

The Global Far Right and the War in Ukraine

Initial Reactions and Enduring Narratives

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When Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered the invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, international reactions were quick to arrive, mainly condemning Russia's action and pledging support for Ukraine. The events that started unfolding in Ukraine, however, also attracted the interest of various violent extremist groups. The reactions of Islamist groups ranged from support for Ukraine, based on Putin's previous support for Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, to calls to exploit the conflict and wage jihad against unbelievers on both sides of the conflict.¹ The global far right, which is made up of a wide range of groups and movements with different priorities and views, similarly expressed a range of initial reactions and opinions about Russia's war in Ukraine.

The close relationship that existed between the international far right and the Putin regime over the last years, as well as Putin's arguments of "denazification" to justify the war, complicated the views of various far-right groups and movements with regard to the war.² Following the diverging initial reactions and narratives within the far right, the emerging energy crisis and

associated inflation that resulted from the war, particularly in Europe, in addition to the arrival of large numbers of Ukrainian refugees in many countries, led to further shifts in attitudes and reactions to the war.

This brief will analyze the ways in which the perception of Putin's actions among the international far right, as well as the relationships that existed with Russia, has shifted since the beginning of the war. In addition to the far-right reactions to Russia's denazification claims and the immediate conflict, this also includes their reactions to issues such as sanctions on Russia and the energy crisis that has resulted from the war. Building on this analysis, the brief will outline some of the key trends and narratives that have been developed or strengthened through the war and that will likely remain in the far-right discourse in the future.

The primary focus of this brief is on the violent end of the right-wing spectrum, where there is violent action or professed intent or actions or narratives that might lead to or encourage others into violence. Yet, this remains a very difficult and complex ideological context to define in many cases as the line between

1 Anti-Defamation League (ADL), "White Supremacists, Other Extremists Respond to Russian Invasion of Ukraine," 3 March 2022, <https://www.adl.org/resources/blog/white-supremacists-other-extremists-respond-russian-invasion-ukraine>.

2 Claudia Wallner, "If Russia Is Serious About De-Nazification, It Should Start at Home," Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies (RUSI), 21 April 2022, <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/if-russia-serious-about-de-nazification-it-should-start-home>.

mainstream and extreme is often blurry, with some right-wing groups combining political participation and sometimes violent forms of activism and expression. The current global political and social climate has further encouraged the mainstreaming of this threat, in addition to a blurring of ideological lines due to the often nebulous use of political speech, integration of left-wing causes by the far right, and the use of pop cultural symbols in far-right propaganda.³

RUSSIA AND THE GLOBAL FAR RIGHT

Over the last couple of decades, the global far right has enjoyed a close relationship with Russian far-right groups and, to an extent, the Russian state. Within Russia, acts of political violence motivated by far-right ideologies are considerably more common than in the West. For example, one study indicates that, from 2000 to 2017, annual levels of lethal far-right violence per million inhabitants were five times higher in Russia than in the United States and more than seven times higher than in western Europe.⁴ Although repression of these violent far-right groups in Russia gradually increased in the late 2000s, pro-Putin vigilante groups, as well as far-right imperial Russian groups, continue to face little suppression by the security forces.⁵ Indeed, such groups were strategically utilized as proxies of the

regime, fighting its opponents while providing plausible deniability for the government,⁶ in the context of Putin's strategy of "managed nationalism," an effort to construct a national identity and patriotism centered on historical strength and military victories.⁷ Far-right nationalist groups that are tolerated, if not directly supported, by the Kremlin in this way include groups such as *Russkii Obraz*, as well as biker gangs, hooligans, and pro-Kremlin youth groups such as *Nashi*.⁸

Abroad, Russian far-right groups similarly serve the regime's agenda by influencing narratives and spreading disinformation on social media, undermining trust in democratic institutions, and sowing chaos and polarization in Western societies.⁹ Far-right groups in Russia, ranging from the Night Wolves, a motorcycle club with links to the Kremlin, to the Russian Imperial Movement (RIM), the first far-right group to be designated as a terrorist organization by the United States;¹⁰ skinheads; and neo-Nazis, have also established direct contact with European and North American counterparts. For example, members of the far-right Nordic Resistance Movement allegedly participated in paramilitary training offered, with the Kremlin's tacit approval, by RIM in Russia prior to committing an attack on a Swedish refugee center in 2017.¹¹ Such cases of transnational far-right cooperation have been identified in countries with a history of pro-Russian views among the far right, such as Serbia and the Czech Republic,

- 3 Pietro Castelli Gattinara, Eviane Leidig, and Jacob Aasland Ravndal, "What Characterizes the Far Right Scene in Europe and Beyond?" Center for Research on Extremism (C-REX), 15 November 2020, <https://www.sv.uio.no/c-rex/english/groups/compendium/what-characterizes-the-far-right-scene-in-europe-and-beyond.html>.
- 4 Johannes Due Enstad, "Right-Wing Terrorism and Violence in Putin's Russia," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 12, no. 6 (2018): 89–103. For definitions and an updated version of the underlying data, see "RTV Codebook, 1990–2021," C-REX, 24 June 2022, <https://www.sv.uio.no/c-rex/english/groups/rtv-dataset/rtv-codebook-2022.pdf>.
- 5 Miroslav Mareš, Martin Laryš, and Jan Holzer, *Militant Right-Wing Extremism in Putin's Russia* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2018), p. 163.
- 6 Robert Horvath, *Putin's Fascists: Russkii Obraz and the Politics of Managed Nationalism in Russia* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2021), p. 267.
- 7 Taras Kuzio, "How Putin's Russia Embraced Fascism While Preaching Anti-Fascism," Atlantic Council, 17 April 2022, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/how-putins-russia-embraced-fascism-while-preaching-anti-fascism/>.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Michael Carpenter, "Russia Is Co-opting Angry Young Men," *Atlantic*, 29 August 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/08/russia-is-co-opting-angry-young-men/568741/>.
- 10 U.S. Department of State, "United States Designates Russian Imperial Movement and Leaders as Global Terrorists," 7 April 2020, <https://2017-2021.state.gov/united-states-designates-russian-imperial-movement-and-leaders-as-global-terrorists/index.html>.
- 11 J. Lester Feder, Edgar Mannheimer, and Jane Lytvynenko, "These Swedish Nazis Trained in Russia Before Bombing a Center for Asylum Seekers," BuzzFeed News, 22 July 2017, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/lesterfeder/these-swedish-nazis-trained-in-russia>; Elizabeth Grimm Arsenault and Joseph Stabile, "Confronting Russia's Role in Transnational White Supremacist Extremism," Just Security, 6 February 2020, <https://www.justsecurity.org/68420/confronting-russias-role-in-transnational-white-supremacist-extremism/>.

and in countries where this has not been the case in the past, such as Germany and Hungary.¹²

These connections have made Russia a central player in transnational far-right extremism. This has also been reemphasized by the role that Russian far-right groups such as Rusich or the Russian Imperial Legion, which is the paramilitary arm of RIM, as well as mercenary groups such as Wagner, with their own far-right connections, have played and continue to play in the war in Ukraine since 2014.¹³

INITIAL REACTIONS AND SHIFTING PERCEPTIONS IN THE INVASION'S WAKE

Even though the far right has evidently enjoyed a close relationship with Putin's Russia, the war in Ukraine, as justified by Russia on a pretext of denazification, has created a split among international far-right groups with regard to Putin's actions. Some on the far right apparently tried to ignore the war, believing it to be staged by crisis actors as a distraction from their "mission" at home,¹⁴ but most had strong initial reactions in favor of or against the invasion.

For QAnon communities and other conspiracy theorists, which are closely allied with far-right extremist communities,¹⁵ Putin's attack on Ukraine was a long-awaited hit against the "deep state," an evil cabal that has supposedly infiltrated Western governments and

political elites, which could open the doors to a wider war against the deep state in the West.¹⁶ As Ukraine featured prominently in QAnon narratives since 2017, including conspiracy theories involving U.S. President Joe Biden's son Hunter, as well as John Podesta's emails and the Clinton Foundation, conspiracy communities were ready to support Russia's action in the country. These narratives were also supported by stories, widely debunked, that were initially spread on Russian media and then picked up by the conspiracy movement about U.S.-funded biological weapons laboratories in Ukraine that were the real target of Putin's "special operation."¹⁷

The New Right, a broad network within the wider far-right landscape encompassing movements such as the alt-right in the United States, the Neue Rechte in Germany, and the Nouvelle Droite in France,¹⁸ similarly voiced support, if only lukewarm, for the war. This support is less based on support for Putin than on general anti-Western sentiments, blaming the United States and other Western nations, as well as NATO, the United Nations, and the European Union, for provoking the war.¹⁹ In particular, NATO and its eastward expansions and the United States and its "globalism" have been blamed by these movements for leaving Russia with no alternative to invading Ukraine.²⁰ Building on existing feedback loops between Russia and the international far right, far-right groups in the United States and beyond have also parroted many of the narratives that have been used to justify the war in Russian state-run media, justifying the war with the

12 Mareš, Laryš, and Holzer, *Militant Right-Wing Extremism in Putin's Russia*, p. 232.

13 Fidelius Schmid, "Zahlreiche Neonazis kämpfen in der Ukraine für Russland," *Der Spiegel*, 22 May 2022, <https://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/ukraine-krieg-organisierte-neonazi-gruppen-kaempfen-fuer-russland-geheimdienstbericht-a-f1632333-6801-47b3-99b9-650d85a51a52>.

14 Sara Aniano, "Far-Right Responses to Russia's Invasion of Ukraine," Global Network on Extremism & Technology (GNET), 7 March 2022, <https://gnet-research.org/2022/03/07/far-right-responses-to-russias-invasion-of-ukraine/>.

15 Saifelddeen Zihiri et al., "QAnon Shifts Into the Mainstream, Remains a Far-Right Ally," *Heliyon* 8, no. 2 (February 2022), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2022.e08764>.

16 Aiganysh Aidarbekova, "Russia's QAnon Followers Can't Make Up Their Minds About Ukraine," Bellingcat, 15 April 2022, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/2022/04/15/russias-qanon-followers-cant-make-up-their-minds-about-ukraine/>.

17 Stephanie Foggett, Mollie Saltskog, and Colin Clarke, "How Are Putin's Far-Right Fans in the West Reacting to His War?" War on the Rocks, 18 March 2022, <https://warontherocks.com/2022/03/how-are-putins-far-right-fans-in-the-west-reacting-to-his-war/>; David Gilbert, "Here's Why QAnon Believes Vladimir Putin Is the Good Guy," *Vice*, 2 March 2022, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/93bgxd/qanon-russia-putin>.

18 Johannes Steizinger, "Why the Ideology of the 'New Right' Is So Dangerous," *Conversation*, 2 November 2022, <https://theconversation.com/why-the-ideology-of-the-new-right-is-so-dangerous-192833>.

19 Aniano, "Far-Right Responses to Russia's Invasion of Ukraine."

20 Claire Burchett and James Barth, "How the European Far Right Is Using Russia's Invasion of Ukraine to Radicalise Its Audience," GNET, 14 April 2022, <https://gnet-research.org/2022/04/14/how-the-european-far-right-is-using-russias-invasion-of-ukraine-to-radicalise-its-audience/>.

alleged genocide of Russians in Ukraine and the necessity to fight Nazis in Ukraine.²¹

Most of the movements and individuals who voiced support for Russia's war did so without intending to actively support Russia, although some tried to join the war on Russia's side. For example, a man with contacts to far-right groups was arrested in Germany for sharing pro-war propaganda and allegedly planning to travel to Ukraine via Belarus to support Russia in the war.²²

Pro-war views have also been expressed by some historically pro-Russian far-right groups in places such as Serbia or the Baltics.²³ In Serbia and other parts of the Western Balkans with Serb or Orthodox populations, members of far-right groups such as Obraz, People's Patrol, or the Night Wolves, as well as the Serbian nationalist Ravna Gora Chetnik Movement, have been very vocal with their support for Russia's actions in Ukraine.²⁴ These views are not particularly surprising, given Russian efforts to emphasize a pan-Slavic identity with populations in the Balkans and the fact that hundreds of individuals from the region have joined the broader conflict in Ukraine on the Russian side since 2014.²⁵ According to the Ukrainian Resistance Center, Russia has also been recruiting mercenaries from the Balkans in the current war.²⁶

On the other hand, many far-right groups have taken the side of Ukraine in the conflict, criticizing

Russia's narratives of denazification and its destruction of a Western country. Although initial support for Russia came mainly from groups that are part of the New Right branch of the far right, groups siding with Ukraine came largely from the neo-Nazi and neo-fascist end of the ideological spectrum.²⁷ Framing the war as brother wars between two white European countries, those groups mainly regret the killing of white people in Ukraine, blaming the imperialist ambitions of two anti-white empires—the globalist West and Eurasionist Russia—for the bloodshed.²⁸ Even some far-right QAnon Telegram channels within Russia initially took an antiwar view, urging Russian soldiers not to kill Ukrainians and sending “peace and love” to those in the war zone, a message that stands in direct contrast to the narratives supported by global QAnon communities that saw Putin destroying the “cabal” in Ukraine as initiating a war against the deep state.²⁹

Neo-Nazi groups in the West similarly declared their allegiance to Ukraine, pointing to their support for and ideological similarities with the Ukrainian Azov regiment, with its purported neo-Nazi ties, and criticizing Putin's ambitions of denazification.³⁰ Importantly, the Azov regiment has evolved from its formation in the early phases of the conflict in 2014, largely shedding its extremist members and integrating into the Ukrainian National Guard, with only the Azov movement being left as a harbor and transnational hub for

21 Peter Stone, “U.S. Rightwing Figures in Step With Kremlin Over Ukraine Disinformation, Experts Say,” *Guardian*, 6 April 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/apr/06/us-right-wing-republicans-russia-ukraine-disinformation>.

22 “Ermittler nehmen mutmaßlichen Russland-Unterstützer fest,” *Der Spiegel*, 4 August 2022, <https://www.spiegel.de/panorama/justiz/hamburg-mutmasslicher-russland-unterstuetzer-festgenommen-a-7873125d-5082-42d5-9bd3-6841827e3bc2>.

23 Paul Stronski, “Russia in the Balkans After Ukraine: A Troubling Actor,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 20 September 2022, <https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/87959>; “Recurring Pro-Kremlin Rhetoric Linking Baltic States With Nazism,” Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 6 September 2022, https://www.isdglobal.org/digital_dispatches/recurring-pro-kremlin-rhetoric-linking-baltic-states-with-nazism/.

24 Nermina Kuloglija, “At Pro-Russian Balkan Rallies, a Who's Who of the Far-Right,” *Balkan Insight*, 10 March 2022, <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/03/10/at-pro-russian-balkan-rallies-a-whos-who-of-the-far-right/>.

25 Claudia Wallner and Jessica White, “Global Violent Right-Wing Extremism: Mapping the Threat and Response in the Western Balkans, Turkey, and South Africa,” Counter-Terrorism Monitoring, Reporting and Support Mechanism, February 2022, https://ctmorse.wenginepowered.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/global-vrwe-threat-and-response-mapping_think-piece_final-17022022.pdf.

26 “The Russians Are Recruiting Mercenaries in the Balkans,” National Resistance Center, 6 January 2023, <https://sprotyv.mod.gov.ua/en/2023/01/06/the-russians-are-recruiting-mercenaries-in-the-balkans/>.

27 Burchett and Barth, “How the European Far Right Is Using Russia's Invasion of Ukraine to Radicalise Its Audience.”

28 Foggett, Saltskog, and Clarke, “How Are Putin's Far-Right Fans in the West Reacting to His War?”

29 Aidarbekova, “Russia's QAnon Followers Can't Make Up Their Minds About Ukraine.”

30 ADL, “White Supremacists, Other Extremists Respond to Russian Invasion of Ukraine.”

far-right extremists.³¹ Yet, some individuals on the more extreme ends of the far-right spectrum, at least initially, saw it as a potential pathway to achieving National Socialist control over Ukraine if Russia could be defeated.³²

In order to help achieve this Russian defeat, some members of far-right groups in the West have provided financial support to Ukraine or attempted to join the conflict themselves. Especially in the early days of the war, concerns about far-right extremists from the West joining the war in large numbers were widely shared in European and North American media.³³ This concern was largely based on the fact that, in earlier stages of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, many of those who traveled from abroad to join the conflict in Donbas on either side were linked to ultranationalist or white supremacist groups or networks.³⁴ Indeed, it appears that the Azov movement managed to recruit some international far-right extremists into the International Legion.³⁵ Yet, the numbers of recruits were much lower than anticipated, with very few far-right volunteers making it through the recruitment process.³⁶

In the months since the beginning of the war, the far right's initial reactions to the war itself have partly faded. As the longer-term impacts of the war have started to become clear, however, many of the groups and movements on the far-right spectrum shifted their focus, capitalizing on these developments and

their impacts on the world, especially the surging gas prices in Europe and beyond following the imposition of sanctions and interruptions in Russian gas exports to Europe, which resulted in a wider energy crisis and contributed to overall inflation. These practical economic and financial impacts have become a narrative tool of many far-right groups and movements, who took up the issue of inflation and the energy crisis to express their support for Russia and their dissatisfaction with their own governments.³⁷

Having previously rallied around ending COVID-19 pandemic-related restrictions and limiting migration from places such as Afghanistan, these groups utilized economic anxieties among the public to gain wider support, especially as restrictions relating to the pandemic have been lifted for the most part. Given their internal divisions with regard to their support for or opposition to Russia's actions, far-right groups have shifted the focus to the impact of sanctions on European and Western societies rather than debating the merit of sanctioning Russia in general.³⁸ In the Czech Republic, for example, far-right and far-left groups have come together with pro-Russian positions in the context of rising energy prices and a cost-of-living crisis.³⁹ Directing their anger toward the Czech government, as well as the EU and NATO, the protesters complained that resources are being used to support Ukrainian refugees while the Czech population is told to "wear sweaters indoors" to stay warm.⁴⁰

31 Alexander Ritzmann, "The Myth Far-Right Zealots Run Ukraine Is Russian Propaganda," Euronews, 12 April 2022, <https://www.euronews.com/2022/04/12/the-myth-far-right-zealots-run-ukraine-is-russian-propaganda-view>.

32 ADL, "White Supremacists, Other Extremists Respond to Russian Invasion of Ukraine."

33 Sudarsan Raghavan et al., "Right-Wing Azov Battalion Emerges as a Controversial Defender of Ukraine," *Washington Post*, 6 April 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/04/06/ukraine-military-right-wing-militias/>.

34 Jeff Seldin, "White Supremacists Lead New Wave of Foreign Fighters," VOA News, 30 September 2019, https://www.voanews.com/a/usa_white-supremacists-lead-new-wave-foreign-fighters/6176687.html.

35 Kacper Rekawek, "Extremist Foreign Fighters in Ukraine," Centre for Research and Evidence on Security Threats, 13 November 2022, <https://crestresearch.ac.uk/comment/extremist-foreign-fighters-in-ukraine/>.

36 Jeff Seldin, "Anticipated Foreign Fighter Flow to Ukraine Likely Just a Trickle," VOA News, 27 May 2022, <https://www.voanews.com/a/anticipated-foreign-fighter-flow-to-ukraine-likely-just-a-trickle-/6593263.html>.

37 Tristan Bove, "Europe's Deglobalization and Surging Nationalism Have Echoes of the 1930s. Now It's Heading Into a Major Energy Crisis," *Fortune*, 2 October 2022, <https://fortune.com/2022/10/02/europe-similar-1930s-trends-populism-isolationism-energy-crisis/>.

38 Elizabeth Schumacher, "Far-Right AfD Seeks a Boost in Times of Crisis," *Deutsche Welle*, 27 September 2022, <https://www.dw.com/en/germanys-far-right-afd-hopes-for-a-boost-in-times-of-crisis/a-63252759>.

39 Soufan Center, "IntelBrief: Concerns Grow Over Political Stability in Europe Related to Ukraine Crisis," 22 September 2022, <https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-2022-september-22/>.

40 Ibid.

In Germany, far-right protests erupted over the summer of 2022, bringing together many of the disparate groups that came together for demonstrations against COVID-19 pandemic measures to rally against the government's participation in the EU sanctions regime, as well as arms deliveries to Ukraine.⁴¹ Analysts have warned of large-scale, violent protests breaking out in case of a breakdown of industries due to gas shortages, given the large numbers of people who joined far-right channels and groups on Telegram linked to the protests.⁴² These fears did not materialize so far, partly due to the unusually warm temperatures in parts of the country in late 2022, which meant that less gas was needed to heat private households. Nevertheless, the far right continues to use the crisis to mobilize its followers, for example by refocusing on migration, given that Germany has accepted around one million Ukrainian refugees since February 2022.⁴³ In at least one case, these antimigration sentiments appear to have even led to an arson attack on an accommodation for Ukrainian refugees, soon after a drawing of a swastika was apparently found on a board in front of the building.⁴⁴

ENDURING NARRATIVES AND IMPLICATIONS

The emotive initial reactions to the war in Ukraine have long faded, and far-right groups and movements in different parts of the world have shifted their stance on Russia and its role in the war with changing priorities and perceived threats. Yet, many of the narratives

that were reemphasized in the context of the war are here to stay.

First, the war strengthened already existing anti-Western, antiglobalist sentiments among the far right in the West, which are often closely linked to antisemitic tropes and narratives about Jewish global elites ruling the Western world. The idea that Western governments, with the help of international organizations such as NATO, the EU, or the United Nations, are plotting to destroy the white race and force their liberal values on the world is not new, but the propaganda that was spread by the Putin regime and picked up by far-right groups in the West certainly helped to cement these beliefs in far-right ideologies.⁴⁵ Far-right attitudes toward Putin and his decisions have varied, but what unifies the different strands of the far right in their narratives regarding the war is the belief that the West, through its expansionist policies or its failure to respect Putin and take Russia seriously, has made the war inevitable. Prior to the war, many on the far right hailed Putin as a strongman with a nationalistic agenda and the Russian way as an inspiration and a model for their militant struggle. Now, although most on the far right who still support Putin are less enthusiastic about him than they were before the war, many still see him as a preferable option to “atheist Western hegemony.”⁴⁶ This reaffirmed hatred toward Western liberal elites provides far-right movements around the world with a common enemy that further enables transnational connections between far-right groups, methods, and narratives.⁴⁷

41 Maik Baumgärtner, “Wie Rechtsextremisten ihre Anhänger für einen deutschen Wutwinter mobilisieren,” *Der Spiegel*, 23 July 2022, <https://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/energiekrise-und-inflation-wie-rechtsextremisten-ihre-anhaenger-fuer-einen-wutwinter-mobilisieren-a-d61b5838-a020-4bff-8af5-438754c72afb>.

42 Ibid.

43 “Aus dem »heißen Herbst« ist laut Verfassungsschutz ein »laues Lüftchen« geworden,” *Der Spiegel*, 28 December 2022, <https://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/thomas-haldenwang-ueber-proteste-in-ostdeutschland-heissen-herbst-nur-laues-lueftchen-a-d51c4359-5f66-470c-a8b0-51bcba225fb8>.

44 “Polizei geht von politischem Hintergrund aus,” *Der Spiegel*, 20 October 2022, <https://www.spiegel.de/panorama/justiz/gross-stroemkendorf-unterkunft-fuer-ukrainische-gefluechtete-abgebrannt-polizei-geht-von-politischem-hintergrund-aus-a-a41c6d70-fc3b-4dde-b3c6-b69659bf9285>; Mona Berner, Tom Kroll, and August Modersohn, “Brand in Flüchtlingsunterkunft Groß Strömkendorf: Nicht sicher,” *Die Zeit*, 26 October 2022, <https://www.zeit.de/2022/44/gross-stroemkendorf-brand-ukraine-gefluechtete-fluechtlingsheim>.

45 Foggett, Saltskog, and Clarke, “How Are Putin's Far-Right Fans in the West Reacting to His War?”

46 ADL, “White Supremacists, Other Extremists Respond to Russian Invasion of Ukraine.”

47 RUSI, “Global Perspectives on the Transnational Far-Right Threat and Response,” 3 November 2021, <https://rusi.org/events/conferences/global-perspectives-transnational-far-right-threat-and-response>.

Linked to the opposition to liberal Western values, Putin's narratives concerning gender, including his opposition to LGBTQ+ rights and his emphasis on the importance of traditional family values, have gained a lot of traction with the far right. Again, these views are not new among far-right groups and movements, who see LGBTQ+ rights and feminism as some of the main threats to the survival of their race and way of life. Putin's own rhetoric with regard to these topics has remained unchanged.⁴⁸ For many on the far right, Putin has long represented a real man—an archetype of strength and security, defined through masculinity.⁴⁹ This stands in clear contrast to the wokeness they criticize in, for example, the U.S. military, where they fear that increasing diversity among service members will lead to a deterioration of standards and capabilities.⁵⁰

Most far-right groups have apparently not given too much thought to the military defeats of Russia's "ideally masculine" military, but Putin still managed to double down on his misogynistic narratives in the context of the war, which resonated with domestic audiences and the international far right.⁵¹ As it became clear that his denazification argument alone would not convince the Russian population for long, he soon started creating new narratives to justify his actions. Prominently, this included the argument that the war was necessary to prevent what he considered to be degenerated liberal family values, where families are

made up of "parent one" and "parent two" rather than mother and father,⁵² from spreading to Russia and save Ukraine from these imported Western norms.

Further weaponizing the debate, Putin introduced a law banning the "promotion of non-traditional sexual orientations" in late 2022, tightening already existing laws in this space.⁵³ Aside from helping to construct a sense of national identity domestically, Putin's appeals to supposed traditions, often under the guise of religion, continue to resonate with foreign far-right audiences, who feel that their understanding of gender and family values is under attack in the West. In addition to seeing their values represented in Putin's Russia, some on the far right also praise Putin for his supposed fight against pedophilia, linking common far-right narratives about pedophilia and the grooming and abuse of children by LGBTQ+ communities with QAnon conspiracy theories about Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy enabling such activities in Ukraine.⁵⁴

A third narrative that existed within the far right before the war in Ukraine and came to the forefront again through the developments of the last year centered on energy security and a wider debate about the environment and limitations in natural resources. Often linking purported concerns about the environment with issues such as migration and overpopulation, far-right groups have long capitalized on climate change and other issues relating to the natural

48 Carpenter, "Russia Is Co-opting Angry Young Men"; Mikhail Fishman, "To Avoid Answering Hard Questions at Home, Putin Will Keep Fighting in Ukraine," Wilson Center, 14 November 2022, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/avoid-answering-hard-questions-home-putin-will-keep-fighting-ukraine>.

49 Kay Rollins, "Putin's Other War: Domestic Violence, Traditional Values, and Masculinity in Modern Russia," *Harvard International Review*, 3 August 2022, <https://hir.harvard.edu/putins-other-war/>.

50 Foggett, Saltskog, and Clarke, "How Are Putin's Far-Right Fans in the West Reacting to His War?"; Stephanie Foggett, "The Far-Right Idealized the Russian Military. Ukraine Exposes All the Ways They're Wrong," *Lawfare*, 10 April 2022, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/far-right-idealized-russian-military-ukraine-exposes-all-ways-theyre-wrong>.

51 Rollins, "Putin's Other War."

52 "Extracts From Putin's Speech at Annexation Ceremony," Reuters, 30 September 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/extracts-putins-speech-annexation-ceremony-2022-09-30/>.

53 "Putin Signs Law Banning Expressions of L.G.B.T.Q. Identity in Russia," *New York Times*, 5 December 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/05/world/europe/russia-ban-lgbtq-propaganda.html>.

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environment.⁵⁵ The far right may not directly connect the debate on energy security, in which they enthusiastically got involved during the summer of 2022,⁵⁶ to climate change and the wider environment, but it links to their narratives about scarce natural resources and with whom they should be shared, as well as their views on alternative energy sources and a move away from fossil fuel use. Although the feared violent far-right protests in parts of Europe in response to the energy crisis have not materialized so far, the risk is not entirely averted. In the absence of sufficient alternative gas sources, a similar crisis could still hit in 2023, sparking a new wave of far-right protests.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Far-right groups thrive on moments of crisis and chaos, utilizing widespread anger and frustration to mobilize existing supporters and gain new followers. This has certainly been the case in the context of Russia's war in Ukraine and its consequences for the world in 2022. Even as the far right moves on to new topics, these three key themes—its support for anti-Western views, a sense of misogyny and a general opposition LGBTQ+ identities and communities, and increasing anxieties about energy security and related concerns—will continue to feature in its narratives.

This brief therefore makes the following recommendations:

- Analysis of and threat assessment for violent far-right extremism should be informed by a thorough understanding of the role of misogynist and anti-LGBTQ+ narratives in far-right ideology, particularly as a connecting element, bringing together far-right communities that are otherwise based on very different national or regional expressions of far-right ideologies and narratives.
- In the context of violence based on misogynist and anti-LGBTQ+ narratives as part of far-right ideology but also with regard to acts of violence directed against Ukrainian refugees in Europe and beyond, the intersections between hate crime laws and counterterrorism policy and laws should be considered carefully. In order to gain a realistic understanding of the threat level posed by such ideologies, incidents need to be adequately categorized and reported across jurisdictions.
- Monitoring and investigation of domestic far-right groups should include a detailed analysis of transnational links to far-right groups in Russia and other parts of the world, both physically (e.g., bilateral visits, attendance at far-right music festivals or sports events, and financial exchanges) and online (e.g., interactions on mainstream and fringe online channels, including Telegram and far-right discussion boards, but also gaming platforms).
- The presence of narratives that are historically linked to left-wing causes, such as narratives relating to the environment and climate change, should not be misunderstood to represent a move away from the more extreme ends of the far-right spectrum. Similarly, ad hoc cooperation with left-wing groups on such causes should not automatically be taken as a sign that a group has moved away from violent far-right beliefs and ideologies.
- Ideological convergence and exchanges between the more violent end of the far-right spectrum and non-violent far-right groups and movements should be closely monitored. In particular, the mainstreaming of certain far-right narratives (e.g., anti-Western/antiglobalist views and anti-LGBTQ+ narratives) should not be ignored, and the ability of governments and law enforcement agencies to clearly differentiate nonviolent and violent groups should be carefully reconsidered.

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56 Thomas Wieder, "Germany's Far-Right AfD Seeks to Rebound Thanks to Energy Crisis and Inflation," *Le Monde*, 10 October 2022, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2022/10/10/in-germany-the-far-right-afd-party-is-relying-on-the-energy-crisis-and-inflation-to-try-to-rebound_5999726_4.html.

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