

Vladimir Putin's popularity among populist parties in Europe illustrates the depth of the challenges facing European democracy

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Although most mainstream political actors in the European Union have criticised the actions of Russia during the Ukraine crisis, not all parties have been critical of Vladimir Putin. [Angelos-Stylianos Chrysogelos](#) writes on Putin's popularity among several far-right and far-left parties within the EU. He notes that while some of this support reflects compatible ideological positions, the real common ground between these parties and Putin's regime is a belief in the use of populist politics to oppose foreign influence. He argues that the extent to which this style of politics has proved successful illustrates the challenges facing European democracy.



With the crisis in Ukraine in full swing, a cascade of reports in [media](#) and [policy](#) outlets have pointed [attention](#) to the hitherto little noticed phenomenon of Vladimir Putin's relationship with far-right parties in Western and Eastern Europe. Reflecting the logic of the Cold War, [many fret](#) about the possible repercussions for European security at a time when pro-Russian radicals are on the rise in many European countries.

The question is why these parties are exhibiting such strong sympathy for Vladimir Putin. Putin's Russia certainly enjoys support among the far-right family in Europe. But he also finds support among populist and Eurosceptic forces (like [UKIP](#) in the UK and the [AfD](#) in Germany) which are usually, but not entirely accurately, categorised as belonging to the far-right. Interestingly, most significant parties of the far-left in Europe are also pro-Putin, suggesting the pro-Russia camp spans ideological barriers. But what is it about Putin's Russia that is so attractive to these parties?

On the surface, it is relatively easy to come up with reasons for Putin's appeal. There are elements in Putin's Russia that speak both to the far-right (e.g. homophobia) and far-left (e.g. anti-Americanism). With this stated, these parties overlap with Putin's regime most in an aversion to standardised rules and constitutional checks to 'popular' rule, alongside an affinity for a system of unmediated mass representation based solely on electoral (or, more accurately, plebiscitary) legitimacy. In fact, the main ideological feature, as well as theoretical concept, that explains consistently the affinity between Putin and his European admirers is populism.



Vladimir Putin, Credit: Republic of Korea (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

Putin and Europe's far-right

Clearly what makes Putin popular for the far-right is his nationalism and authoritarianism, traits which also characterise both extreme-right parties with a questionable commitment to democracy, such as the Golden Dawn in Greece or Jobbik in Hungary, and radical-right parties characterised by nationalism and xenophobia, such as the Front National in France and Austria's FPÖ.

Both of these subtypes lay claim to [ideological traditions](#) associated with anti-liberalism, anti-Americanism and anti-Westernism, all features linked in various historical periods with Russia. Virtually [all parties](#) belonging to these two types across Europe support Russia today. An already existing predisposition to view Russia positively is further compounded by traits of Putin's regime that are in congruence with a radical-right profile, including [anti-Semitism and homophobia](#).

But Putin's Russia is also popular among parties that do not partake in these ideological traditions and that can be located within the far right only with caution, like the AfD and UKIP. While these parties are commonly positioned in the far right, they do not spring from radical or extreme-right traditions and [distance themselves](#) from the radical right's authoritarianism. As such, they do not carry any ideological baggage that should predispose them positively towards Putin. If anything, the AfD and UKIP present themselves as advocates of true (national) democracy. For them to [support](#) the actions of a less-than-democratic strongman is somewhat odd – and in any case, not self-evident.

Putin and the far-left

Most casual observers would see the support of far-left parties like Germany's [Die Linke](#), the Dutch [Socialist Party](#), or [SYRIZA](#) in Greece, as a continuation of communist parties' support for the USSR. However, while [communist ideology plays a role](#) in the outlook of some of these parties, their overall profile as 'radical leftist' does not necessarily imply nostalgia for the USSR.

In addition, and even more important, there are very few things genuinely 'leftist' about Putin's Russia. Radical leftists should normally be appalled by the authoritarian nationalism and the rampant social and economic [inequality](#) of today's Russia. The radical left's anti-Americanism may explain the propensity to see global rivals to the United States in a positive light, but its support for Putin's Russia is deeper and more developed than just an 'enemy-of-my-enemy' attitude.

Populism and support for Putin

This convergence between far-right and far-left can best be explained with reference to one common element that has increasingly marked their outlook: populism. As the classical scholarly statement has it, populism is a 'thin-centred ideology', something more than a style but less than a complete ideology, privileging the homogeneous people against elites and outsiders at home and abroad. Parties of the radical-right have embraced populism since the 1980s to update a discredited tradition of fascism and militarism. Populism has also allowed the radical-left to embed its critique of capitalism and globalisation in a more pertinent discourse since the 2000s. Today there is virtually no successful party of the far-right or left in Europe that is not also populist as well.

With time, populism has occupied an ever-larger part of these parties' ideological profile. In the context of crisis, recent successes for populist radical-right and left parties have less to do with their ideological traditions and more to do with their ability to use populism as a relevant response to questions of democratic rule, accountability and sovereignty in an environment where the ability of national democratic systems and governments to respond to popular demands has been challenged by bailouts, austerity and pressure from global markets and supranational bureaucracies. Populism allows radical parties to realign political competition along an openness-vs.-sovereignty dimension where 'the people' are pitted against political and economic elites at home and abroad.

Putin's regime is populist because, among other things, it puts forth a vision of an undifferentiated people requiring representation through strong leadership, sanctioned by large majorities in plebiscite-like electoral contests and unhindered from constitutional checks. Much like similar phenomena in Latin America or the [Muslim world](#), Putinism is populism to the extent that it derives legitimacy from its targeting of rules-based global governance and its supporters (the US, Europe, and the 'West'). Putin's regime both upholds the key feature of populism – a monolithic people expressing its views in an unmediated way – and uses the methodology of populism by targeting elites abroad, or by drawing connections between 'deviant' groups at home (liberals, homosexuals) and enemies abroad.

If Putinism is part of one camp in a global cleavage between rules-based governance and nationally delineated majoritarian populism, populists of the right and left have sought to energise this cleavage within Europe proper. The famous 'democratic deficit' in Europe is just an expression of a wider tension in world politics between governance and government, between rules, institutions and norms that regulate transnational policymaking and economic integration, and the as yet unfulfilled need to establish accountability and legitimation of such processes to electorates and citizens.

The crisis has exacerbated this tension in Europe, and the populism of radical parties has become a promise for unmediated popular representation on a national basis against foreign unaccountable elites. More than authoritarianism or nostalgia for the Soviet Union, Putin's regime appeals to European populists and their audience because it presents a vision of rule that seemingly bridges the tension between popular representation and the pervasiveness of global governance processes.

Indeed, for all European populist parties, pro-Russian attitudes are but [a mirror image](#) of their [critique of international organisations](#) like the EU and NATO, of international criminal justice, of trade liberalisation, and of norms challenging classical sovereignty. Vladimir Putin is seen as a strong national leader – thus juxtaposed to European elites that supposedly care only about European integration and obscure international regulations.

While many of Putin's actual policies correspond little to European radicals' ideological positions, to them it is enough that these policies are made (seemingly at least) within the confines of national sovereignty by a powerful executive speaking for the people. For the populist right, Putin's defiant foreign policy contrasts with the legalistic and moralising discourse of Western governments. For the populist left, the exploitation of natural resources in Russia appeals as an example of economic policy away from the asphyxiating pressure of world capital markets.

Several commentators have used the recent interest in the links between Vladimir Putin and European radicals to make a point about Putin's authoritarianism. However if one takes into account the evolution of the far-right and far-left into populist forces during the current crisis of European democracy, and if one views Putinism as feeding off accountability and legitimacy concerns over global governance, this partnership reveals less about Putin and more about the dire state of European democracy.

The attractiveness of Putin's regime as an example of populist leadership that actively challenges international norms of technocratic, apolitical and legalistic governance is proof of the crisis surrounding such deficits in Europe. It must be recognised as such sooner rather than later.

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