an explorative phase, after which the codebook is updated. Both the quantitative as the qualitative content analysis can numerically show trends, patterns and differences, it does not however read between the lines. Therefore a framing analysis is also added in this study. These methods are applied to national and European parliamentary debates ranging from the first of January 2021 until the 31st of June 2023.

The reason why VB and PVV were chosen as research subject is threefold. Firstly, They utilise the same language, making it easier to study as well as to compare, and they share a similar (export) economy, culture as well as history with Russia. Secondly, their framing and rhetoric surrounding the conflict has not been studied extensively, especially for VB. Finally, the other

PRR party in the Netherlands; Forum voor Democratie, was not selected due to their instability and their extreme attitudes towards Russia, making them more of an outlier.

Analysis

In order to study the evolution of the framing and rhetoric of VB and PVV when it comes to Russia, the analysis is divided in four phases. The first “Pre-War” phase looks at parliamentary debates ranging from January first 2021 until February 23rd 2022, the second “Initial Reaction” phase ranges from February 24th 2022 until March 24th 2022, the third phase ranges from March 25th 2022 until October 31st 2022 and finally the fourth phase ranges from November first 2022 until June 30th 2023.

The theoretical conceptions that explain the connection between the western PRR and Russia found in the literature review are implemented in a codebook. It consists of Mudde’s definition of the PRR ideology which desires that the state is solely inhabited by the native people while non-native people are a threat to that homogenous state (Nativism), in which authoritative in-group figures are glorified and out-group persons are to be punished (Authoritarianism).²³ In the world view of the PRR, society is separated in two homogenous antagonistic groups, ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’, in which politics should be the expression of the general will of the people (Populism).²⁴ Moreover, they oppose some core concepts of liberal democracy (Radicalism) and they believe in a natural hierarchy (Right-Wing).²⁵ Carlotti’s view on PRR-Russia relations is also implemented in the codebook.²⁶ She finds there to be a marriage of convenience in which three factors facilitate this relationship. Firstly, the parties’ populism result in an adoration of Putin’s leadership. Furthermore, the ideological proximity of European PRR parties and Russia foster positive relations and the PRR parties consider Russia an ally to fight against European integration. Another perspective on PRR-Russia relations that will be studied is Diesen’s “Russia as an international conservative power”.²⁷ On the one hand, PRR parties are attracted to Russia’s

belief in: preserving traditions, Christian heritage, national culture and identity and elevating the family as the core institution in society. On the other hand, Russia gains from embracing set European parties to gain more legitimacy. A final theoretical conception comes from Ostermann and Stahl who theorise that populist radical right parties strive to replace technocratic foreign policy (-decision making processes) with those inspired by the general will.²⁸

Additionally, some extra codes are added to complete the analysis. These check if the party mentions Ukraine or Russia in a positive, neutral or negative light, if they desire neutrality in the conflict and in what context the mentions take place.

Results

Pre-war

Before the war, Vlaams Belang only mentioned Russia a limited number of times. Ukraine wasn't even mentioned at all. There was a stark difference between their rhetoric in the European parliament and the federal parliament. In the European Parliament, VB follows the theoretical expectations of PRR-Russia relations. They regard Russia as an integral part of the European continent which is being demonized by the EU for not following its left-liberal dogmas. Moreover, they state that the EU has no say in Russian internal affairs. In their national parliament however, they have a more critical tone towards Russia. They put the fault of the high energy prices and as a result "the people" on the side of the government since the economy has become too dependent on Russian energy.

In contrast to VB, the PVV does extensively mention Russia and Ukraine before the invasion in 2022. When the party talks about Russia they primarily mention the Russo-Ukrainian conflict in which they strive for prevention, by appeasement and rethinking the status of Crimea, they desire Dutch neutrality and they wish to form positive diplomatic relations. When the party mentions Ukraine however, they take a more neutral to negative stance. The party states that it has no

obligation to help Ukraine and that the country is situated in the Russian sphere of influence. Most interestingly, the party blames Ukraine for contributing to the MH17 tragedy by letting the flight cross dangerous airspace. Finally the party critiques sanctions against Russia due to their collateral damage to the people, their escalatory effects and the further involvement of the Netherlands. Unlike VB, the PVV directly blames the west for the conflict as Russia is seen as protecting itself from growing western influence and decadence.

Initial reaction

During the first month of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the differences between VB and PVV seem to only multiply. VB has turned its back to Russia and now condemns the aggression outright and the party is even supportive of limited sanctions against Russia. Moreover, the party blames the government for contributing to the economic crisis but puts the cause of this downturn in the war. When it comes to Ukraine, VB appears to be extremely supportive of their cause, while still opposing the states entry into NATO. What's remarkable is their framing of the Ukrainian refugee influx. This frame consists of three parts: sameness making of the Ukrainian people, granting innocence to Ukrainian refugees and demonizing other refugees. The party also constructs the region of Ukraine as consisting of Belgium which results in the party advocating to take in Ukrainian refugees which are framed as 'women', 'children' and 'real' compared to other refugees which are seen as 'men', 'schemers' and 'fake'.

PVV also condemned Russia and its invasion but it did not become positive about Ukraine, unlike VB. Their focus lies strongly with their desire for Dutch neutrality. This is done by stating that the Netherlands has no obligations to protect Ukraine and that Dutch involvement, including sanctions and arms deliveries, would hurt "the people". Just like VB, the PVV frames Ukrainian refugees as "true" and other refugees as "false" or "fortune-seekers", but unlike VB, the PVV does not regard the Netherlands to be part of the Ukrainian

region. Ukrainian refugees should be taken in by their neighbouring countries and not by the Netherlands.

25 March 2022 – 31 October 2022

After the dust of the first month of the invasion settled, Vlaams Belang changed its rhetoric and framing. While the party still has a negative stance towards Russia, condemning their ‘illegal’ war, the party has grown less supportive of the Ukrainian cause. They use more sharp language in their opposition to Ukrainian membership of the EU claiming that Ukraine neither has a stable market-economy nor a stable democratic rule on top of being the most corrupt country in Europe. The party now opposes sanctions against Russia, claiming they hurt the people and would strengthen Russia. When it comes to Ukrainian refugees however VB remains extraordinary supportive. They are still framed as deserving and are still welcome in the country. What is most interesting is how they wish to avoid the anti-Ukrainian-refugee rhetoric taking ground in the Netherlands. They warn the government to not forget the people, otherwise the own population will turn against the Ukrainian refugees. During this period, the party no longer gives any leeway to the governments victimhood. They blame the government for the economic crisis, instead of the war, and accuse it from using the war as a scapegoat. Moreover, the EU is charged with using the war to grab more power.

The PVV’s rhetoric has remained relatively stable in this period. They don’t openly support Ukraine and they oppose government sanctions against Russia for being futile, strengthening Putin and harming the people. Just like VB, they blame the government for using the war as an alibi and they accuse the EU of using the conflict to centralise more power. The party agreed to taking in a limited amount of Ukrainian women and children, while still emphasising the role of the neighbouring countries. In parallel to VB, the PVV criticizes the national government of caring more about Ukrainian refugees than the people.

1 November 2022 – 30 June 2023

For the most part, Vlaams Belang has maintained its framing of Russia, the war and the reaction of Belgium and the EU. The party remains supportive of Ukraine, although less fervently and still condemns Russia. During this period, the Ukrainian refugees are only mentioned once as deserving, which coincides with the party no longer calling Ukrainian people as a European brother folk. Moreover, the government and other political parties are accused of using the war as an alibi to hide away their failures. Most interestingly, VB compares the Russian invasion to the Holodomor massacre, equating the Russian state to the USSR.

The rhetoric of the PVV remained relatively stable, still opposing sanctions, pleading for neutrality and temporary and limited hosting of Ukrainian refugees. Additionally the government is still accused of caring more about Ukrainian people than the own Dutch people. The party still states that the Dutch government, and especially the people, don’t owe Ukraine anything. Subsequently all aid to Ukraine must be halted since it is seen as futile, a waste of Dutch money, harming the people and the funds and weapons should go to strengthening the Dutch military. Finally, the party announces that it is not the duty of the Dutch to stop the war, but it is the job of the Russians, Ukrainians and Americans (who are depicted as the engine behind the Ukrainian war effort).

Conclusion

Before the invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, Vlaams Belang rarely debated on Russia-related topics. The few times that they did, the party blamed the national government of becoming to dependant on Russian energy and even called Russia an ally in the European parliament. This positive outlook however changed drastically right after the invasion. The party became negative towards Russia and extremely supportive of Ukraine, going so far as to support limited sanctions against Russia. VB applied a sameness making frame to the Ukrainian people by equating them to a European brother folk deserving of our aid, yet they still

opposed the EU membership of Ukraine. Subsequently, the party was also in favor of hosting Ukrainian refugees in Belgium. After time passed, VB was still supportive of the Ukrainian struggle and still employed sameness making rhetoric, but the radical positive outlook eventually watered down. The party came to oppose sanctions as they saw them hurting the people, furthering Belgian involvement and strengthening Putin. VB became less sympathetic to the struggling national government and put most of the blame of the following economic downturn on the national government and European Union instead of the war. Moreover, the party accuses the EU of grabbing more power and using the war as an alibi. Near the end of the analysis the party equated the current Russian invasion to the Holodomor tragedy in which the Ukrainians are once again fighting for the survival of their nation. Vlaams Belang's current stance and rhetoric on Russia and the war goes as follows:

The Flemish or Belgian people are victims of national policies towards the Russo-Ukrainian war, consisting primarily of sanctions and taxes on oil. Sanctions are regarded as harmful, counterproductive and causing further Belgian involvement in the conflict. The Ukrainian people should be supported since they are a European brother folk. The EU is seen as using the crisis to grow its power, its decisionmakers as an undemocratic elite and as the main cause of the economic harm to the people.

Before 24 February, the PVV follows the expectations established in the literature review the closest. It desires neutral to positive relations with Russia and opposes the government imposed sanctions as they cause harm to the people, escalate the conflict and involve the Netherlands. To justify this stance, the party blamed 'the west' for causing the eastern conflict due to their constant spreading of western societal decay. In this period the party emphasises Dutch neutrality in a possible war and subsequently state that they don't own Ukraine anything since it is not part of NATO. On

top of this the party blames Ukraine for being partially at fault for the MH17 incident.

After the invasion however, the party shifted away from some of its stances. It no longer supported positive relations with Russia and it no longer blamed the west for the conflict. Yet, they still opposed the sanction regime with the same arguments together with claiming that they would strengthen Russia. Moreover, party members don't put the cause of the economic downturn with the war, but rather with their national government. Any support for Ukraine is seen as futile and unnecessary since the country is not part of NATO. The party wants the west to facilitate peace-talks between Russia and Ukraine (and the USA, who is seen as the engine behind Ukraine). After a month of war in Ukraine the party starts to accuse its own government of caring more about Ukrainians than the people. At the same time, the PVV frames the EU as an undemocratic and technocratic institution which is using the crisis to grab more power from its member states. Partij Voor de Vrijheid's current stance and rhetoric on Russia and the war goes as follows:

The Dutch people are victims of national policies towards the Russo-Ukrainian war, including sanctions, arms deliveries, financial aid and funds for Ukrainian refugees. Sanctions are regarded as harmful, escalatory, counterproductive, fruitless and causing further Dutch involvement in the conflict. The Netherlands should remain in a state of absolute neutrality. The EU is seen as using the crisis to grow its power and its decisionmakers as an undemocratic elite.

An interesting finding from the analysis is the two parties views on Ukrainian refugees. Both parties apply a 'fake' vs 'real' refugee framing. Ukrainians, who are mostly depicted as vulnerable women and children are regarded as true war-refugees fleeing violence, while other refugees, depicted as men, are fortune-seeking schemers. Both parties' nativism and authoritarianism shines through in their solution to this influx; expulsion of these 'other refugees' to make place for Ukrainians. There are however

some differences. VB goes the furthest in its sameness-making of Ukrainians. They are a European brother folk and the region of Ukraine, where refugees are welcome, is constructed as including Flanders. As a consequence the party

has been willing to take in Ukrainian refugees since the beginning of the war. The PVV still frames Ukrainian refugees as Europeans, but they should be taken in in their neighbouring countries, which the party is willing to help.

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