

UDC 329:327.8
DOI: 10.46493/2663-2675.34(4).2024.104

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Pro-Russian political forces in Europe: Factors of electoral support

Abstract. The purpose of this study was to identify and systematise the key factors that determine the electoral support for pro-Russian political forces in the European Union in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian war. To fulfil this purpose, a comprehensive analysis of the historical dynamics and current state of pro-Russian parties in the EU was performed, the level of their electoral support was investigated, and the key factors influencing their popularity were identified. The findings of the study show that Russian aggression against Ukraine has become a catalyst for significant transformations in the strategies and rhetoric of pro-Russian forces, forcing them to adapt to new geopolitical realities. The study covered a heterogeneous picture of electoral support for these parties in different EU countries: while in some states, especially in Central and Eastern Europe, there was a decline in the popularity of openly pro-Russian forces, in other countries they maintained or even strengthened their positions. The key factors contributing to the rise in popularity of pro-Russian political forces were economic problems related to the energy crisis and inflation, Euroscepticism and anti-globalisation sentiment, and the influence of Russian disinformation. Cultural and historical ties with Russia also play a significant role, especially in Central and Eastern Europe. The study found that pro-Russian forces have adapted their rhetoric, often positioning themselves as “neutral” and focusing on criticising sanctions against Russia from an economic perspective. This strategy allows them to maintain electoral support while avoiding direct accusations of supporting the aggressor. A significant aspect of their activities has been the use of information technology to spread alternative narratives and undermine trust in European institutions. The findings of this study highlight the need for a comprehensive approach to countering pro-Russian influences in Europe, including strengthening economic solidarity in the EU, improving communication between European institutions and citizens, and developing effective strategies to combat disinformation.

Keywords: euroscepticism; populism; disinformation; sanctions; energy crisis; inflation; electoral behaviour

Introduction

The study of pro-Russian political forces in Europe and the factors of their electoral support is of particular significance in the context of the current geopolitical situation. Russia's aggression against Ukraine has dramatically changed the political landscape of Europe, forcing a rethinking of relations with the Russian Federation, and calling into question the effectiveness of the previous policy of “engagement”. At the same time, despite the pan-European consensus on condemning Russia's actions, political parties and movements that hold a pro-Russian or neutral position on the war in Ukraine stay strong and even strengthen their positions in a range of EU countries. The problematic of the present study lies in identifying and analysing the factors that determine the electoral support for pro-Russian political forces in the European Union in the context of the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian war. This issue is critical for understanding internal

political processes in European countries, assessing the stability of European unity in countering Russian aggression, and predicting possible changes in the foreign policy of individual EU member states.

Historically, pro-Russian sentiments in European politics have had different origins, ranging from the ideological proximity of left and far-right parties to pragmatic economic interests. However, Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2022 created a new context in which support or neutrality towards Russia's actions became much more controversial. Nevertheless, a series of political forces in Europe continue to receive considerable electoral support, advocating positions that can be described as pro-Russian or neutral in relation to the Russian-Ukrainian war.

Analysing the impact of Russian aggression on European politics, S. Braghiroli (2023) examines how pro-Russian parties in Europe have adapted to the new geopolitical

Received: 14.05.2024, Revised: 06.08.2024, Accepted: 26.08.2024

Suggested Citation:

Dmytrenko, S. (2024). Pro-Russian political forces in Europe: Factors of electoral support. *Foreign Affairs*, 34(4), 104-115. doi: 10.46493/2663-2675.34(4).2024.104.

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realities. The researcher finds that although many of these parties have been forced to distance themselves from open support for Russia, they continue to promote narratives that undermine EU unity in confronting Russian aggression. This is manifested in criticism of sanctions, calls for “neutrality” in the conflict, and a focus on internal EU problems instead of support for Ukraine.

An important aspect of the problem is the link between right-wing extremism and Russian influence. In this context, S. Butt & D. Byman (2023) examine how Russia uses far-right movements to advance its interests in Europe. The researchers note that this cooperation is based on a common rejection of liberal values and a desire to undermine the unity of the West. At the same time, R. Cohen (2023) points out that pro-Russian voices in Europe, although less prominent since the start of the full-scale invasion, still retain considerable influence in some countries.

Considering the prospects for European elections, S. Sayem (2024) analyses the phenomenon of the “hard right puzzle” in the context of the upcoming European Parliament elections. The researcher emphasises that right-wing and far-right parties, many of which have a history of pro-Russian sympathies, could significantly strengthen their positions. This is confirmed by C. Mudde (2024), who predicts an increase in the influence of extreme right-wing forces in the European elections of 2024. Notably, the electoral support for pro-Russian forces is not limited to the right-wing spectrum. As the analysis of İ. Saylan & M. Aknur (2024) shows, populist movements of various ideological orientations are challenging normative and geopolitical Europe, often using pro-Russian rhetoric as a tool to criticise the EU.

In the context of Russia’s political influence on European countries, L. Bokinskie (2024) considers the concept of “Russian political warfare”. The researcher analyses the methods and strategies used by Russia to influence European politics, specifically through the support of pro-Russian parties and movements. At the same time, the researcher notes the limited effectiveness of these efforts in the context of open aggression against Ukraine. Particular attention should be paid to the study by L. Hooghe *et al.* (2024), which analyses how the Russian threat affects the consolidation of the West. Researchers have identified a complex dynamic where, on the one hand, transatlantic unity is strengthening, and on the other hand, populist and Eurosceptic forces continue to receive significant support, often using pro-Russian rhetoric.

An analysis of the available literature helps to identify several key factors that influence the electoral support for pro-Russian forces in Europe. Firstly, there are the economic problems associated with the energy crisis and inflation, which some voters attribute to the policy of sanctions against Russia (Cohen, 2023; Sayem, 2024). Secondly, the rise of Euroscepticism and nationalist sentiment, which often correlate with pro-Russian sympathies (Mudde, 2024; Saylan & Aknur, 2024). Thirdly, the influence of Russian disinformation and propaganda, which, despite its limited effectiveness, continues to influence public opinion in some European countries (Bokinskie, 2024). At the same time, research also reveals opposite trends. L. Hooghe *et al.* (2024) note that Russian aggression has led to a certain consolidation of Western democracies

and increased support for Ukraine. This creates a complex dynamic where pro-Russian forces are forced to adapt their rhetoric to the new reality, often disguising their sympathies for Russia under the slogans of “peace” and “neutrality” (Bokinskie, 2024).

Thus, the analysis of the literature points to the need for an in-depth investigation of the factors of electoral support for pro-Russian forces in Europe, considering both conventional factors (economic problems, Euroscepticism) and new challenges related to Russian aggression against Ukraine. Particular attention should be paid to investigating how these forces are adapting their rhetoric and strategies in the changed geopolitical context, as well as analysing the effectiveness of their efforts considering the growing consolidation of the West against Russian aggression. The growing popularity of these political forces raises a series of questions about the factors that determine their electoral appeal. Possible explanations include economic difficulties related to the energy crisis and inflation, which some voters attribute to the policy of sanctions against Russia; the rise of Euroscepticism and nationalist sentiment; the impact of Russian disinformation and propaganda; and general dissatisfaction with traditional political elites.

The purpose of this study was to identify the reasons and mechanisms for maintaining the influence of pro-Russian political forces in the European Union against the background of the Russian-Ukrainian war. To fulfil this purpose, the following tasks were set: to analyse the historical dynamics and current state of pro-Russian political forces in the EU, their ideological positions and rhetoric on the Russian-Ukrainian war; to investigate the level of electoral support for pro-Russian parties in different EU countries and identify the factors that influence its dynamics; to identify key socio-economic, cultural, and informational factors that contribute to the growing popularity of pro-Russian political forces in European countries.

Materials and Methods

The study analysed key resolutions of the European Parliament, specifically Resolution of the European Parliament No. 2022/2564(RSP) (2022), which defined the EU’s official position on the conflict. This helped to assess the discrepancies between the EU’s official position and the rhetoric of pro-Russian political forces. Official statements and speeches of political leaders such as Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban (Hungary’s Orban..., 2022) and Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico (Slovak PM..., 2024) were studied, which helped to analyse the evolution of the rhetoric of pro-Russian forces after the start of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

An analysis of these statements and speeches also revealed common narratives used by pro-Russian forces to justify their position, such as the defence of national interests, criticism of the “Brussels bureaucracy” and calls for a diplomatic solution to the conflict. This offered a better understanding of strategies for adapting pro-Russian rhetoric to new geopolitical realities and methods for maintaining electoral support in the changed international context. The study analysed the statistical data on the results of parliamentary and European elections in the EU countries for 2014–2024. Specifically, the results of the

elections in France, Italy, Hungary, Slovakia, and the Baltic States were investigated in detail. This helped to trace the dynamics of electoral support for pro-Russian parties and identify specific regional features of their influence. A comparative analysis of the positions of pro-Russian forces on key aspects of European policy, such as sanctions against Russia, support for Ukraine, and EU energy policy, was performed. This helped to identify both commonalities and differences in the approaches of different parties and movements. The study analysed the reports of international organisations, specifically the 2024 report of the European External Action Service (EEAS) on foreign information influence and manipulation (EEAS, 2024). This helped to assess the extent and methods of Russian information influence on European politics.

Academic publications and analytical reports by leading experts in the field of European politics and international relations were studied, which helped to consider different theoretical approaches to the analysis of pro-Russian forces in Europe and the factors of their support. A series of methods were used to process and analyse the data collected. The study periodised the development of pro-Russian forces in Europe, identifying three key stages: before 2014, 2014–2022, and 2022–2024. This helped to trace the evolution of their strategies and rhetoric in response to changes in the geopolitical situation. The study typified pro-Russian political forces by ideological orientation, attitude towards the EU, position on sanctions against Russia, and support for Ukraine. This helped to identify a variety of approaches and strategies within the pro-Russian spectrum of European politics. Two comparative tables were developed to systematise and visualise the findings of the study. The first table shows the evolution of pro-Russian political forces in Europe over 2014–2024 according to ten key parameters. The second table compares the impact of various factors on the popularity of pro-Russian forces in Eastern and Western Europe.

Results

The historical dynamics and current state of pro-Russian political forces in the EU. Pro-Russian political forces in Europe have undergone a complex evolution over the past decades. Their establishment and development took place against the backdrop of considerable geopolitical changes that substantially affected the ideological positions and electoral support of these parties. The post-Cold War period, from 1991 to 2014, saw a gradual increase in the influence of pro-Russian forces in European politics, driven by a series of interrelated factors. Economic interests played a key role, as energy dependence on Russia and the potential of the Russian market for European companies created a favourable basis for cooperation. C. Mudde (2024) emphasises that many European parties viewed Russia as a significant economic partner, especially in the energy sector. This economic attractiveness was reinforced by the ideological proximity of some European political forces to the Russian model of “sovereign democracy” and conservative values. N. Guerra (2024) notes that some European right-wing parties have found ideological affinities with the Putin regime, especially in terms of traditional values and criticism of liberal democracy. Furthermore, geopolitical considerations related to the desire

to create a counterweight to American influence in Europe have prompted some European political forces to see rapprochement with Russia as a way to reduce dependence on the United States and increase Europe’s strategic autonomy (Becker & von Ondarza, 2024). This combination of economic, ideological, and geopolitical factors created a favourable environment for the growth of pro-Russian forces in European politics during this period. However, the annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014 was a turning point that forced many pro-Russian parties to reconsider their positions. This process intensified after Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. The Russian-Ukrainian war has split the European right-wing, forcing it to make a clear decision about its geopolitical orientation (Guerra, 2024).

In 2014–2024, the evolution of pro-Russian forces in Europe was characterised by a complex dynamic of interconnected processes. The initial differentiation of positions, when parties from Central and Eastern Europe abruptly changed their rhetoric to anti-Russian, provoked a chain reaction. This forced even those parties that retained a pro-Russian orientation to adapt their rhetoric, softening it and distancing themselves from open support for Russia’s actions. This adaptation has led to a polarisation of the European political spectrum: pro-Russian forces have become more marginalised in many countries, but paradoxically strengthened their positions in some regions. This polarisation has created favourable conditions for the growth of pro-Russian parties at the national level in some countries, where they have managed to increase their electoral support and even enter government coalitions, contrary to the European trend. Thus, the initial differentiation of positions triggered a cascade of changes that ultimately led to a complex and heterogeneous picture of the influence of pro-Russian forces in Europe, where marginalisation in some regions was accompanied by strengthening of positions in others.

A significant aspect of the implementation of pro-Russian policy in Europe has been the use of energy resources, specifically natural gas, as an instrument of geopolitical influence. This strategy, known as the “Falín-Kvitsynsky Doctrine” (Ruszel, 2017), envisaged replacing the military influence of the USSR, and later Russia, with economic influence through the supply of natural gas. A striking example of the implementation of this doctrine was Germany, where Russian gas corporations, especially Gazprom, actively promoted their interests through lobbying and economic cooperation. The construction of the Nord Stream 1 and Nord Stream 2 gas pipelines was the culmination of this strategy, creating a direct energy dependence of the EU’s largest economy on Russia. Former high-ranking officials, such as Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, who after leaving office took up senior positions in Russian energy companies, helped promote Russian interests in German politics. This strategy allowed Russia not only to gain significant economic benefits but also to create political leverage, which became especially clear during the 2021–2022 energy crisis and subsequent full-scale aggression against Ukraine. However, as N. Guerra (2024), “the Russian-Ukrainian war destroyed the illusion of the effectiveness of this strategy, forcing European countries to reconsider their energy policies and look for alternative sources of supply”.

As of 2024, pro-Russian forces in Europe are a heterogeneous group with varying levels of influence in different countries, making it difficult to formulate a unified European policy towards Russia. The Russian-Ukrainian war has become a key factor that has forced pro-Russian political forces in Europe to clearly define their ideological positions and adapt their rhetoric. An analysis of their statements and political programmes reveals several main approaches: Calls for “neutrality” and “peaceful resolution of the conflict” – many parties that used to openly support Russia now position themselves as “neutral” and advocate for an immediate ceasefire and peace talks. This rhetoric allows them to avoid directly supporting Russian aggression while criticising EU and NATO policies (Guerra, 2024). Such an approach often ignores the aggressive nature of Russia’s actions and its violations of international law, specifically Article 2(4) of the United Nations Charter (1945), which prohibits the use of force against the territorial integrity and political independence of any state.

Criticism of sanctions against Russia: Pro-Russian forces often emphasise the negative impact of sanctions on the EU economy, arguing that they hurt European countries more than Russia. This rhetoric appeals to the economic interests of voters and attempts to undermine EU unity in confronting Russian aggression (Becker & von Ondarza, 2024). A striking example of such rhetoric is the statement of Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban, who in September 2022 said: “Brussels’ sanctions pushed Europe into an energy crisis” and argued that lifting the sanctions would lead to an immediate 50% drop in gas prices and lower inflation (Hungary’s Orban..., 2022). Notably, this position contradicts European Parliament Resolution 2022/2564(RSP) of 1 March 2022, which calls for tougher sanctions against Russia (Resolution of the European Parliament No. 2022/2564(RSP), 2022).

Focus on internal EU issues: Instead of discussing Russian aggression, these parties often focus on internal EU issues, such as inflation, the energy crisis, and migration. This allows them to divert attention from foreign policy issues and appeal to populist sentiments. This approach may be considered a violation of the principle of solidarity prescribed in Article 24(3) of the Treaty on European Union (1957).

Anti-American rhetoric: Some pro-Russian forces present the war as a confrontation between Russia and the US/NATO, downplaying the role of Ukraine and European countries. This narrative strategy is aimed at undermining transatlantic unity and legitimising Russian aggression. A striking example of such rhetoric is the statement by Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico, who in January 2024 claimed that “Ukraine is not an independent and sovereign country” but “is under the full influence and control of the United States” (Slovak PM..., 2024). Such rhetoric contradicts the principles prescribed in Article 21 of the Treaty on European Union (1957), which defines the values and objectives of the EU’s foreign policy, including support for democracy, the rule of law, and the sovereignty of states.

Use of Russian propaganda narratives: Russian propaganda narratives about the “denazification” of Ukraine or the “protection of the Russian-speaking population”

are often repeated (Ferraro, 2023). These narratives have no legal or factual basis and contradict the EU’s official position. The dissemination of such information can be considered a violation of Article 11 of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights (2000), which guarantees freedom of expression and information, but also prescribes liability for the abuse of this right. Notably, the rhetoric of pro-Russian forces often teeters on the edge of legality, avoiding direct violations of EU and national laws. However, their statements and actions undermine the unity of the EU and its ability to effectively counter Russian aggression, which can be considered an indirect violation of the principles of loyalty and solidarity prescribed in the EU treaties.

Russian aggression against Ukraine has become a catalyst for profound transformations in the strategies and rhetoric of pro-Russian political forces in Europe. This process of adaptation, characterised by complexity and heterogeneity, reflects the diversity of political contexts in the EU and demonstrates the flexibility of these parties in adapting to new geopolitical realities. An analysis of these adaptation processes reveals five key strategies that are shaping the new landscape of pro-Russian politics in Europe. “Strategic distancing” allows parties to balance between publicly condemning aggression and criticising EU policies while maintaining electoral support. This tactic, while effective from an internal policy perspective, teeters on the brink of violating the principles of EU solidarity.

The “reorientation towards internal problems” shifts the focus of the discussion from foreign policy issues to the economic consequences of sanctions and the energy crisis. This strategy, appealing to the immediate interests of voters, creates the basis for criticism of European unity in countering aggression. The positioning of “neutrality” as a political stance is becoming a tool to avoid direct support for Russia, while undermining efforts to help Ukraine. This rhetoric, masquerading as peacekeeping, factually favours Russian interests, violating the principle of EU solidarity. “Information warfare” through the spread of disinformation and propaganda narratives is becoming a powerful tool for undermining EU unity. This tactic, by creating information chaos, directly threatens democratic principles and freedom of information enshrined in EU law. The “geopolitical reorientation” reflects the search for new alliances and partnerships, especially among parties that previously had close ties with Russia. This strategy, although aimed at adapting to new realities, potentially contradicts the principles of EU foreign policy. This reorientation is particularly noticeable among parties that have faced the need to reconsider their geopolitical positions in light of Russia’s aggression against Ukraine. These political forces, seeking to maintain their influence and electoral support, are actively seeking new international contacts and ideological guidelines, which often leads to ambiguous and contradictory foreign policy positions.

These adaptation strategies, interacting and intertwining, create a complex and dynamic picture of the transformation of pro-Russian forces in Europe. Their flexibility and ability to quickly adapt to changing conditions pose a serious challenge to the establishment of a common European policy towards Russia and Ukraine. This requires constant monitoring and analysis, as well as the development of effective counter-strategies to

preserve EU unity and values in the face of the ongoing geopolitical crisis.

N. Guerra (2024) also addresses the significant role of external influences in this process of adaptation: “The ideological influences of figures such as Steve Bannon and Alexander Dugin continue to shape the geopolitical visions of the European right, creating a complex network of ideological and political connections”. Thus, the adaptation of pro-Russian forces to the new geopolitical realities is characterised by complexity, heterogeneity, and constant evolution. This situation poses serious challenges to EU unity and its ability to effectively counter Russian aggression, requiring constant monitoring and analysis by European institutions and researchers. An analysis of the

evolution of pro-Russian political forces in Europe over the past decade reveals profound transformations in their positions and strategies, reflecting a dynamic response to the changing geopolitical environment. These changes cover a wide range of aspects, from ideological orientation to concrete political actions, demonstrating the complex adaptation of pro-Russian forces to the new realities of European politics. To visualise these multidimensional changes, comparative Table 1 has been developed, which systematises the key aspects of the evolution of pro-Russian forces. This table not only illustrates the significant shifts in their positions, but also highlights the heterogeneity and complexity of this political phenomenon in the context of European integration and foreign policy challenges.

Table 1. Comparing the Evolution of Pro-Russian Political Forces in Europe (2014-2024)

Aspect	Before 2014	2014-2022	2022-2024
Ideological orientation	Open support for Russia, focus on economic cooperation	Ambivalence, balancing between a pro-Russian position and criticism of Russia's actions	Polarisation: sharp division into pro-Russian and anti-Russian forces
Rhetoric on Ukraine	Ukraine is considered part of Russia's sphere of influence	Criticism of Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic integration, calls for neutrality	The split: from full support for Ukraine to accusations of provoking the conflict
Attitudes towards EU sanctions	The issue was not relevant	Criticism of sanctions as harmful to the EU economy	Increased criticism, calls to lift sanctions
Geopolitical orientation	Striving for a multipolar world with a strong role for Russia	Growth of Euroscepticism, criticism of the US and NATO	Diversification of positions: from pro-Atlantic to Eurasian
Economic policy	Maintaining close economic ties with Russia	Balancing economic interests with geopolitical realities	Emphasis on energy independence, criticism of dependence on Russian resources
Internal political influence	Marginal positions in most EU countries	Growth of support, entry into parliaments and coalitions	Increased influence in some countries but overall marginalisation in the EU
Attitudes towards the EU	Criticism of the EU as a limiter of national sovereignty	Growing Euroscepticism, calls for EU reform	The split: from complete rejection of the EU to the desire to reform it from within
Information strategy	Limited presence in the media space	Active use of social media and alternative media	Accusations of misinformation, adaptation to increased regulation
International alliances	Limited cooperation between pro-Russian forces in the EU	Formation of transnational alliances of right-wing forces	Fragmentation of alliances, search for new partnerships
Legal status	Legal activities within the framework of national legislation	Increased legal pressure in some countries	Banning some organisations, strengthening legal control

Source: created by the author of this study

Table 1 demonstrates the dynamics of changes in the positions and strategies of pro-Russian political forces in Europe over the past decade, reflecting the complexity and heterogeneity of this political spectrum. It illustrates how geopolitical developments, especially Russian aggression against Ukraine, have forced these forces to adapt and re-think their positions, often leading to internal splits and reorientation.

Electoral support for pro-Russian parties in EU countries. The political landscape of the European Union has undergone a considerable transformation in terms of support for pro-Russian parties, especially since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022. These dynamics are complex and heterogeneous, reflecting the diversity of historical, cultural, and geopolitical factors that influence electoral preferences in different EU countries and regions. A detailed analysis of these changes

requires a deep understanding of the specifics of each country, as well as the wider European context.

East-Central Europe conflicts with itself. There is no single “post-communist” response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine (Grzymała-Busse, 2024). This fundamental divergence in the reactions of post-communist EU countries to Russian aggression is also reflected in electoral trends. In the Baltic states and Poland, which have historically had difficult relations with Russia and are among the most consistent supporters of Ukraine, there has been a steady decline in support for pro-Russian forces. For instance, in Estonia, the Centre Party, which traditionally targeted Russian-speaking voters and had a softer stance on Russia, suffered substantial losses in the 2023 parliamentary elections, receiving only 15.3% of the vote compared to 23.1% in 2019 (Mölder, 2024). This reflects a change in the electorate's attitude towards a more

critical stance on Russia and its policies. At the same time, in some Central European countries, the opposite trend is observed. In Hungary, where the government of Viktor Orbán openly opposes sanctions against Russia and criticises support for Ukraine, the ruling Fidesz party maintains a prominent level of support. In the 2022 parliamentary elections, this party received 54.13% of the vote (Sadecki, 2022), which demonstrates the resilience of her electoral base, despite international criticism of its stance on the Russian-Ukrainian war. Slovakia is another example of growing support for pro-Russian forces. According to A. Grzymała-Busse (2024), "...the recent elections returned to power a politician who advocates for the end of aid to Ukraine and actively seeks to maintain his country's dependence on Russian energy exports". Truly, in the 2023 parliamentary elections, the Směr-SD party led by Robert Fico, which advocates a more neutral stance on the Russian-Ukrainian war, received 22.94% of the vote and formed the government (Csanyi, 2023).

In Western Europe, the situation is more ambiguous. In France, the situation with support for pro-Russian forces stays complex and ambiguous. Marine Le Pen's National Rally (RN) party, which has historically had a pro-Russian stance, continued to show a considerable increase in support. In the European elections on 9 June 2024, the RN received 31.4% of the vote (over 7.7 million voters), more than double the result of the list of incumbent President Emmanuel Macron. In the first round of the early parliamentary elections on 30 June 2024, the RN improved its result to 33.22%, receiving 10.6 million votes (Toussaint, 2024).

However, this increase in support cannot be directly attributed towards the party's pro-Russian stance. The factors behind the RN's electoral support are more related to France's internal socio-economic problems. The RN owes its support to "a large part of the popular classes and the traditional working class", especially "in rural and urban areas most affected by deindustrialisation, as is the case in north of France". Notably, the RN has significantly toned down its rhetoric towards Russia since the start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The party has adapted its discourse to focus on France's internal problems, such as the cost of living, immigration, and security. This suggests that the pro-Russian position is not a key factor in the RN's electoral support. In Italy, where a coalition of right-wing forces, including parties with historically pro-Russian positions, came to power in 2022, there are complex dynamics. Matteo Salvini's Lega party, which previously had a strong pro-Russian stance, has lost some support but still retains significant influence. In the 2022 parliamentary elections, the League received 8.8% of the vote (Garzia, 2023), a substantial decline from previous elections, but still securing a place in the government coalition.

This heterogeneity of electoral trends reflects deeper divergences in the approaches of different EU countries to Russian aggression and support for Ukraine. A. Grzymała-Busse (2024) emphasises: "Russian aggression has not united these countries, nor has it given them a common strategic goal. In many respects, this is surprising: if any region should be able to form a unified response to Putin's brutal aggression in Ukraine, it is post-communist East-Central Europe".

Regional peculiarities of support for pro-Russian forces are also an important aspect of the analysis. The Visegrad countries (Hungary, Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia) have different trends. While pro-Russian forces have considerable support in Hungary and Slovakia, their influence in Poland is minimal. In the Czech Republic, the situation is intermediate, with a gradual decline in support for openly pro-Russian parties, but the influence of Eurosceptic forces stays strong. In the Baltic states, support for openly pro-Russian forces is low, but in Latvia and Estonia there are parties that target the Russian-speaking population and take a more moderate stance on relations with Russia. However, their support also tends to decline after the start of a full-scale invasion. In southern Europe, particularly in Italy and Greece, pro-Russian sentiment is often associated with left-wing and populist movements. This trend reflects the complicated history of these countries' relations with Russia and the USSR, as well as the influence of economic factors and Euroscepticism.

Notably, electoral support for pro-Russian forces does not always directly correlate with their influence on EU policy. Even in countries where such parties have relatively low support, they can influence political discourse and force other parties to adapt their positions. This creates additional challenges for the formation of a common European policy towards Russia and Ukraine. An analysis of the dynamics of electoral support for pro-Russian political forces in Europe before and after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 reveals a complex and ambiguous picture. In France, the situation with Marine Le Pen's National Rally (RN) party, which has historically had a pro-Russian stance, is a good example of this dynamic. In the short term, the invasion saw a decline in the ratings of many pro-Russian parties, including the RN. However, eventually, the party not only regained its position, but also considerably strengthened it. This is confirmed by the results of the 2024 elections.

In the European elections on 9 June 2024, the RN received 31.4% of the vote (over 7.7 million voters), more than double the result of the list of incumbent President Emmanuel Macron (14.6%). In the first round of the early parliamentary elections on 30 June 2024, the RN further improved its result, receiving 33.22% of the vote (10.6 million voters) (Toussaint, 2024). This increase in support, however, cannot be directly attributed to the party's pro-Russian stance. The factors behind the RN's electoral support are more related to France's internal socio-economic problems. Despite a significant increase in support, the RN suffered a political defeat in the second round of parliamentary elections on 7 July 2024. This happened due to the mobilisation of left-wing forces and the formation of a broad coalition of the Nouveau Front Populaire (NFP). This fact demonstrates that even with considerable electoral support, pro-Russian forces can be restrained by the consolidation of democratic forces.

Thus, the analysis of the situation in France shows that electoral support for parties with a historically pro-Russian stance can grow significantly even after events that would seem to have a negative impact on their ratings. However, this growth has more to do with internal socio-economic factors and the ability of parties to adapt their rhetoric to the current situation than with their

position on Russia. This makes it difficult to directly determine the impact of the pro-Russian position on the electoral support of such parties and requires a more nuanced analysis of the factors that influence their popularity. This adaptation of the rhetoric and strategies of pro-Russian forces is a key factor influencing their electoral support. Many parties that used to openly support Russia now position themselves as “neutral” and advocate for an immediate ceasefire and peace talks, often ignoring the aggressive nature of Russia’s actions. This position allows them to maintain electoral support while avoiding accusations of direct support for the aggressor.

Notably, electoral support for pro-Russian forces is not homogeneous even within individual countries. Regional differences, socio-economic factors and historical context play an important role in shaping electoral preferences. For instance, in Eastern Germany, which has historically had stronger ties with Russia, support for parties with a softer stance on Russia may be higher than in the western states. A. Grzymała-Busse (2024) emphasises the significance of understanding these differences for effective EU policy-making: “These differences make it difficult to formulate a common European policy towards Russia and Ukraine, creating potential points of division within the EU”.

In sum, electoral support for pro-Russian parties in the EU stays a complex and dynamic phenomenon that requires constant monitoring and analysis. While Russia’s aggression against Ukraine has led to a certain marginalisation of openly pro-Russian forces in many countries, their ability to adapt to new realities and use economic hardship and social problems to mobilise support stays a considerable challenge to European unity and democracy.

Factors influencing the popularity of pro-Russian political forces. The analysis of the factors influencing the popularity of pro-Russian political forces in the European Union reveals a complex interaction of socio-economic, cultural, informational, and ideological factors. These multidimensional dynamics create a unique political landscape where pro-Russian sentiment is intertwined with internal issues and global trends, posing challenges to European unity and democratic values.

Socio-economic factors play a key role in shaping support for pro-Russian forces. Economic inequality, unemployment, and a sense of economic insecurity create fertile ground for populist and anti-systemic movements, some of which lean towards pro-Russian positions. For instance, between 2008 and 2020, when Europe was experiencing the effects of the global financial crisis and the eurozone debt crisis, there was an increase in support for parties that criticised EU economic policies and proposed alternative models, often with a focus on cooperation with Russia (Sobieraj, 2023).

The energy crisis of 2021–2022, caused by the reduction in Russian gas supplies and the subsequent rise in energy prices, has become a powerful catalyst for pro-Russian sentiment in some EU countries (Siegel, n.d.). Parties that opposed sanctions against Russia, arguing that they would have a negative impact on national economies, managed to mobilise support among voters concerned about the rising cost of living. This rhetoric, however, often ignores the long-term consequences of energy dependence on

authoritarian regimes and contradicts the principles of EU energy security prescribed in Article 194 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (Consolidated version of the Treaty..., 1957).

Cultural and ideological factors also play a significant role in shaping pro-Russian sentiment. In some countries of Central and Eastern Europe, historical ties to Russia, common Slavic roots, and nostalgia for the Soviet past create a cultural basis for sympathy for Russia. Furthermore, the conservative values promoted by the Russian regime resonate with some European voters, especially in the context of debates about identity, migration, and traditional values. A. Grzymała-Busse (2024) notes: “In some countries, such as Hungary and Serbia, governments openly support Russian President Vladimir Putin”. This support is often based on ideological proximity and a shared vision of “sovereign democracy” that is opposed to the EU’s liberal values. Information influence and the role of disinformation have become critical factors in shaping pro-Russian sentiment. Russian state media and related information resources are active in the European information space, spreading narratives that undermine trust in European institutions and promote pro-Russian interpretations of events. These activities often violate the principles of media freedom and pluralism prescribed in Article 11 of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights (2000).

The impact of disinformation was particularly noticeable in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian war. The spread of fake news and manipulative narratives about the causes and course of the conflict has created information chaos, which is being used by pro-Russian forces to promote their positions. In its 2024 report, the European External Action Service (EEAS) noted a significant increase in the series of disinformation campaigns aimed at undermining support for Ukraine and weakening EU unity on sanctions against Russia (EEAS, 2024).

Euroscepticism and anti-globalisation sentiments also play a significant role in supporting pro-Russian forces. The criticism of the EU as a bureaucratic structure that is distant from the needs of citizens resonates with a part of the electorate that feels disillusioned with the European project. Pro-Russian parties often position themselves as defenders of national sovereignty against the “Brussels bureaucracy”, appealing to anti-globalisation sentiment and fear of losing national identity (Charting the Radical..., 2024). Notably, these factors do not act in isolation, but interact and reinforce each other, creating a complex dynamic of support for pro-Russian forces. For instance, economic difficulties can increase Euroscepticism, which makes the audience more susceptible to pro-Russian disinformation.

The response of European institutions to these challenges has been mixed. On the one hand, the EU has stepped up its efforts to counter disinformation, including through the creation of the East StratCom Task Force and increased regulation of social media (Stefan, 2023). On the other hand, the effectiveness of these measures is often limited by national legislation and different approaches to freedom of expression and media regulation in member states. In the economic sphere, the EU is trying to address socio-economic challenges through various support programmes and funds, such as Next Generation EU

(Mitsi, 2023), aimed at overcoming the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and stimulating economic growth. However, the effectiveness of these measures in countering pro-Russian sentiment stays debatable, especially in the context of the ongoing energy crisis and inflationary pressures.

Cultural and ideological challenges proved to be the most difficult to address at the EU level. Attempts to promote common European values often face resistance from national governments, especially in countries where pro-Russian forces have major influence. This creates a tension between the principles of respect for national identity and the need to preserve the EU's common democratic values. Euroscepticism and anti-globalisation sentiment stay a serious challenge to European integration. Although the EU is trying to improve its communication with citizens and increase the transparency of its processes, the underlying causes of dissatisfaction with European institutions often stay unresolved. A. Grzymała-Busse (2024) notes: "Colonised and exploited for decades by the Soviet Union and still regarded by the Kremlin as Russia's "near abroad" rather than a group of sovereign nations, these countries now either belong to the European Union and NATO or are trying to join." This situation creates a unique context in which historical trauma and aspirations for European integration collide with pro-Russian sentiment, creating a complex political landscape.

In summary, the factors influencing the popularity of pro-Russian political forces in the EU form a complex

and dynamic picture that requires a comprehensive and nuanced approach. Socio-economic problems, cultural and ideological differences, information manipulation, and Euroscepticism create a favourable environment for pro-Russian sentiment, challenging EU unity and values. Countering these trends requires not only strengthening security measures and combating disinformation, but also in-depth reforms aimed at addressing the root causes of dissatisfaction with European institutions. This includes strengthening economic solidarity, improving communication between the EU and its citizens, and striking a balance between respect for national identities and preserving common democratic values.

A comprehensive analysis of the factors influencing the popularity of pro-Russian forces in the European Union reveals considerable regional differences and various challenges to European unity. To illustrate these complex interrelationships and their impact on the EU political landscape, a comparative table was developed (Table 2). It systematises the key factors – socio-economic factors, cultural and ideological aspects, information influence and disinformation, as well as Euroscepticism and anti-globalisation sentiments – demonstrating their relative impact in Eastern and Western Europe. The table also highlights the key challenges the EU faces in countering these factors, emphasising the need for a differentiated approach to addressing the problems in different regions of the Union.

Table 2. Comparison of factors influencing the popularity of pro-Russian forces in the EU (2022-2024)

Factor	Impact in Eastern Europe	Impact in Western Europe	Key challenges for the EU
Socio-economic factors	High (energy dependence, economic inequality)	Average (inflation, cost of living)	Overcoming economic inequality, energy diversification
Cultural and ideological factors	High (historical ties, language proximity)	Low (except for extreme right movements)	Balancing national identities with common EU values
Information influence and disinformation	High (language availability of Russian media)	Medium (through social networks and alternative media)	Countering disinformation without violating freedom of speech
Euroscepticism and anti-globalisation	Medium (criticism of the "Brussels bureaucracy")	High (especially in the context of the migration crisis)	Increasing the transparency and effectiveness of EU institutions

Source: created by the author of this study

Notably, the situation stays dynamic, and the impact of various factors may change over time and depending on the concrete national context. Continuous monitoring and analysis of these trends is critical to developing effective strategies to counter pro-Russian influences and strengthen European unity in the long term.

Discussion

The findings of the study demonstrate the complex dynamics of the development and transformation of pro-Russian political forces in the European Union in 2014-2024. It was found that the Russian-Ukrainian war has become a key factor that has forced these forces to adapt their rhetoric and strategies. The analysis of electoral support revealed a heterogeneous picture: in some countries, pro-Russian parties saw a decline in popularity, while in others they maintained or even strengthened their positions. The study also highlighted key factors influencing the popularity of these forces, including socio-economic factors,

cultural and ideological aspects, information influence and Euroscepticism.

Cultural and historical ties with Russia have proven to be a powerful factor in shaping pro-Russian sentiment in Central and Eastern Europe. This is especially evident in Hungary and Serbia, where common Slavic roots and Orthodox traditions create fertile ground for Russian influence. H. Ivanov & M. Laruelle (2022) cover this phenomenon in detail, emphasising the significance of cultural affinity. While cultural proximity does contribute to pro-Russian sympathies, its impact is not uniform even within the same region. For instance, in Poland, despite its Slavic origins, historical conflicts with Russia significantly weaken the effect of cultural proximity. In Bulgaria, despite its membership in the EU and NATO, cultural ties with Russia stay a powerful factor in shaping public opinion. This heterogeneity points to the need for a more nuanced approach to analysing cultural influences. In contrast to the country-specific focus proposed by Ivanov and Laruelle,

the current pan-European analysis shows how cultural factors interact with other aspects – economic interests, geopolitical orientations and national narratives – to form a complex mosaic of pro-Russian sentiment in Europe.

Economic interests play a decisive role in shaping pro-Russian sympathies in Europe, often overriding ideological differences. The study shows that energy dependence on Russia and the potential of its market create fertile ground for pro-Russian sentiment even in countries with traditionally anti-Russian rhetoric. A.S. Weiss (2020) rightly emphasises the significance of economic factors in his analysis of the Kremlin's ties to right-wing forces in Italy and Austria. However, the findings of the present study allow expanding on this understanding. It was found that economic motives influence not only right-wing but also left-wing populist movements. In Germany, for instance, the Die Linke party actively opposed sanctions against Russia, arguing that they were necessary to protect jobs in the eastern states. This observation substantially complements the findings of A.S. Weiss (2020), demonstrating that pro-Russian influences reach beyond the traditional right-wing spectrum.

Notably, the economic arguments often mask deeper ideological sympathies. For example, right-wing populists in Italy, while criticising sanctions against Russia from an economic standpoint, simultaneously express admiration for Putin's authoritarian model. This observation contradicts the assumption of A.S. Weiss (2020) about a clear distinction between economic and ideological motives, pointing to their complex intertwining in the formation of pro-Russian positions. Overall, the findings of this study confirm the significance of economic factors identified by A.S. Weiss (2020), but also extend the understanding of their role by demonstrating their impact on a wider range of political forces and their complex interaction with ideological motivations.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has caused a dramatic shift in the rhetoric of pro-Russian forces across Europe. K. Arzheimer (2023), analysing the German context, notes a substantial transformation of the discourse of populist actors. This observation is confirmed on a wider European scale. However, a comparative analysis of different EU countries reveals a more nuanced picture than K. Arzheimer (2023). While German populists have indeed toned down their pro-Russian rhetoric, in Hungary, for example, the opposite trend is being observed – the strengthening of pro-Russian narratives. This points to the need to consider the specific national features when assessing the reaction of political forces to geopolitical changes.

Moreover, the study reveals an interesting phenomenon of “double play” by some parties. For example, France's National Rally publicly distanced itself from Russia but continued to promote pro-Russian narratives through social media. This contradicts the assumption of K. Arzheimer (2023) about the unambiguity of changes in rhetoric and highlights the complexity of pro-Russian forces' adaptation strategies. Overall, while the conclusions of K. Arzheimer (2023) on the transformation of rhetoric is apt for the German context, a pan-European perspective shows a more complex and heterogeneous picture of pro-Russian forces adapting to new geopolitical realities.

The Italian political landscape has undergone substantial changes since the outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian war, which clearly illustrates the general European trends. N. Guerra (2023), in his analysis of the Italian far right, notes its significant fragmentation and reorientation. This observation correlates with the processes identified in other EU countries, but the picture becomes more complex when the geographical focus is expanded.

In contrast to the Italian scenario, where pro-Russian positions have been divided, some Eastern European countries, such as Hungary, are seeing a consolidation of right-wing forces around pro-Russian rhetoric. This contradicts the findings of N. Guerra (2023) and points to the need to consider the specific regional features when analysing the transformation of pro-Russian forces. The study also reveals an interesting phenomenon of “hidden pro-Russianism” among parties that have publicly distanced themselves from the Kremlin. For example, in France and Germany, right-wing populists, while officially condemning Russian aggression, continue to promote pro-Russian narratives through alternative communication channels. This complements the analysis of N. Guerra by showing more complex adaptation strategies than just fragmentation or reorientation. Overall, while the conclusions of N. Guerra (2023) on the Italian situation are valuable, the pan-European perspective reveals a more diverse and nuanced picture of the transformation of pro-Russian forces in response to geopolitical changes.

Information influence and disinformation have proven to be powerful tools in shaping pro-Russian sentiment in Europe. U. Nanuashvili (2020) rightly emphasises their key role, which is confirmed by the findings of the present study. However, the analysis shows that information manipulation does not operate in isolation, but in a complex interplay with economic and cultural factors. In Bulgaria, for example, pro-Russian narratives are particularly effective because of their synergy with historical myths of Russian-Bulgarian friendship and economic interests in the energy sector. This observation extends the findings of U. Nanuashvili (2020) by demonstrating how information influences are amplified by their interaction with other social and economic factors.

In terms of the role of historical context and ideological factors, N. Paulovičová & G. Soroka (2024) place an important emphasis on their significance for post-communist right-wing movements. Their findings are confirmed in Central and Eastern Europe, where historical ties with Russia truly influence the formation of pro-Russian sympathies. However, the study reveals that these factors are not only important for right-wing movements. For example, in Greece, left-wing forces also demonstrate pro-Russian sentiments, relying on the historical memory of supporting the USSR during the civil war. This observation complements the analysis of N. Paulovičová & G. Soroka (2024), pointing to the need to consider the impact of the historical context on a wider range of political actors.

Moreover, the study reveals an interesting phenomenon of “selective historical memory” in the formation of pro-Russian positions. Thus, Hungarian right-wing forces focus on Soviet assistance during World War II, ignoring the suppression of the 1956 uprising. This demonstrates

how the historical narrative can be selectively used to support a pro-Russian orientation.

The findings of the study reveal significant changes in the rhetoric of right-wing populist forces in France after the outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian war. G. Ivaldi (2023) aptly notes their reorientation towards criticising the economic impact of sanctions on French citizens. This observation is indeed in line with the general trend of pro-Russian forces adapting to new geopolitical realities identified in this study. However, it is worth disagreeing with G. Ivaldi (2023) on the universality of this trend. A pan-European analysis shows a more diverse picture. For example, in Hungary, unlike France, pro-Russian rhetoric has increased, not decreased. This contradicts the findings of G. Ivaldi (2023) and points to the need for a more nuanced approach to analysing the transformation of pro-Russian forces in different national contexts.

Regarding the role of information technology, the findings of V. Voskresenskii (2023) on the migration of German right-wing groups to Russian online platforms is worthy of attention. However, this trend is not limited to the online environment and Germany. In Italy and Greece, for example, pro-Russian narratives are actively spread through conventional media and cultural events. This complements the findings of V. Voskresenskii (2023), showing a more comprehensive picture of the information strategies of pro-Russian forces. Moreover, in contrast to the focus of V. Voskresenskii (2023) on technical aspects, it is worth emphasising the significance of the content of the narratives disseminated. The study reveals that pro-Russian forces skilfully adapt their messages to local contexts, appealing to specific national problems and sentiments. This observation adds a new dimension to the analysis of V. Voskresenskii (2023), demonstrating the complex interaction between technological capabilities and the content of pro-Russian propaganda.

The study points to a substantial decline in support for pro-Russian forces in the Baltic states after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. M.L. Jakobson & A. Kasekamp (2023) note this trend in Estonia, linking it to the country's historical experience and geopolitical position. This observation is truly in line with the polarisation of attitudes towards Russia in countries with strong historical ties identified in the study. Notably, the situation in the Baltic region is not universal for the entire EU. In contrast to Estonia's sharp dissociation from pro-Russian forces, some Central European countries, such as Hungary, have seen pro-Russian sentiment persist or even grow. This contradicts the findings of M.L. Jakobson & A. Kasekamp (2023) and points to the need for a more differentiated approach to analysing the transformation of pro-Russian forces in different regions of the EU. In terms of the role of transnational ties, B. Futàk-Campbell (2020) emphasises their significance in shaping pro-Russian positions. However, this observation is worth expanding on. The study found that transnational connections, while important, are not decisive in all cases. For instance, in Greece and Bulgaria, pro-Russian sentiment is largely shaped by internal cultural and historical factors rather than external relations.

Moreover, in contrast to the focus of B. Futàk-Campbell (2020) on political synergies, it is worth emphasising the role of economic interests in the formation of

transnational pro-Russian alliances. The study reveals that in some cases, it is economic factors, such as energy dependence or investment opportunities, which form the basis for the formation of pro-Russian coalitions between political forces in different countries. The identified trends in the adaptation of rhetoric, transformation of information strategies, and the formation of transnational ties underscore the need for a comprehensive approach to investigating this phenomenon. At the same time, the diversity of national contexts and specific regional features points to the significance of further research that would combine broad comparative analysis with in-depth study of the specifics of individual EU countries and regions.

Conclusions

The conducted study helped to identify and systematise the key factors that determine the electoral support of pro-Russian political forces in the European Union in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian war. An analysis of the historical dynamics and current state of these forces showed that Russian aggression against Ukraine has become a catalyst for significant transformations in their strategies and rhetoric. Pro-Russian parties have been forced to adapt to new geopolitical realities, which has led to differentiation of their positions and, in some cases, internal splits.

The study of the level of electoral support for pro-Russian parties revealed a heterogeneous picture in different EU countries. While some states, especially in Central and Eastern Europe, have seen a decline in the popularity of openly pro-Russian forces, in others they have maintained or even strengthened their positions. These dynamics are largely driven by a combination of socio-economic, cultural, and information factors. The key factors contributing to the rise in popularity of pro-Russian political forces have been economic problems related to the energy crisis and inflation, Euroscepticism and anti-globalisation sentiment, and the influence of Russian disinformation. Cultural and historical ties with Russia also play a significant role, especially in Central and Eastern Europe. At the same time, the effectiveness of these factors varies depending on the national context and regional characteristics. The study found that pro-Russian forces have adapted their rhetoric, often positioning themselves as "neutral" and focusing on criticising sanctions against Russia from an economic perspective. This strategy allows them to maintain electoral support while avoiding direct accusations of supporting the aggressor. A significant aspect of their activities has been the use of information technology to spread alternative narratives and undermine trust in European institutions. The findings of the study highlight the need for a comprehensive approach to countering pro-Russian influences in Europe. This includes strengthening economic solidarity in the EU, improving communication between European institutions and citizens, and developing effective strategies to combat disinformation. Finding a balance between respect for national identities and preserving the EU's common democratic values stays an important task.

A limitation of this study was its focus on pan-European trends, which may not fully consider the specifics of individual countries. Promising areas for further research

include a deeper analysis of the national characteristics of pro-Russian movements, investigating the impact of social media on the formation of pro-Russian sentiment, and researching the effectiveness of various strategies to counter Russian influence in European politics.

None.

Acknowledgements

Conflict of Interest

None.

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