What kind of vision(s)? The Far-Right and European Security

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Abstract

Far-right parties are now widespread in different countries across Europe, raising questions about states' commitment to European security. These parties varied their positions on the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, but it is still unclear how they form their visions and which types of actors they can play in European security. In this contribution, I take stock of the visions and roles of far-right parties in European security by suggesting that we should explore their preference systems. I hold that we should investigate their definition of what constitutes security, how they aim to address threats, and in what way. Building on the forum's introduction, I argue that we can conceive such actors as spoilers, agnostics, or even architects of European security. The paper concludes by raising questions about the implications of far-right actors for organizing European security at a time when they are increasingly integrated into its existing structures.

Keywords: Radical Right Parties, Populism, Multilateralism, Contestation, Politicization

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Introduction

Following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, far-right parties across Europe responded differently to the changing security situation in Europe. Some of them, like Rassemblement National (RN) in France, struggled to defend their anti-EU and pro-Russian stances held before the war. Others, like Fidesz in Hungary, held ambiguous positions despite the strong rhetorical opposition to supporting Ukraine. There have been also far-right parties, like Fratelli d'Italia (FdI) in Italy, that took strong stances against the Russian invasion and favoured multilateral answers to the conflict (Holesch and Zagórski 2023; Wondreys 2023). Far-right parties held heterogeneous preferences on the Russian war against Ukraine depending on how they related the aggression to different issues such as euroscepticism, their relations with Russia, Western states or Ukraine, and sanctions, (Wondreys 2023; Fagerholm 2024). Such a variety of far-right preferences on specific issues suggests that they have a complex set of ideas constituting their visions of European security.

A growing range of studies is exploring the variety of far-right positions on security issues (Özdamar and Ceydilek 2020; Haesebrouck and Mello 2020; Wondreys and Zulianello 2024; Finke 2023), as well as their

broader effects on international affairs (Copelovitch and Pevehouse 2019; Wajner, Destradi, and Zürn 2024). While we know that they seem to prefer a kind of European security constituted by an ensemble of sovereign nations with nationalist preferences (Liang 2007; Henke and Maher 2021), we still do not know much about how they constitute their visions and what kind of actors they play in European security. Exploring their various visions is important to understand dynamics affecting European security as these actors have thinned the boundaries between international and domestic politics (Hooghe and Marks 2009; De Vries, Hobolt, and Walter 2021) and brought security issues at the centre of the political attention (Martill and Mesarovich 2024; Kinacioglu 2023). Since security policy is a field subject to political actors' transformations of what societies discuss and perceive as existential threats (Rothschild 1995; Buzan, Wæver, and Wilde 1998), the emergence and success of far-right parties across Europe should prompt our attention to their participation in such a process. Thus, we should explore how their visions shape what type of actors they can play in a changing security environment (Hofmann 2024).

This paper contributes to the forum "*Organizing European Security for yet another geopolitical era"* by exploring far-right parties' visions of and kinds of actors in European security. It takes stock of what visions of regional security far-right parties have and what they do in the European context by building on our existing knowledge on populist and radical right parties' foreign policy and far-right engagement in international (security) organizations. I argue that we should look at what they understand as the referent subject of security, which means they believe it is suited to best address threats, and in what ways. I hold that far-right parties have a variety of European security visions that, according to the order of their system of preferences, prompts them to act as spoilers, agnostics, and architects – to use the language in this forum's introduction.

The paper aims to prompt reflections upon the implications of different forms of far-right participation in European security. The paper contributes to the existing literature on the far-right in European security by suggesting that, to understand their visions and conduct in organizing European security, we need to consider not only how they relate to different issues, but also how these are ordered in their complex sets of preferences. I conclude with some suggestions that could contribute to develop the research agenda on the far-right and European security.

Which vision of European security?

The emergence and election in government of parties with nativist, sovereigntist, and anti-liberal democratic values across Europe raises questions about how much, and in which terms, are states willing to commit to multilateral initiatives against common threats. In the past, European governments have organized regional security by developing forms of cooperation to address common threats (Walt 1997), or to foster a sense of security community (Deutsch 1957), while striving to maintain national sovereignty in a policy area considered highly sensitive (Hoffmann 1966). European security has been the product of different visions, preferences, and interests held by different political actors who valued cooperation differently and affected regional structures accordingly (Hofmann 2013; see also 2024).

The substance of far-right visions matters for what security stands in Europe. Since they gain influence in security policymaking, these parties participate in a "process through which ideas are constructed, emerge and flow" in security (Kurowska and Pawlak 2009, 481). Far-right actors oppose liberal internationalist ideas of international affairs based on multilateralism and diffused reciprocity where institutions promote human rights, democracy, and the rule of law (Lake, Martin, and Risse 2021; Abrahamsen et al. 2024). However, these parties present a diversity of preferences over international affairs that should be unpacked to reveal their visions on European security (Özdamar and Ceydilek 2020). Their visions reflect value complexes that, similarly to other party families (Hofmann 2013), determine and organize their preferences. What differs from other parties, however, is that they base their visions on previously disregarded and communitarian concerns that they use to mobilize public discontent and that could affect cooperation (Walter 2021; Hooghe and Marks 2009). Considering these parties' growing presence in government across European countries, far-right ideologies are likely to contribute to shape how European security should be organized.

Far-right actors base their beliefs and preferences on their conceptions of nativism (Mudde 2007). Their nativist traits bring them to conceive the nation as ethnically homogenous and to oppose sovereignty limitations endangering such traits (Mudde 2019; Gellner 2006). How they believe that national sovereignty should look like depends on their ideas about who should constitute the nation and how authority should be exerted (Mudde 2019). They strive to concentrate authority in their hands and claim to be the sole protectors of national sovereignty (Mudde 2007). This pits them against the broader liberal political establishment and thus they develop a rejection of the fundamental elements of liberal democratic ideas – among which rule of law, pluralism, and minority rights – with the aim to disrupt the political dominance of mainstream liberal actors (Sartori 2005; Pirro 2023). They "believe in a strictly ordered society and value tradition and stability" (Vasilopoulou 2018, 65) that emphasises an ethnically homogenous citizenship. These parties are generally sceptical that European security should be constituted by a community of states sharing "commonly held attributes, such as, for example, democracy, developmentalism, and human rights" (Adler and Barnett 1998, 43). Instead, they argue that such a community of states is constituted by sovereign nations sharing cultural and religious features (Abrahamsen et al. 2024, 18). However, far-right ideas vary across parties and influence how they perceive world politics (Copelovitch and Pevehouse 2019). Based on their nativist traits, they give various set of values to different elements constituting European security, interpreting these in strict terms of national prerogatives or in broader expressions involving solutions to national security problems no matter how.

First, they are concerned with who should be the referent subject of European security. Far-right actors fuel public insecurities and discontent on issues like international authority or migration (Jenne 2021; van der Veer and Meibauer 2024). They portray such issues as security threats to their nations, which eventually contribute to define what security should be about, and question the ability of existing arrangements to address their national concerns (Wojczewski 2020). Their preferences on the referent security subjects overlap with their preferences over other existing issues constituting European security. For instance, the AfD in Germany rejects

multilateral interventions on its main security concerns, migration and terrorism, claiming that these are a national prerogative and that the functions of multilateral cooperation should only address national territorial defence (Ostermann and Stahl 2022). Such a pattern was also evident in the context of the Russian aggression against Ukraine, where far-right parties were hostile, neutral, or in favour of Russia depending on how they believed responses to the invasion could affect their nations (Wondreys 2023). Thus, such parties could appear to take extreme positions on security issues (Haesebrouck and Mello 2020), especially when they give precedence to their nationalist and sovereigntist concerns over other issues, as in the case of the AfD. Therefore, how they define the referent subject of European security depends on the elements that constitute their preferences on nativism.

Second, their preferences around European security relate to how they believe is best to assure their nations' security. This relates to far-right preferences over the organization of European security in terms of unilateralism, bilateralism, or multilateralism even in smaller regional subgroups (Söderbaum, Spandler, and Pacciardi 2021). Considering their sensitivity to national sovereignty, they often resist international constraints to their security policies. Therefore, they base their preferences on European security's organization depending on how these parties believe its structure allows them to exercise national authority. Visnovitz and Jenne (2021) argue that a far-right actor such as Viktor Orban has favoured bilateral partnerships because these allowed the Hungarian government to pursue national authority independently from existing arrangements. In this sense, they might be more eager to support relations with states that are perceived to diverge from established alliances, such as Russia, China, and even Trump's US (Ostermann and Stahl 2022). Far-right parties can also support alternative cooperative mechanisms that allow them to avoid making compromises through formal negotiations (Söderbaum, Spandler, and Pacciardi 2021; Juncos and Pomorska 2024; Landau and Lehrs 2022). When it comes to multilateral security cooperation, they do not reject it but have various preferences on how to organize it. They might prefer lighter burden-sharing commitments (Becker and Mellon 2023), informal groupings (Rivera Escartin 2020), or even cooperation in some policy areas rather than others considered more sensitive, as FdI did by prioritising the EU defence industry while rejecting ideas on an EU army (Fasola and Lucarelli 2024). In other words, they structure their preferences on how to organize European security reflecting on how functional it may be to their exercises of national authority (Henke and Maher 2021).

Third, far-right parties are concerned with the ways through which to address (what they conceive as) threats to European security. They oppose liberal internationalist articulations of means to achieve security, involving the promotion of liberal democratic values, human rights, and the rule of law (Cottey 2014), on grounds that such an approach only eroded security in Europe (Hisarlıoğlu et al. 2022, 9). They reject liberal internationalist principles and support altering how institutions function when it comes to security (Jenne 2021). Therefore, they might encourage cooperative arrangements with authoritarian states that they deem can help them to address their security concerns, unconditionally from domestic reforms (Rivera Escartin 2020). They often also prefer developing instruments to address traditional definitions of threats rather than their broader conceptions like human security (Ostermann and Stahl 2022, 7). At the same time, their preferences over

means such as military interventions abroad also depend on how they believe that these are valuable means to ensure security (Coticchia and Vignoli 2020; Vignoli, Ostermann, and Wagner 2022).

Far-right parties' visions of European security relate primarily to their nativist traits, which define their preferences over what should constitutes security, how to address it, and with which means. They present a complexity of preferences that relates to different issues constituting European security, which motivate their favourable, neutral, or hostile positions on security issues (Wondreys 2023; Wondreys and Zulianello 2024). When they position on European security issues, they range from rejecting to cooperate to supporting its reform (see also Copelovitch and Pevehouse 2019). In the former case, this takes place when they believe that responses to (what they conceive as) security lie in the nation state alone. In the latter, they support a functional engagement in European security affairs as they try to reshape the elements that constitute it. Thus, we should consider how their complex set of preferences are organized to understand what types of actors they can play in European security.

The far-right in European security: Spoilers, agnostics, or even architects?

Far-right parties may be various kinds of actors in European security depending on the issue at stake for them, on which they have a diverse and complex set of preferences based on their visions. While considerations about domestic and international politics shape their opportunities to have an impact (De Vries, Hobolt, and Walter 2021; Verbeek and Zaslove 2015; Destradi and Plagemann 2024), how they value different European security elements and order accordingly their preferences should inform us about what drives their efforts. The organization of the preference system informing far-right visions on European security thus should reveal different potential types of far-right actors. Following the framework outlined in the forum introduction (Hofmann 2024), we can conceive as having spoiling, agnostic, or even designing features and aspirations. We should not expect that a far-right party is a spoiler, agnostic, or architect all the time. Instead, we should expect that far-right parties play various roles based on the issue at stake, since how they order their preferences on that issue determines whether they reject or cooperate in European security.

Spoilers

Far-right actors may take a spoiling attitude when they disagree with the focus of security, when they believe that existing cooperative frameworks harm their interests, and when they reject the proposed means to address threats. They narrowly define their sovereigntist concerns and contest multilateral efforts, preferring national responses. We can expect these cases to combine nationalism with populism, which motivate antagonistic vision to cooperation, and far-right parties to threaten to exit or withdraw from established frameworks (Copelovitch and Pevehouse 2019). They take extreme positions on problems constituting European security as they conceive cooperation to damage their nations (Haesebrouck and Mello 2020). This may be the case when populist far-right parties contest Western organizations and disapprove confrontational stances against Russia, towards which they display a stronger tendency to favour closer links (Fagerholm 2024). Most evidently, this has been the case of Orban's Hungary opposition to NATO's high-level meetings with Ukraine

and to the provision of military and financial assistance to Kyiv through the EU after the Russian invasion in 2022 (Kopper, Szalai, and Góra 2023, 103–5).

Spoilers are willing to go against the majority (Hofmann, 2024), with implications about the functioning of multilateral cooperation. They often make negotiations harder, if not impossible, in multilateral settings (Juncos and Pomorska 2024). These far-right actors reject compromises on issues they consider a national priority both to demonstrate the liabilities of regional frameworks of cooperation and because they do not agree with how to address the problem (Zaun and Ripoll Servent 2023). In the EU context, Operation EUNAVFORMED Sophia's activities in the Mediterranean stopped under the League's pressures on the Italian government, despite its predecessors advocated for the mission, because it did not address the League's concerns over irregular migration as it preferred, having also a search and rescue component (Taylor 2019). The far-right spoiling exercise takes the form of a rejection of multilateral cooperation on issues that they deem would impinge on their national interests if addressed with joint efforts (Jenne 2021). In this sense, "obstruction may only target specific aspects of cooperation" (Pacciardi, Spandler, and Söderbaum 2024, 2030) as far-right parties might prefer other forms of engagement or cooperation on other subjects. Spoilers block attempts to come up with a functional European security because their political goals diverge from the security ideas, interests, and means discussed by other states.

Agnostics

When far-right parties are agnostic, they do not necessarily disagree with European security's focus but are rather disinterested in this policy field. They become more interested in it for strategic reasons related to what they can get from addressing it through cooperation and its means. They generally engage in European security passively over issues that are not salient domestically and that they can ignore (Destradi, Plagemann, and Taş 2022). In such instances, far-right actors demonstrate apathy towards cooperation arrangements (Wajner and Wehner 2023). When security gains salience for their political aims, they either favour or oppose multilateral cooperation, depending on such preference relates to the issues discussed.

When they value that security can be a tool through which to address their political goals, agnostic far-right parties can actively engage in cooperation to request concessions from international partners. While agnostic far-right parties might avoid blocking initiatives and prefer to covertly participate (Carnegie, Clark, and Kaya 2023), they might continue to participate and receive international benefits but might have enough domestic incentives to delay or threaten to veto agreements (Voeten 2020). This has been the case with Turkey's initial veto of Sweden's NATO accession that eventually allowed Ankara to get US F-16 and get pledges to resume discussions about modernising the custom union with the EU (BBC 2023). They can also exploit institutional overlaps to improve their redistributive opportunities (Hofmann 2019). The Hungarian delay to Sweden's accession in NATO as Budapest tried to unblock funds from the EU stands as an example of this. When far-right actors take agnostic positions, they can contribute to European security only to receive concessions in exchange of their participation, but they are hardly ready to invest their entrepreneurship or resources to design its organization.

Architects

Unlike spoilers and agnostics, some far-right actors engage in European security to design its shape according to their visions. We can think of them as architects when they value that their security concerns should constitute European security. They also deem that their national sovereignty benefits from addressing such threats through international cooperation. However, they sustain that the means to address security should be readapted. Refusing to cooperate through multilateral frameworks or staying indifferent on issues deemed of national interest may not be convenient for them. Instead, they aim to reform what constitutes the focus of security and through which means to address threats. In 2015, PiS in Poland demonstrated this point when it criticized NATO for not paying enough attention to its security concerns related to Russia, arguing the need to increase the organization's military presence in the Eastern flank (euronews 2015). Architect far-right parties recognize that participation in processes of (re-)production of norms, practices, and ideas increases the possibilities to influence existing cooperative frameworks according to their visions of European security (Stengel, MacDonald, and Nabers 2019). At the same time, engaging in European security organizations may become instrumental to reduce international scrutiny on domestic issues involving rule of law, human rights, and democratic standards (Meyerrose and Nooruddin, 2023).

However, the fact that they participate in existing security arrangements does not mean that they can easily compromise. Since they deem that compromises would reduce their authority, they might prefer bypassing formal policymaking processes limiting negotiations around their goals (Landau and Lehrs 2022). The Italian government led by FdI did exactly this when it bypassed EU ambassadors to visit Tunisia with the Dutch Prime Minister Rutte and the EU Commission President von der Leyen in July 2023 to sign a Memorandum of Understanding to curb migration flows (O'Carroll 2023). In this way, they might even rely on the bureaucratic machinery of the organization, which may be eager to address these architects' concerns to carrying on its interests (Schuette 2021). Architect far-right parties, thus, engage in European security with the aim to shape it because they believe that its structure should be based on what issues they define as security, their preferred means to exert their national authority, and through which instruments and responses to address threats.

Conclusions

This contribution to the forum addressed questions about how far-right actors develop their visions of and participate in European security. I argued that we can conceive these actors as spoilers, agnostic, or architects in European security considering their ordered set of preferences around how they define the referent subject of security, how to answer to threat, and through which means. Their definition of nation and its security interests determines how they value different issues at stake in the regional security landscape, shaping their visions and role. Far-right parties have diverse visions not only depending on the extent to which they relate to concerns over national authority, multilateralism, and responses to threats, but also on the precedence that some security issues take over such assessments (Henke and Maher 2021). Some preferences take precedence over others in the value system of far-right parties, explaining why they prefer some formats of cooperation or means to achieve their interests. The contribution suggests that far-right actors' visions and roles should be

explored for their complex preference systems to capture not only their extremity, which often suggests their spoiling or agnostic attitude, but also their influence in actively shaping the European security environment.

The paper aimed to bring scholarly attention to the effects of far-right parties on European security at a time in which they are increasing their electoral successes across the Transatlantic space. The new Trump presidency of the US will likely reshape the dynamics of long-term alliance cohesion (Kunertova and Schmitt 2024), especially if he follows up on his promises to end the war in Ukraine and put pressure on European allies to share the burden of their security (Hirsh 2024). Thus, far-right actors' participation in European security could affect how Europeans understand what is worth defending and how.

Research on the far-right and European security is bourgeoning, contributing to understand how these parties position on and engage in international affairs. However, we need to clarify better what these parties imply for European security, when they affect it and how. While these parties' 'thin' ideology has produced innovative findings (Chryssogelos et al. 2023), there are some directions that scholars could pursue by focusing on far-right's 'thick' ideology. Far-right parties' presence in coalition governments (Verbeek and Zaslove 2015), their relation with public opinion, (Mader 2024; De Vries, Hobolt, and Walter 2021), and their cooperation practices (Zaun and Ripoll Servent 2023) are all areas that have contributed to our understanding of what these actors do and could be explored further. Adding to this research could mean posing more attention to the changing nature of party competition, which allowed such parties to emerge and success in the first place and that could reveal new patterns related to their ideological complexity (Hofmann and Martill 2021). Future research could also explore how far-right's various visions become integrated into the existing European security structures through the networks that support them. While we know that transnational far-right networks affect international norms and practices on minority rights (Ayoub and Stoeckl 2024), we know less about how the diffusion of their ideas takes place in security (Varga and Buzogány 2021). Moreover, scholars could investigate the effects of far-right ideas on patterns of multilateral security cooperation. The rising interest in the study of the security policy and politics of far-right actors has progressed our knowledge on the topic, but new questions remain unaddressed that promises to reveal new patterns and venues for thinking about the changes in the European security environment.

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