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# **Ideological motivations or pragmatic interests? Toward a better understanding of the motivations of Russia-friendly populist radical right parties in Europe**

Oldenburger, Anke

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**Ideological motivations or pragmatic interests? Toward a better understanding of the motivations of Russia-friendly populist radical right parties in Europe**

Anke Oldenburger, S1678280 ([S1678280@vuw.leidenuniv.nl](mailto:S1678280@vuw.leidenuniv.nl))

MA Thesis, International Relations, Leiden University

Supervisor: Dr. J. Fynn-Paul

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### **Abstract**

This thesis examines the motivations of three European populist radical right (PRR) parties that have adopted Russia-friendly positions and investigates whether parties are driven by ideological or pragmatic motivations. These linkages were brought to the fore following the recent invasion of Ukraine by Russia, which demonstrated the necessity of mitigating the long-term risks posed by these linkages. No conclusive answer to the question of parties' motivations can be given, as parties are driven by a combination of ideological and pragmatic motivations. In the first case study about the Dutch Party for Freedom, pragmatism prevailed; in the second case study about the Dutch Forum for Democracy, ideology dominated; and in the third, on the Belgian Flemish Interest, evidence pointed to pragmatism, but the evidence was weak as the party appeared mostly neutral. A policy recommendation is given to invest in strengthening democratic values to mitigate the long-term risks of the linkages between European PRR parties and Russia.

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## 1. Introduction

When the United Socialist Soviet Republic (USSR) collapsed, the West interpreted this as a victory of liberalism over the totalitarian ideologies of the twentieth century. The Russian Federation (hereafter, Russia) that arose from the USSR was believed to have transformed into a modern state along the lines of the (Western) liberal-democratic model. Initial optimism slowly disappeared after Putin came to power in the early 2000s, as he moved away from the liberal-democratic model. Deeply rooted distrust from the Cold War era resurfaced. The annexation of Crimea and Russian involvement in the Ukrainian Donbass Region in 2014 changed the geopolitical status quo on the European continent. All of this led to a deterioration of the relationship and complicated interactions between the Russian Federation and European countries and the European Union (EU). As a result, Russia needs allies in Europe and is looking for ways to influence European affairs (Butt & Byman, 2020).

In Europe, the common attitude of national political parties was rather indifferent toward Russia after the Cold War ended (Onderco, 2019). This changed after the invasion of Ukraine in 2014, when Russia returned to the top of the (political) agenda again, and parties were forced to take a stance. Russian attempts to interfere in domestic affairs in European politics were noticed and studied both within and outside academia (Butt & Byman, 2020; Önis & Kutlay, 2020). Possible similarities and linkages between European political parties and Putin's administration became a subject of scholarly interest (Shekhovtsov, 2017). During the same period, the European populist radical right's (PRR) influence on mainstream politics had been growing extensively since the early 2000s. The PRR is characterized by a combination of nativism, authoritarianism, and populism and is considered by most scholars in the field as "a problem for, if not open threat to, the liberal democratic system" (Mudde, 2017, p. 2).

When the linkages between the European PRR and Russian (state) actors came to light, the PRR's popularity was further problematized by governmental actors and scholars. Prominent examples are the French Rassemblement National (formerly known as Front National) and the Italian Lega (known as Lega Nord). These linkages are interpreted as possible (future) challenges to the foundation of the EU and liberal democracies in Europe (Shekhovtsov, 2017). The European Commission has identified these linkages as a threat to the EU's core values (Önis & Kutlay, 2020). This leads to questions about how states or governments should deal with PRR parties that adopt pro-Russian positions. To answer this question, the first step is to examine *why* these parties adopt certain positions. In this research, the motivations of three PRR parties that have adopted Russia-friendly positions are analyzed.

The parties included in the research are the Dutch Partij voor de Vrijheid (PVV, Party for Freedom), the Dutch Forum voor Democratie (FVD, Forum for Democracy), and the Belgian party Vlaams Belang (VB, Flemish Interest). A structural and consistent analysis of the motivations behind these parties' adoption of Russia-friendly positions will contribute to effective policymaking needed to counter the long-term risks to democratic principles. This thesis will answer the following research question:

Do the political parties included in this research adopt Russia-friendly positions based on ideological motivations or pragmatic interests?

The outcome of this research contributes to the existing literature, as these cases have not been studied in depth before and will illuminate the motivations of Russia-friendly parties in the Netherlands and Belgium.

### **1.1. Literature review**

The scholarly debate on what drives linkages between Russia-friendly parties and Russia revolves around two schools of thought. One group of scholars argues that ideology explains the linkages between European political parties and Russia; the other argues that these linkages are pragmatically motivated.

This debate started with the 2014 Political Capital Institute report "The Russian Connection." This was the first comprehensive research on these relationships between the European far-right and Russia and included parties from countries all over Europe. Based on statements by party representatives and documents published on party websites, parties were divided into different categories of positions on Russia: committed, open/neutral, and hostile. The PCI argues that positions on Russia are determined by ideological affinity based on three elements. First, Russia offers an attractive state-organization model for far-right parties. This model entails "an authoritarian political system, its heavy-handed leader, its great power rhetoric, the suppression of basic freedoms, state control over strategic sectors, the constant reference to 'national interests' overriding market mechanisms and a controlled economy that keeps 'big-capital' in check" (p. 3). Secondly, far-right parties find an ally in Russia for their goals of self-reliance and isolation. By approaching Russia, they find an ally in their criticisms of the EU and their attempts to break up the transatlantic community. And lastly, there is overlap between the European far-right's anti-establishment ideas and policy interests and Russia's geopolitical strategy, meaning that Russia offers political support to parties that

are considered friendly through “political initiative taking, NGO-diplomacy and support for friendly media enterprises” (p. 4).

This Political Capital Institute report laid out the foundations for research on this topic. Mudde (2014) acknowledged the report as the “most comprehensive study of far-right positions on Russia to date.” However, Mudde critiques the way the far-right parties are categorized as too vague. Furthermore, he argues that relationships between political parties and Russia take place primarily on a personal level and that most far-right parties are neutral in their positions on Russia (para 14). The distinction between ideology and pragmatism is important because ideologically motivated positions are more difficult to change, whereas pragmatic underpinnings, with their goal orientation, are more flexible (Gerring, 1997). A concise overview of the state of the art in the literature is presented below.

### *1.1.1. Ideology*

When analyzing the scholarship arguing that ideology explains the relations between the European far-right and Russia, not one scholar presented a conceptual definition of ideology (Engström, 2014; Pomerantsev, 2015; Polyakova, 2015; Laruelle, 2017; Gressel, 2017; Golosov, 2018; and Butt & Byman, 2018). Still, they refer – albeit in different terms – to the same dynamic, the far-right’s aim to change the political status quo along the lines of the Russian model.

Scholars offer various explanations of the practical relevance of ideology, namely that ideology can grant purpose and legitimacy, offer practical alternatives, and underpin alliances. Gressel (2017) describes the practical relevance of ideology as “another way is possible and that Europe could seek a political, economic, and social order different from the Western liberal model of democracy and market economy” (p. 8). According to Gressel, the shared ideology of anti-Westernism is what guides parties toward Russia. The relationship grants purpose and legitimacy to anti-Western parties. Likewise, Golosov (2018) writes, “their [PRR parties’] stance is party-motivated by their perception of Putin’s regime as an alternative to mainstream western politics. [...] This analysis reveals, however, that there is a certain degree of genuine ideological affinity among Putin-sympathizer parties” (p. 61). These parties are characterized as anti-system parties, sharing a rejection of liberal democracy and Western capitalism. Far-right parties consider the current political system anti-national, as it threatens traditional values and national independence. According to Golosov, the practical merit of a relationship with Russia is the alternative political reality offered by Russia. Engström (2014) argues along similar lines, claiming that Russia’s new conservative doctrine is “an argument

for Russia's true European Christian identity that got lost in the bureaucratic body of the EU" (p. 376). This doctrine matches the European far-right's interests and provides an alternative to the European status quo. Laruelle (2017) suggests that the ideological nature of the relationship is based on shared hostility toward the political mainstream. The connections between the Russian regime and the Western far-right serve as a tool to increase Russian soft-power. For far-right parties, Russia offers an alternative model that entails "the belief in a strong state and condemning 'hypocritical' liberal elites at home; it promotes a *realpolitik* abroad and has the capacity and audacity to name its enemies; it posits the supreme sovereignty of the state in the international arena; it reaffirms Christian morals and 'authentic' European values" (idem). According to Laruelle, allyship based on shared ideology is what matters most to far-right parties.

Ideological motivations are built on a combination of, mostly, *-isms* or *antis*: anti-Westernism, Euroscepticism, anti-EU integration, anti-contemporary capitalism, individualism, neo-conservatism, traditional values and social conservatism. The *-isms* and *antis* point to the necessity of analyzing both domestic and foreign policy to understand how positions on Russia are motivated.

### 1.1.2. Pragmatism

Other scholars (Mudde, 2014; Braghiroli & Makarychev, 2016; Snegovaya, 2021; Futák-Campbell & Schwieter, 2020; Klapsis, 2015; Orenstein & Kelemen, 2017; Balfour et al., 2016; Rohac, Zgut, & Gyori, 2017; and Onderco, 2019) conclude that linkages between the PRR and Russia are driven by pragmatic or opportunistic motivations. In some instances, this is explicitly stated (Braghiroli & Makarychev, 2016; Snegovaya, 2021); other claims are more implicit. By arguing: "Putin's regime and Russia sympathizers in Europe pragmatically use each other, thus stretching beyond classical ideological paradigms" (p. 214), Braghiroli and Makarychev (2016) explicitly point to pragmatism as the explanatory factor. Pragmatism is an approach to politics that prioritizes practical considerations over ideological principles (Gardini, 2011). Lawson (2015) describes pragmatism as a recognition of the reality of politics in order to arrive at workable solutions instead of being guided by impossible ideals. A pragmatic approach to foreign policy could thus mean that parties are open to alliances with other countries or parties, even if these countries have different political systems or values, in order to achieve a certain goal.

This group of scholars is loosely constructed; after all, pragmatism includes a wide range of possible motivations. Futák-Campbell and Schwieter (2020) build on practice theory



and argue that far-right parties use Russia as a means to build political competence at home, thereby expanding their influence at home and abroad. PRR parties establish transnational networks, centered around a particular topic (in this case Russia) which is taken over in the public sphere, for example by setting the public agenda. These three aspects allow for the deduction of political competence. Orenstein and Kelemen (2017) argue that “given these substantial economic links, these countries have, perhaps not surprisingly, prioritized their relations with Russia. [...] There are widespread, if hard to verify, reports that Russia has also provided financial support to extremist parties” (p. 93). As mentioned before, Mudde (2014) contends that personal relationships drive relations between the PRR and Russia and refutes the claim that the relations are based on financial incentives. The disagreement between Mudde (2014) and Orenstein and Kelemen (2017) points to the possibility of disagreement within the pragmatist group. Rohac, Zgut, and Gyori (2017) connect different motivations by concluding “through financial ties, personal connections, and an alignment of interests between the Kremlin and populist politicians, the latter have helped shape public views of Russia and have provided practical political assistance to Putin’s regime” (p. 15). Lastly, Onderco (2019) argues that party positions on Russia are partly determined by real-world events, such as the invasion of Ukraine in 2014.

In addition to the broad range of motivations, scholars point out the changing nature of relationships with Russia and repudiate the importance of ideology. Snegovaya (2021) writes, “But the agendas of these groups are rarely set by the Kremlin. They only align temporarily with the Kremlin’s interests” (p. 416). As soon as goals are achieved or interests change, parties change their positions and move on. Electoral successes or failures are another factor determining policy positions. Once parties move closer to power, they tend to take on more neutral positions to stay in power. Rohac, Zgut, and Gyori (2017) highlight the Russian point of view that “engagement is flexible, depending on the circumstances of particular countries and situations” (p. 12). Other scholars explicitly dispute the importance of ideology. Onderco (2019) claims, “ideology is scarcely a factor structuring partisan views of Russia” (p. 540). Braghiroli and Makarychev (2016) conclude that the ideological components on which relationships are based can be considered empty signifiers, having different meanings in different contexts and being open to interpretation. For example, viewpoints about national sovereignty can be framed in a way that they appeal to the far-right and the radical left. To the far-right, Putin provides an alternative in accordance with a traditional understanding of sovereignty, whereas to some radical left parties Russia’s stance on sovereignty matches the perception of the EU and NATO as neo-colonial structures. Snegovaya (2021) assesses far-

right positions as elements of Russian ideology and concludes that far-right parties only partially align themselves. In her view, partial alignment points to opportunistic motives.

Overall, this literature review has given insight into the different motivations for parties to adopt Russia-friendly positions. Ideologically motivated positions can grant purpose and legitimacy, offer practical alternatives and function as the glue for alliances. Russia-friendly positions based on pragmatic reasons can serve a variety of interests: building political competence, generating economic or financial profits, strengthening personal ties, providing practical assistance and/or simply allowing the pursuit of practical goals in the most efficient way.

## **1.2. Methodology**

This section describes the different methodologies used by other scholars who have conducted similar research, justifies the approach taken in this thesis and describes the way data was collected. Lastly, the blueprint for this research is presented in the “research operationalization” subsection.

Based on the insights into the possible motivations for adopting Russia-friendly positions explored in the literature review, a comparative case study of three political parties (PVV, FVD and VB) was carried out. These PRR parties were selected because they adopted Russia-friendly positions at some point in time. So far, political parties in smaller European countries remain understudied; hence, this research aims to add to the existing literature by filling this gap. In-depth case studies allow for an understanding of the relationship between the European far-right and Russia in terms of national and international contexts and the actors involved.

Scholarship on the ties between the European far-right and Russia is conducted using different methods. One group of scholars locates this specific phenomenon as part of a broader strategy or policy such as neo-Eurasianism or disinformation campaigns (Engström, 2014; Pomerantsev, 2015; Polyakova, 2015; Laruelle, 2017; and Orenstein & Kelemen, 2017). The most popular method of this group is analysis based on real-world examples from which patterns are deduced and inferences are drawn (Mudde, 2014; Klapsis, 2015; Braghiroli & Makarychev, 2016; Balfour et al., 2016; Rohac, Zgut & Gyori, 2017; Butt & Byman, 2020; and Futák-Campbell & Schwieter, 2020). Alternatively, there is a group of scholars conducting structural analyses of political parties and their linkages to Russia (Political Capital Institute, 2014; Gressel, 2017; Golosov, 2018; Onderco, 2019; and Snegovaya, 2021). This research fits into this category.

For this thesis, existing research methods used by other scholars were combined and mimicked (Political Capital Institute, 2014; Klapsis, 2015; and Snegovaya, 2021). Through a qualitative analysis of election programs, voting behavior and public statements by party leaders and representatives, motivations were categorized ideological or pragmatic. Parties were analyzed based on what they say they will do (election programs), what they actually do (voting) and how they justify their positions (statements). For the Dutch parties, election programs were acquired through the Documentatiecentrum Nederlandse Politieke Partijen (DNPP); information on voting behavior was found on the parliament's website, [www.tweedekamer.nl](http://www.tweedekamer.nl), and the news articles published on the parties' websites were analyzed. These were supplemented with statements made in the public media. For VB, in Belgium, election programs were downloaded from the Manifesto Project Database. It was discovered that detailed information on voting behavior in the Belgian national parliament is not available online. Consequently, voting behavior in the European Parliament (EP) was analyzed. The data was compiled from the [www.HowTheyVote.eu](http://www.HowTheyVote.eu) database. Another difficulty in the analysis of VB was the limited availability of news articles published on the party website. Only news articles from 2018 onward were available online. This gap was (partly) filled by news articles.

### *1.2.1. Research operationalization*

This section lays out the research blueprint that was used to ensure that the same indicators of ideology and pragmatism were consistently analyzed in all three case studies. The blueprint was based on the literature review and the methodology. To analyze ideology, Laruelle's (2015) model is used. Adherence to and incorporation of the model indicated an ideological linkage. Parties' deviation from this model suggests an absence of genuine ideological affinity with Russia. Next, the four components of Laruelle's model are discussed.

a. A shared belief in a strong state and condemning "hypocritical" liberal elites at home. Based on the characteristics of the PRR, it is expected that the parties included in this study display these elements as a part of their party identity. Russia is an example of an authoritarian state with a strong leader (Political Capital Institute, 2014). The state has the capacity to control strategic sectors, foreground national interests and control globalization. Anti-liberalist viewpoints and belief in a strong state forms common ground between Russia and the PRR (Golosov, 2018). As Mudde (2017) explains, "authoritarianism refers to the belief in a strictly ordered society, in which infringements of authority are to be punished

severely” (p. 4). Thus, a strong state is needed to enforce authority. Another key feature of the PRR is populism (Mudde, 2017). Populists divide society into two groups: the people and the elites. Populists claim to represent the people and oppose the elites.

- b. Adherence to the principles of *realpolitik* abroad and having the capacity and audacity to name enemies.

It is expected that the parties included are supportive of the alternative model offered by Russia. By adopting the principles of *realpolitik*, Russia pursues its national interests based on current circumstances and needs without tying itself to moral or ideological principles. Russia seeks to position itself as the leader and defender of an alternative world order. For example, during the 2013 Syrian Conflict, where Russia acted as a peacemaker, and the invasion of Crimea, which was justified by the reasoning that the Euromaidan Revolution was a coup backed by the EU and United States (Engström, 2014; Polyakova, 2015). Russia is willing to name its enemies and challenge them. In this manner, Russia proves to be a viable and consistent alternative to the status quo.

- c. Positing the supreme sovereignty of the state in the international arena.

The parties in the case studies are expected to support attempts to regain full sovereignty. For Russia, states are the main actors in international relations. By approaching states as the main actors, the positions of international (NATO) and/or supranational (the EU) organizations are weakened. This aligns with Russia's aim to divide the West (Butt & Byman, 2020). For example, this is reflected in the Front National's – one of the main outposts of Russia in Europe – support for a Europe of Nations (Laruelle, 2015). Hence, state sovereignty is essential for states to participate in the international arena.

- d. Support for Christian morals and “authentic” European values.

It is predicted that the parties included in this study share these values with Russia and actively promote them. Even though Russia's attitude has been anti-Western, “it is not a denial of Russia's European identity; rather, it is an argument for Russia's true European Christian identity that got lost in the bureaucratic body of the EU” (Engström, 2014, p. 376). Gressel (2017) identifies this from the European viewpoint as the “fear of losing Europe's Christian roots” (p. 9). The praise of Putin for doing what is good for Russia and Russians by Le Pen of France is an example of why European far-right parties are captivated by the

Russian regime (Butt & Byman, 2020). Nativism is characteristic of the PRR and could be the reason for the incorporation of these values (Mudde, 2017).

Deviations from these elements do not mean that parties are driven by pragmatic reasons. Therefore, a framework is needed to analyze pragmatic motivations as well. As the literature review demonstrated, the group of pragmatists is loosely connected, hence it is challenging to define elements that point to pragmatic motivations. Pragmatic factors that shape party positions identified in the literature include the desire to build political competence, economic and/or financial links, personal connections and/or real-world events. Combinations are also possible, as these factors are not mutually exclusive (Rohac, Zgut & Gyori, 2017). Attention was given to how changes in positions are justified, as flexible positions might indicate pragmatic motivations (Snegovaya, 2015). Consequently, it is expected that non-ideological motivations fit at least one of the following categories: establishing political competence, generating economic and/or financial benefits, building or strengthening personal connections and responding to real-world events.

## **2. PVV: In a Situationship?**

In this chapter, the Partij voor de Vrijheid (PVV) is analyzed. First, background information about the party is given, and the outcomes of previous research are discussed. After this, expectations from the research's operationalization are tested. Ideological elements are analyzed first, followed by pragmatic elements. The chapter concludes with an overview of the outcomes of the analysis.

### **2.1. Background**

The Dutch political party Partij voor de Vrijheid (Party for Freedom, in short, PVV) was established in 2006. Its leader, Wilders, is the main party figure. The PVV is a PRR party, embodying authoritarianism, nativism, and populism (Mudde, 2017). Throughout the years, the PVV has become a stable actor in the Dutch opposition and participated in government from 2010-2012. Remarkable about the party structure is that the PVV has no members except for Wilders. This implies that the party does not receive any subsidies from the Dutch state, as the threshold to apply for a subsidy is 1,000 members (de Lange, 2021). This also means no revenues are collected through membership fees. Because of the PVV's organizational structure, there are no party congresses or party journals. Lastly, as Wilders is

both the leader and the only member, he dominates the party and is primarily responsible for its course and successes.

Different scholars point to Russia-friendly stances of the PVV. In the 2014 report by the Political Capital Institute, the PVV was categorized as “open to Russia.” The open category includes “parties that while in most cases display a negative or neutral attitude toward Russia, in some important issues support the Russian position even in the absence of genuine motivation” (p. 6). Futák-Campbell and Schwieter support the Political Capital Institute’s conclusion, stating, “although Wilders publicly spoke out against the annexation of Crimea, he has frequently criticized The Hague’s Russophobia, claiming that Russia is an ally” (2020, p. 900). In contrast to other Russia-friendly parties – such as the French Front National and the German Alternative für Deutschland – the PVV is considered more aligned with the Atlantic sphere and more liberal in its stance on LGBTQ rights. According to Gressel’s (2017) analysis, the PVV is moderately anti-Western, “rejecting more elements of the Western order than they endorse but accepting some parts of the Western model” (p. 3). This category of political parties is considered to adopt party positions favoring ties with Russia.

## 2.2. Ideological motivations

The PVV shares with Russia the belief in a strong state and condemnation of domestic elites. Authoritarianism plays a minor role in the PVV, and their views on morality and law-and-order authoritarianism are mostly tied to the party’s nativism (Otjes, 2020). Still, the PVV is known for its advocacy for law-and-order politics. A strong state needs strong leadership, of which Putin is a role model, according to Wilders (Russia Today, 2018). Thus, the PVV shares the belief in a strong state with Russia, but their underlying motivation is different. Although given different names – progressive elites (PVV Verkiezingsprogramma, 2012), Europhiles in Brussels (PVV Verkiezingsprogramma, 2017) and leftist-liberal elites (PVV Verkiezingsprogramma, 2021) – there is a notion in various party programs of elites who have turned against the “normal” people. On this subject, the PVV has adopted a populist strategy of politics, declaring that they represent and protect the people from the elites.

Secondly, traces of *realpolitik* toward Russia are found in the PVV’s election programs. Russia was mentioned two times in the five electoral programs included in this analysis. The first time, the PVV pleaded for nuclear energy, as this would grant the Netherlands independence from Russia and Islamic countries in terms of energy provision (PVV Verkiezingsprogramma, 2010). In 2020 the PVV pleaded for a Russia strategy through

which Dutch social, economic and political interests would be served, unlike the common European strategy, which the Dutch government follows (PVV, 2020). PVV is supportive toward a common strategy in the military domain shaped by NATO. Another interesting point is the statement that relations with Russia can only be improved if Russia is left to determine its own moral and cultural values without the Netherlands projecting Dutch values on the Russian state. Additionally, the PVV's arguments were backed by economic considerations. In the 2021 election program, the PVV called to improve bilateral political and economic relations with Russia (PVV Verkiezingsprogramma, 2021), which was justified by highlighting the negative effects of a problematic relationship with Russia on Dutch interests. They did highlight that those responsible for the shoot down of MH17 should be held responsible, even if it involved state actors. Also in 2021, the PVV promoted the purchase of Russian gas by arguing that it would make Russia dependent on gas revenues and thus on the buyers (PVV, 2021). This marks a break from their previous position, when nuclear energy was promoted as a means of becoming less dependent on Russia. Vulnerabilities in this regard were exposed after Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022 and limited the gas supply to Europe. In sum, the positions taken on Russia and the underlying motivations testify to the principles of *realpolitik*. There are no indications that the PVV conforms to the idea of Russia as providing an alternative order; instead, they distance themselves from Russian internal matters and foreground Dutch trade interests. In terms of enemies, the PVV is not afraid to name its main enemy, the EU. Another intangible enemy is Islam, embodied by immigrants from Islamic countries. In short, the PVV has the capacity and audacity to name its enemies; however, these enemies are not exactly the same as Russia's enemies.

The PVV has been "euro-critical" since its establishment and is known for its advocacy for national sovereignty. The party positioned themselves against further EU enlargement and transfers of sovereignty to Brussels in its first electoral program in 2006 (PVV Verkiezingsprogramma, 2006). Instead, they proposed a union limited to economic cooperation. In 2012, the PVV started advocating for a NEXIT – a Dutch withdrawal from the EU – to regain national sovereignty (PVV Verkiezingsprogramma, 2012). The EU was framed as a totalitarian institution and compared to the former Soviet Union. Throughout the years, the EU has been increasingly characterized by the PVV as tied to immigration, one of the most prominent issues on the PVV's agenda. In the latest electoral program, the EU is held responsible for immigration to the Netherlands because open borders allow refugees to travel to the Netherlands (PVV Verkiezingsprogramma, 2021). This overview clearly demonstrates the PVV's anti-EU positions and their viewpoints on state sovereignty.

The PVV's positions on defense policy and NATO further illuminates how the PVV centers state sovereignty in foreign affairs. Economic considerations – which should serve the Dutch interest – are considered in positions on defense policy (PVV Verkiezingsprogramma, 2012). Initially, the PVV was in favor of cutting the defense budget (PVV Verkiezingsprogramma, 2006; PVV Verkiezingsprogramma, 2010), but after the annexation of Crimea, the PVV argued for a significant increase in the defense budget (PVV Verkiezingsprogramma, 2017). In 2021 the PVV specifically highlighted the importance of transatlantic ties and NATO. There is no doubt that the PVV is pro-NATO and loyal to the alliance. NATO does not curb state sovereignty but solely facilitates international cooperation related to security challenges, which explains the PVV's position on NATO.

Lastly, the concept of Dutch identity is central to the PVV; hence, the party strongly rejects immigration and multiculturalism. According to the PVV, the Dutch identity is superior and rooted in Judeo-Christian and humanistic values (PVV Verkiezingsprogramma, 2010; PVV Verkiezingsprogramma, 2017). The perceived threat from Islam is inherently linked to the party's nativism (Otjes, 2021). According to the PVV, Western liberal, humanistic and modern values, including rights such as same-sex marriage and the rights of women, must be protected. Identity politics and the value attached to culture and traditions, to which a separate chapter is dedicated, are affirmed in the 2021 election program (PVV Verkiezingsprogramma, 2021). Even though culture and traditions are strongly valued by both, the PVV's values are fundamentally different from those articulated by the Russian state. In the words of van Klingeren, Zaslove, and Verbeek (2017), the PVV is not a “morally conservative party.” In 2013, when the Netherlands co-organized “the Netherlands-Russian Year” the PVV was critical of its celebratory nature, emphasizing Russian violations of human rights and the derogation of the rule of law in the country (PVV, 2013). In this regard, the PVV also has changed its position. They went from being critical of human rights violations to arguing that the Netherlands should leave Russia to decide on internal matters without projecting Dutch values on their conduct (PVV, 2020).

### **2.3. Pragmatism**

Except for Futák-Campbell and Schwieter (2020), who argue that the PVV is one of the parties using Russia as a way to establish political competence, no significant traces of the implementation of this strategy were found through the analysis.

Another element that could point to pragmatic motivations is economic or financial contributions. The PVV is financially vulnerable as it completely depends on donations.



When asked in 2017, Wilders said not to accept Russian gifts or loans (Vrijssen, 2017). In 2022, the PVV voted against – the only faction in the House of Representatives to do so – an investigation of possible financing of political parties by Russian actors. It is unknown why the PVV was against this investigation. There is no evidence available that the PVV received money from Russian actors.

Throughout the years, Wilders has had various personal interactions with Russian state actors. He visited the Russian embassy – on his own initiative – in The Hague to “counterbalance Russophobia” (Vrijssen, 2017). This visit was justified by the common interests of both countries, even though the party rejected the annexation of Crimea and condemned the shootdown of the Dutch MH17 flight. Further, Wilders stated that Russia is an example to the Netherlands with regard to patriotism and an ally in the struggle against terrorism and immigration. This meeting was followed in 2018 by a visit to the Russian Duma, where Wilders spoke with representatives of the Russian government (PVV, 2018). During this meeting, different topics were discussed: trade relations, Ukraine, the EU and NATO, sanctions imposed on Russia and Islamization. After this visit, Wilders restated his admiration for the Russian president, whom he considers to be a role model (Russia Today, 2018). Putin has been described by Wilders as a leader who stands for the Russian people, a form of leadership that is lacking in Europe. Besides these bilateral meetings, representatives of the PVV have attended congresses organized by or linked to Russian political actors (Larrabe, 2017; Futák-Campbell and Schwieter, 2020). According to van Herpen (2018) and the Political Capital Institute (2014), Wilders and the PVV are playing a double game, expressing critique and disapproval at home while showing sympathy to Russia and its supporters abroad.

In the immediate aftermath of the invasion of Crimea in 2014, the PVV highlighted the differences in worldview and historical experiences between the West and Russia. The annexation was perceived as a violation of Ukrainian sovereignty (PVV, 2014a). The PVV criticized the EU and NATO for having tempted Ukraine to commit to the West (PVV, 2014b). Following this reasoning, it is not surprising that Russia reacted with aggression. Sanctions against Russia were assessed based on their effects on the Dutch economy, and because of their negative effects, they were rejected. Motions filed after the annexation of Crimea – for example, directed at weapon exports and energy – were voted down by the PVV. It is important to note that the vast majority of Dutch politicians voted against these sanctions. When the PVV received an invitation to monitor the referendum held to legitimize the annexation of Crimea, the party did not accept (Fiers, 2014). In the same year, the Russian

state was reportedly involved in the shootdown of the Dutch MH17 flight above Donetsk. That time, the sanctions implemented in response to the events were supported by the PVV (PVV, 2014c). After the shootdown, the PVV supported the motions that were filed against Russia, except for one that aimed to pressure Russia to repeal laws that had been recently adopted and limited certain liberties. Not interfering in domestic issues aligns with the shift from criticizing Russia for – among other – human rights violations to adopting a neutral position on domestic issues. Motions that were not about MH17 – and had a negative impact on Russia – were voted against (see annexation A for an overview of the motions). After the invasion in February 2022, the PVV condemned Russian behavior but again rejected the sanctions that followed, highlighting the ineffectiveness of sanctions and the negative consequences for the Netherlands (PVV, 2022). The PVV's position can be summarized as unwillingness to pay for a war that is not "ours" (PVV, 2022). After nine months, Wilders labeled Putin as the aggressor and even admitted to having acquired new insights (Valk, 2022). Yet, the party opposes the supply of weapons to Ukraine (Schmidt, 2023). Since 2022, 28 motions have been filed, and the PVV has voted five times against Russian interests. The topics of these motions were: (1) initiation of peace efforts by the Dutch government; (2) reserving confiscated properties in the Netherlands, as a result of the sanctions, for the reconstruction of Ukraine; (3) reducing dependency on Russia in relation to energy; (4) prohibiting imports of biomass from Russia; and (5) establishing a special tribunal to prosecute suspects of Russian aggression in Ukraine. Overall, in the past, the PVV has consistently rejected motions about sanctions against Russia, reduction of energy imports, and efforts to contain the Russian sphere of influence. Taking all of this into account, the invasion of 2022 changed the PVV's position on Russia. The party voted against the Russian interest, and Wilders admitted that his personal views of Putin had changed.

#### **2.4. Conclusion**

The analysis of the PVV shows that, as a political party, the PVV seems to align with Laruelle's model, which suggests an ideological linkage. Yet, in looking further into the PVV's positions, discrepancies become apparent. Most important is the PVV's support for NATO and progressive values. The PVV is driven primarily by Dutch economic interests. When analyzing pragmatic elements, it is clear that Wilders maintains contacts with Russian (state) actors, which demonstrates personal contacts maintained by Wilders. At the minimum it can be concluded that Russian state actors are perceived partners for dialogue. Lastly, real-world events, such as the invasion of Ukraine and the shootdown of MH17, have had a

significant impact on the PVV's course toward Russia. Especially after the invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the PVV distanced itself from Russia and Putin. It finds in Russia an ally in their fight against the EU and in Putin a role model; however, it seems that there is no intention to comply with or take over the Russian model. In the end, pragmatic motivations prevail.

### **3. FVD: A Friend of the Family**

The structure of this chapter corresponds to the structure of the previous chapter. First, background information about the party is provided. Secondly, an analysis of the party's ideological expressions is presented, followed by an analysis of pragmatic motivations that shape party positions on Russia. Lastly, the chapter ends with a sub-conclusion.

#### **3.1. Background**

As a result of a campaign against the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement, Forum voor Democratie (Forum for Democracy, hereafter: FVD) was founded in 2015 as a think tank. Its primary objective was to renew Dutch democracy through the incorporation of elements of direct democracy. The party fits the criteria of a PRR party and is built around Baudet's personality (van Raalte, Maesele & Phelan, 2021). In 2017 FVD participated in the elections for the House of Representatives and won two seats. The party managed to become the largest party in the Netherlands in terms of membership rates in 2020 (DNPP, n.d.). Various conflicts led to members leaving the party, establishing breakaway factions. Despite what the name suggests, internal democracy is nonexistent. The executive board has the power to decide policies on all levels, appoint members, change statutes, and make decisions during general member meetings (de Jonge, 2021).

As FVD is a relatively new political party, the existing literature focuses primarily on its party structure (de Jonge, 2021), its competition with the PVV (Otjes, 2021) and its rise (van Raalte, Maesele & Phelan, 2021). However, FVD was included in the research by Onderco (2019), who pointed out that FVD was one of the few European parties that still openly expressed positive views about Russia. FVD included their position on Russia in their first election program and advocated for the normalization of relations with Russia (FVD Verkiezingsprogramma, 2017). In 2020 Dutch journalists from Zembla (an independent investigative journalism platform, aired on the Dutch public broadcast station) researched FVD's ties with Russia (Zembla, 2020a). They found personal connections between Baudet and actors related to the Kremlin. In 2020 the Dutch Intelligence Service expressed their

concerns about the possibility of Russian interference in the party (NOS, 2023). Shortly before the invasion of Ukraine, Baudet tweeted:

Putin is increasingly taking the role as the leader of conservative Europe. Amazing guy. He is totally right about the NATO-aggression and the warmongering of the EU, World Economic Forum, etcetera. So, MarkieMark [reference to the Dutch prime minister, Mark Rutte], off to Moscow and make a deal. Become friends with Russia! (Baudet, 2022)

Even though scholarly evidence describing the pro-Russian viewpoints of FVD is limited, these examples show that FVD openly expressed sympathy toward Russia. Although not addressed in the Political Capital Institute report, FVD fits the category “committed to Russia” as defined by the Political Capital Institute (2014, p. 6).

### **3.2. Ideological motivations**

FVD clearly supports the idea of a strong state. Instead of a traditional populist battle against the elites, FVD has constructed the narrative that the Dutch state is governed by a party cartel. This cartel acts solely in their own interest, which is opposed to the interest of the people (FVD Verkiezingsprogramma, 2017). The role of Baudet is party leader, who is inseparable from the party and fights the establishment (the cartel) for the people (Van Raalte, Maesele & Phelan, 2021). The following quote highlights the party’s ambitions: “We are going to build. We are going to build with an education institute, local branches, a social network. We are going to educate a new elite, replace and defeat the current elites” (Baudet, 2017). Overall, FVD portrays itself as an anti-system force (Nijhuis, Verbeek & Zaslove, 2023). Otjes (2021) concludes that FVD has authoritarian features: it advocates harsher criminal sentences, more imprisonment, and more police (FVD Verkiezingsprogramma 2017 & 2021). Yet, FVD also values certain aspects of democracy that are at odds with the principles of strong state authority, such as the protection and strengthening of privacy laws. Still, FVD contends that many societal problems stem from the inability of the Dutch state to enforce state power (Cliteur, 2020). In terms of societal hierarchy, FVD claims to stand for full equality. This stance is rather ambiguous, as they apply the principle of equality to the relationship between the state and citizen, explicitly stating that they do not want to interfere in the relationships between citizens.

FVD has argued for the normalization of bilateral relations instead of hostility to Russia in both electoral programs. This position is maintained by the claim that economic and

diplomatic relations are beneficial not only to the Netherlands but also to Europe in general (Forum voor Democratie, 2017). In 2021 the party summarized their position on foreign affairs as “in foreign policy Dutch interests must be at the center, always” (FVD Verkiezingsprogramma, 2021). Other reflections of *realpolitik* include the notion of having neither friends nor enemies in foreign affairs, only changing interests that align with or are in opposition to other countries. FVD interprets Russian aggression in Ukraine as a challenge to the globalist world order, which FVD rejects (Forum voor Democratie, 2022b). Their reasoning is as follows:

For the first time a front was started against the American imperium of the globalists, who since 2014 have a forward post in Kiev. Because of all the misery brought to us by the globalists – mass migration, LHBTIQ-propaganda, undermining of sovereignty through the WEF and EU, inflation, and so on – it is hard not to have sympathy for the Russian cause in this conflict: those fighting for a multipolar world. (Forum voor Democratie, 2022b).

Voting behavior on motions related to Russia confirms the position outlined above (see appendix A). Since 2017, 36 motions have been filed, and in 5 of them, FVD has voted against Russian interests. When looking at the content of the motions, it seems that this voting behavior is motivated by considerations other than the party’s stance on Russia. For example, the FVD voted for an import ban on biomass from Russia, but this was motivated by the FVD’s stance that biomass is not a sustainable alternative. A motion about investigating possible Russian interference in Dutch politics was supported but with the side note that the investigation should be about all possible sources of interference, not just possible Russian interference. Through an analysis of tweets by FVD and Baudet, Van Raalte, Maesele, and Phelan (2021) highlight FVD’s enemies: competing political actors, established institutions, the media and migrants. Baudet targets the EU, established political parties and politicians, the media, academia and migrants. These groups are also targeted in election programs, statements and publications. It was demonstrated that FVD adheres to the principles of *realpolitik* and names its enemies.

As a nationalist party, FVD advocates the need for nation-states to be sovereign. In framing the EU, FVD goes beyond the criticism that the EU erodes national sovereignty. The director of the international branch of the party claimed that the EU was founded to wage war instead of bringing peace (Laughland, 2018). In election programs, FVD is milder in its statements. In the 2017 election program, FVD positioned itself against further EU

enlargement and asked for a referendum about the Euro and Schengen, advocating a NEXIT (FVD Verkiezingsprogramma, 2017). According to FVD, the EU is undemocratic, essentially another party cartel that operates “above” the national party cartel. FVD argues that supranational organizations – such as the International Criminal Court and the European Court of Human Rights – that erode sovereignty should be reformed or dismantled. In 2021, the opening chapter of its election program covered the importance of sovereignty (FVD Verkiezingsprogramma, 2021). FVD has not described their positions on NATO in the election programs. However, WhatsApp messages were leaked in which Baudet questioned Dutch NATO membership (Zembla, 2020b). After the invasion of Ukraine, FVD tweeted: “NATO is trying to surround and corner Russia. No wonder Putin is fighting back; geopolitical experts have been warning about this for decades. We should not poke the Russian bear but protect the peace” (Forum voor Democratie, 2022). In 2023, FVD politician Ralf Dekker argued that NATO was a war machine serving American dominance, and therefore the Netherlands should leave NATO and become neutral (Forum voor Democratie, 2023). Given these points, it seems that FVD's attitude toward NATO has developed from a critical to more hostile.

In 2017, FVD presented itself as the flagship of the “Renaissance Fleet” (Baudet, 2017). Their intent was to start a renaissance to which others are invited to join the fleet. Europe’s history is romanticized, and the continent and country are portrayed as under threat from the inside. In its first election program, FVD pleaded for a law to protect Dutch values (FVD Verkiezingsprogramma, 2017). This law aimed to control religion and was justified by the threat to Dutch values posed by groups of (Islamic) migrants. Another important viewpoint is the idea that freedom of speech should prevail over freedom of religion. Baudet outlined his views on – what he considers – European exceptionalism, rooted in classical humanism, Judeo-Christian legacies and Enlightenment values (Baudet, 2019). As a liberal-conservative movement, FVD embodies these values. In the 2021 election program, distinctive chapters were added on freedom of speech, integration and the (rejection of) identity politics (FVD Verkiezingsprogramma, 2021).

### **3.3. Pragmatism**

In this section indicators of pragmatic conduct are analyzed. Allegations have been made about FVD receiving financial donations from Russian actors. One of FVD’s candidates during the 2017 elections was employed by a Russian oligarch related to the Kremlin (van Herpen, 2018). During the campaign against the European Association Agreement with

Ukraine, Baudet messaged about Russian donations. When these messages were leaked, the party denied having received money from Russian state actors and claimed that the messages were meant ironically (FVD, 2020). In 2022, FVD supported a motion to investigate possible Russian financial involvement in the political domain.

Different actors with links to the Kremlin are involved with FVD. During FVD's campaign against the Association Agreement, the party worked with a Russian national (Kornilov) who, according to Baudet, worked for Putin (Forum voor Democratie, 2020). Kornilov appeared in the Dutch news media as an independent political analyst, contributing to the disinformation campaign that took place (Modderkolk, 2017). Baudet initiated a meeting with Dugin – a Russian ultraconservative far-right ideologue with an extensive network in European far-right circles – who is known for his criticisms of liberalism (Laruelle, 2015; Derix, 2019). Another controversial person is the director of Forum for Democracy International and party ideologue, Laughland. He was director of the Institute for Democracy and Cooperation financed by private Russian foundations (who received donations from the Kremlin) and is known for his pro-Russia standpoints and extensive Russian network (Ragozin, 2015; and Schohaus, l'Ami, Beunder & The Investigative Desk, 2022). These examples demonstrate that FVD and Baudet have connections with Russian nationals who are indirectly linked to the Kremlin. Yet, there are no records of official visits or formal interactions with Russian state actors.

FVD's reactions to real-world events validate the worldview outlined in their election programs. After the poisoning of Navalny, FVD argued on its website that Navalny had been used by Western powers to destabilize Russia, suggesting that Navalny is an American agent (Forum voor Democratie, 2021). The story of Navalny proves – according to FVD – how Western media created and controlled a paradigm about Russia that resulted in a lobotomization of public opinion. Internally, this paradigm is used to strengthen the party's own power: FVD argues that anyone who is conservative and does not express hatred toward Putin is considered an enemy by the Western media. Before the invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Baudet described the media's depiction of the run-up to the invasion as the "Russia scam" and NATO as "one of the most aggressive organizations in history" (Vrijssen, 2022). FVD restated a previously adopted position: Ukraine's rapprochement with the EU and NATO is a provocation for Russia, to which Russia has no alternative but to respond by force. Baudet even assessed the war in Ukraine as part of the "Great Reset" (NRC, 2022). Because of increasing energy prices and inflation – caused by the war – citizens are slowly losing their savings, which paves the way for the state-controlled credit system. The absence of FVD

during a speech held by the Ukrainian president in the House of Representatives caused another split in the party (van der Veen, 2022). Simultaneously, there was party enlargement. Marcel de Graaff, a member of the EP, left the PVV to join FVD because of disagreement over the party's positions on COVID. De Graaff is ranked as one of the top pro-Putin voters in the EP (Avilova, Zayakin & Komin, 2023). After the invasion of Ukraine, he left the Identity & Democracy Faction after he was suspended for being too Russophile, which is interesting as many parties in this faction used to be supportive of Russia and Putin (Europa Nu, 2022). In addition to expressing viewpoints about the war in debates and the media, FVD organized a symposium titled "Understanding the Conflict in Ukraine." Speakers included the Russian Ambassador to the Netherlands (Alexander Shulgin), MEP Marcel de Graaff, Director of the Forum for Democracy John Laughland and "independent" journalist Joost Niemöller. Niemöller used to work for a renowned Dutch media company but started his own weblog, on which he published controversial works. For example, he wrote a book in which he held Ukraine responsible for the MH17 shootdown (van der Noordaa & van de Ven, 2019).

### **3.4. Conclusion**

The examples above illustrate that FVD exhibits all four elements of Laruelle's model, as seen in FVD's corresponding worldview. At first, FVD avoided demarcating their position on NATO. However, because of the war in Ukraine, FVD took a position against NATO. Noteworthy is the discrepancy between the extremist rhetoric of Baudet and the party's moderate statements. Personal connections are mostly on an individual level between the party leader and actors who are indirectly linked to the Kremlin. In the case of FVD, pragmatic behavior confirms ideological positions.

## **4. VB: Having Little to Say**

This chapter covers the case study of the third political party, Vlaams Belang. Belgium has a federal system, and in order to cover all the topics needed for this analysis, election programs for both federal and Flemish elections are included. This chapter is structured in the same way as previous chapters: background information, analysis of ideological resemblances, expressions of pragmatism and a conclusion. As mentioned in the methodology section, there were two important differences in the analysis of this political party as compared to the first two: statements were acquired mostly through news articles, and voting behavior in the EP was analyzed.



#### 4.1. Background

Vlaams Belang (Flemish Interest, hereafter: VB) is one of the oldest PRR parties in Europe, with roots going back to the 1970s (de Cleen, 2016). As the name suggests, Flemish autonomy is the party's *raison d'être* (Sijstermans, 2021). VB's PRR characteristics are easily identified: a party program with nativist elements, claiming to represent the average man and advocating law-and-order politics (Pauwels, 2011; Mudde, 2014). From 2004 to 2019 election results had deteriorated. The 2019 elections, however, showed that the tide had turned for VB when they won the elections. A partial explanation of the electoral decline of the VB is the *cordon sanitaire* that was created at the end of the 1980s (Meijen, Raube & Wouters, 2020). Put simply, other Belgian parties decided not to form coalitions or cooperate with VB. Increased competition on the right and political irrelevance because of the *cordon* led voters to abandon VB (Pauwels, 2011). Yet, when competitors failed to deliver while VB held onto their narrative, voters returned (Meijen, Raube & Wouters, 2022). VB has decentralized internal leadership: one party leader and various faction leaders for the factions in the House of Representatives, the Flemish Parliament, the Brussels Parliament and the EP (Vlaams Belang, n.d.). The party's chair is elected for four years through an internal election. Internal democracy is limited as the executive board – appointed by the leader – decides on the most important matters (Sijstermans, 2021).

The Political Capital Institute (2014) categorized VB as committed to Russia and illustrates this by pointing out its active participation in establishing an EP faction under the auspices of United Russia (also Klapsis, 2015). In Gressel's categorization, VB ranks tenth in the category "Europe's most anti-Western political parties" (Gressel, 2017). The group is characterized by its affinity with Russia: they want closer ties, reject sanctions and maintain formal party contacts. Other scholars highlight VB's participation in election monitoring of the referendum that formalized the annexation of Crimea as an indication of the party's supportive position on Russia (Klapsis, 2015; Polyakova, 2015). In doing so, scholars present an unnuanced conclusion because the party distanced itself from the referendum and members who did participate in the monitoring did so on personal terms (Van Thillo, 2014). In sum, VB fits the criteria for inclusion as a case study in this research since scholarship has outlined the Russia-friendly aspects of the party.

#### 4.2. Ideological motivations

In 2007, VB characterized politics as follows: "the *real* [emphasis in original] rulers take decisions elsewhere, in castles or backrooms, in government or within the 'core cabinet',

at headquarters of political parties. But more important, political parties claim more and more political power” (VB Verkiezingsprogramma, 2007). This describes the undemocratic nature of politics as conducted by the governing elite. According to VB, this is exacerbated by the differences between the Flemish and Walloon parts of the country. To restore the credibility of the democratic system VB promotes direct democracy (for example, VB Verkiezingsprogramma, 2009). Throughout the years, populist elements have been presented more explicitly, as VB has described the status quo as a *particracy*. For example, “the political elites protect purposely their own position by political appointments. Political power should be relocated to from the party quarters to the people” (VB Verkiezingsprogramma, 2019). Strong leadership is advocated to achieve Flemish autonomy (Verkiezingsprogramma, 2019). Meijen, Raube and Wouters (2022) argue that VB’s strategies go against democratic principles. The most obvious incorporation of authoritarian elements is VB’s focus on law-and-order politics. Harsher punishment, more police and zero tolerance are promoted in all election programs.

When looking into VB’s foreign policy positions and the way VB frames its enemies, fluctuating positions are discovered. In relation to energy policies, VB has argued simultaneously for the liberalization of the energy market and the need to secure supply independence (VB Verkiezingsprogramma, 2009). This paradoxical position in a strategic sector is remarkable; liberalization inevitably leads to dependence on the market. In 2010, VB changed their stance and argued for an energy policy in line with nationalistic goals and problematized dependence on unstable countries (VB Verkiezingsprogramma, 2010). Shortly before the invasion of Ukraine, the party rearticulated the need for energy independence, as vulnerabilities were exposed by the looming war (Vlaams Belang, 2022a, February 23). Other positions further confirm elements of *realpolitik* in VB’s rhetoric. An obvious example is the statement that Flanders should shape foreign policy according to the interests of Flemish citizens (VB Verkiezingsprogramma, 2010). In 2019 VB outlined their position on foreign affairs, calling for pragmatism (VB Verkiezingsprogramma, 2019). This was justified by the inability of a small state to influence global superpowers in world politics, of which Russia was considered one. This was the only mention of Russia in all the election programs. VB’s main enemies are the Walloon political elite and the federal government, which, in VB’s perspective, thwart Flemish autonomy. Another major enemy of VB is the EU. They accused the EU of hollowing out democracy, sovereignty, freedom and the rule of law (VB Verkiezingsprogramma, 2014). This was followed by the statement that the EU had become a totalitarian institution (VB Verkiezingsprogramma, 2019).

Sovereignty and the right to self-determination are at the heart of VB, which is logical considering the party's main goal: a Flemish state. One of the criticisms of the EU is the threat to national sovereignty. Another of VB's concerns with the EU is the status quo in which Flanders (as a region) has no voice, as the EU only acknowledges states (VB Verkiezingsprogramma, 2009). VB advocates for a confederal Europe, in which the EU's internal market is preserved, working together in policy domains such as crime and terrorism, border control, traffic and the environment (VB Verkiezingsprogramma, 2019). Interestingly, VB used to support the idea of a European armed forces, justified by the need to become independent from the United States (VB Verkiezingsprogramma, 2007) In 2010 VB stated that the national army should be able to carry out NATO commitments (VB Verkiezingsprogramma, 2010). However, both viewpoints have changed. VB has since argued that a European army is irreconcilable with the need to protect national territory (VB Verkiezingsprogramma, 2014). Discontent about the Belgian policy on NATO was expressed in the following statement: "our defense policy is predominantly determined by NATO. We degrade ourselves to assisting foreign powers pursuing foreign interests" (VB Verkiezingsprogramma, 2019, p. 57). Overall, it should be noted that most of VB's coverage of foreign affairs involved the EU, while other issues, such as defense and NATO, received little attention (Pauwels, 2023).

VB articulates conservative values in all its programs, for example:

As the cornerstone of society the family grants security, protection and facilitates the upbringing of children. Families form the frame of reference through which norms and values are passed on. They defend society against egoism and materialism, against indifference and against aggression in society (VB Verkiezingsprogramma, 2007, p. 14).

Another indicator of conservative values is the VB's hesitant position on abortion and euthanasia. Support for national values is articulated in relation to integration. Multiculturalism is rejected, and adjustment to the native culture is promoted (VB Verkiezingsprogramma 2007). Values that are to be protected are the separation between church and state, democracy, freedom of speech and equality between the sexes (for example, VB Verkiezingsprogramma, 2009). Over time, these ideas have been promoted more radically. At first, VB focused on cultural differences (2007), after which religious differences were highlighted as being irreconcilable with native (European) values and at odds with human rights (Verkiezingsprogramma 2009 & 2010), which was followed by the notion that

Islamization had to be stopped and reversed (2014 & 2019). In the words of VB, “the dictatorship of the multicultural political correctness limits our freedom of doing and thinking” (Verkiezingsprogramma, 2019, p. 14). VB considered the former Soviet Bloc an ally in the fight against the threat of Islam, thus sharing the same values (Pauli, 2022). VB is mostly a secular party. References to viewpoints about religion mostly support the freedom of religion or are in relation to Islam. In 2019, VB contrasted Christianity as a “personal religion” with Islam as a political ideology and considered religion a private matter on which no public funds should be spent (VB Verkiezingsprogramma, 2019). LHBTIQ+ rights were given no specific attention.

### **4.3. Pragmatism**

VB, in its quest for autonomy, could benefit from establishing political competence. An example of a claim to political competence is the statement from party member Dewinter: “I think we can be a good partner for Russia in the EP, and Russia sees us as a potential partner” (Hawley, 2014). During another interview, Dewinter claimed that Russia had been involved in attempts to form an anti-EU faction in Brussels (Beunderman, 2014). Later, Dewinter declared that the power of his “foreign friends” strengthens the power and influence of VB (Pauli, 2018). Though these quotations illustrate how claims to competence are made, they were nevertheless made by only one party member.

No suggestions of VB receiving financial donations from Russia were found throughout the analysis. When asked about possible financial benefits, party member Creyelman denied receiving rubles (Zuallaert, 2018).

The same members, Dewinter and Creyelman, were frequently named as politicians having extensive ties with Russian actors. In 2014, Dewinter traveled to Moscow, where he visited the Duma and had a meeting with deputy prime minister Rogozin (Beunderman, 2014). According to Dewinter, Putin's leadership is inspirational as he prioritizes the interests of the Russian people, is a strong leader and rejects multiculturalism (Kreling & Modderkolk, 2017; Zuallaert, 2018). Additionally, Dewinter maintains contacts with nationalists from different countries, such as the American paleoconservatives (Pauli, 2016; Pauli, 2022). He claimed that his views about Putin had changed since the invasion of Ukraine: “I am aware that Putin is not a Russian nationalist. He developed into an imperialist” (Pauli, 2022). Another influential party member with ties to Russia is Creyelman, who visited the Russian armed forces in Syria (Pauli, 2017). Creyelman participated in multiple elections as an “independent” observer in Russia’s traditional sphere of influence (Zuallaert, 2018).

Creyelman organized multiple trips to Russia and its allies: in 2015 to Moscow, in 2016 to Golden Dawn in Greece and in 2017 to a meeting with the Syrian dictator al-Assad, facilitated by Creyelman's Russian connections. When asked about the internal conflict between the pro- and anti-Russia factions within the VB, party chairman van Grieken was pragmatic: "our interest is with the Flemish nation and we choose for Moscow whenever it is beneficial to us" (Zuallaert, 2018).

The Crimean referendum exposed the sympathies of a number of VB members toward the Russian annexation (Krant van West-Vlaanderen, 2014). Former party leader Annemans declared that no representatives of VB would participate in the monitoring of the referendum. Yet three members who went – on a personal basis – showed that there was a branch of the party supportive of the Russian goal. In response to the invasion of Ukraine, van Grieken stated: "Putin started an outright military invasion against a sovereign country, and we strongly condemn this act. However, his aggression is unfortunately facilitated by weak NATO and EU leadership" (Vlaams Belang, 2022b). This indicates that VB condemns Russia and points to the EU and NATO's responsibility at the same time. Secondly, van Grieken emphasizes the need to put the interests of the people first; hence, "intelligent sanctions" are needed just as much as European investments in the military. Overall, economic considerations seem to determine VB's position on sanctions. VB has warned about the impact of sanctions on the national economy as well as the negative impact of rising inflation on the people (Vlaams Belang, 2022c). A polarizing statement aimed to fuel anti-EU sentiments in its electorate and the Belgian population in general – considering that Belgium is dependent on Russian gas for 4-6% of its energy needs – was made by VB: "because of the naïve belief of European leaders in Russian reliability, we financed their weapons of war through the import of oil and gas" (Vlaams Belang, 2022d). This widens the gap between Belgian and EU interests. The analysis of VB's voting behavior in the EP on topics related to Russia is inconclusive (see Annexation B). Of the 14 motions included, VB supported 4, rejected 4 and abstained from voting the other 6 times. Most of the motions were lengthy and covered different topics. No justifications for voting behavior in the EP were found throughout the analysis.

#### **4.4. Conclusion**

In conclusion, this analysis has highlighted commonalities between VB and Russia. The limited availability of stances on Russia could mean that the party is rather indifferent or neutral toward Russia. VB deviated from the Russian model by supporting the Euro-Atlantic

sphere, and has distanced itself further from the Russian model recently by its willingness to compromise on external sovereignty and their secular focus. Other than personal ties between party members and Russian (state) actors and some general overlap, no convincing pro-Russian stances were identified through the analysis. Van Grieken's declaration that VB sides with Russia whenever it is beneficial to VB suggests a pragmatic course.

### 5. Conclusions and Policy Recommendations

To return to the research question – *do the political parties included in this research adopt Russia-friendly positions based on ideological motivations or pragmatic interests?* – the case studies show that political parties are motivated by a combination of ideological and pragmatic motivations. To summarize the main findings: first, there is ideological overlap between the PVV and Russia, but pragmatic motivations prevail. The same seems to apply to VB, where indifference to stating viewpoints on Russia can be interpreted as the party being neutral or pragmatic. For now, VB's course appears pragmatic. FVD is ideologically motivated, and the analysis of the pragmatic indicators confirms their ideological positions. The main findings are summarized below in Table 1.

**Table 1.**

*Summary of the findings of the ideological elements*

	<b>Strong state and elites at home</b>	<b><i>Realpolitik</i> and enemies</b>	<b>State sovereignty</b>	<b>Christian morals and European values</b>
<b>PVV</b>	Consonant	Divergent, supportive of the Euro- Atlantic sphere	Consonant	Divergent, embodies progressive values
<b>FVD</b>	Consonant	Consonant	Consonant	Consonant
<b>VB</b>	Consonant	Divergent, previously supportive of Euro-Atlantic sphere,	Consonant, willing to compromise on external sovereignty	Divergent, secularism

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distanced  
themselves  
recently

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Secondly, when looking further into how positions are justified, differences can be seen. PVV and VB are primarily motivated by national interests and the internal effects resulting from policy choices. FVD is guided by their worldview. Thirdly, the outcomes of the analysis of pragmatic behavior reveal differences between parties. The invasion of Ukraine in 2022 led parties to rethink previously adopted positions. PVV and VB condemned Russian behavior and distanced themselves. FVD's response was the opposite, as it interpreted the situation as a confirmation of previously adopted positions. Still, it remains to be seen if the parties' reactions are genuine or forced by political and societal pressure. Lastly, the analysis of personal ties reveals different patterns. Wilders (PVV) maintains relations primarily with state actors, whereas Baudet's (FVD) network of actors is linked to the Kremlin but operates on the fringe. VB has connections with Russian (state) actors, but these interactions are initiated by individual party members and not by the party's leadership.

The outcomes of this research point to the complexity of the linkages between the PRR and Russia and the challenge to deduce generalizable patterns. A possible explanation could be that PVV and VB are established parties with, more or less, stable voter bases. They are closer to the center of political power and need electoral support for their survival. FVD, on the other hand, is surrounded with a radical and loyal voter base who share their worldview, while many of the moderate voters have chosen to support one of FVD's more moderate breakaway parties. Further research is needed to probe this explanation.

All in all, because of the challenges to democratic foundations in the home countries and the EU, a (policy) response is required to counter the negative impact of the ties between the PRR and Russia. On both the national and European levels, investment in European democratic values is recommended. This can be done in different ways: centrist parties working together to isolate the PRR instead of (partially) adopting their viewpoints; funding civil society and facilitating them as controllers and protectors of the (national) democracy; improving the transparency of party finances; and monitoring Russian efforts to interfere in politics. The positive effects of investment in democratic values are likely to spill over into other policy areas and contribute to another related challenge: dealing with populism.

One of the problems encountered throughout the data collection was the lack of insight into the voting behavior of politicians in Belgium. Therefore, an additional recommendation

is given, namely, to make voting behavior accessible online, as this facilitates democratic checks and balances. After all, voters can hold politicians or political parties accountable for their voting behavior, which strengthens democratic foundations as well. An inspirational example of how access to voting behavior can be improved is [www.HowTheyVote.eu](http://www.HowTheyVote.eu).



## 6. References

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<sup>1</sup> Currently unavailable because of the EU’s sanctions on Russian state owned media outlets. See <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/03/02/eu-imposes-sanctions-on-state-owned-outlets-rt-russia-today-and-sputnik-s-broadcasting-in-the-eu/>

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### Appendix A. Motions Filed in the Dutch Parliament

Search term	Date	Title	Adopted	Number of supportive votes	For	Against	Impact on Russia
<b>Rusland</b>	24-11-2009	Motie Peters en Haverkamp over mensenrechtenbeleid ten aanzien van Rusland, Algerije, Kazachstan en Saoedi-Arabië	Yes	119/150		PVV	Negative
<b>Rusland</b>	29-02-2012	Motie Ouwehand over niet verder uitbreiden van de handelsbetrekkingen met Rusland en China	No	2/150		PVV	Negative
<b>Rusland</b>	05-03-2014	Motie van het lid Omtzigt over steunen van het Britse initiatief tot bevrozen van het lidmaatschap van Rusland	No	13/150		PVV	Negative
<b>Rusland</b>	13-03-2014	Motie van het lid Sjoerdsma over pleiten voor bevrozing van wapenexport richting Rusland	No	29/150		PVV	Negative
<b>Rusland</b>	13-03-2014	Motie van de leden Van Tongeren en Van Ojik over niet leveren van de bestelde Mistral-schepen aan Rusland	No	16/150		PVV	Negative

<b>Rusland</b>	18-03-2014	Motie van de leden Klaver en Van Tongeren over opschorten van de voorbereiding van de energiemissie naar Rusland	No	21/150		PVV	Negative
<b>Rusland</b>	14-05-2014	Gewijzigde motie van het lid Van Tongeren (t.v.v. 21501-33, nr. 476) over het uiterlijk 2035 kunnen beëindigen van import van gas uit Rusland	No	23/150		PVV	Negative
<b>Rusland</b>	19-11-2014	Motie van de leden Servaes en Ten Broeke over het waterscheidingsmoment in de relatie met Rusland	Yes	148/150		PVV	Negative
<b>Rusland</b>	25-06-2015	Motie van het lid Grashoff over in sterke bewoordingen afstand nemen van de inperking van vrijheden in Rusland	Yes	95/150		PVV	Negative
<b>Rusland</b>	04-02-2016	Motie van het lid Bontes over een zaak bij ICAO starten tegen Rusland en Oekraïne	No	14/150		PVV	Negative
<b>Rusland</b>	12-10-2016	Motie van de leden Verhoeven en Sjoerdsma over extra sancties voor Rusland	No	73/150		PVV	Negative
<b>Rusland</b>	12-10-2016	Motie van het lid Bontes over het verzwaren van de economische sancties tegen Rusland	No	16/150		PVV	Negative

<b>Rusland</b>	31-05-2018	Motie van het lid Baudet over de staatsaansprakelijkheid van de Russische Federatie effectueren	No	22/150	PVV, FVD		Negative
<b>Rusland</b>	01-06-2018	Motie van het lid Ten Broeke c.s. over de staatsaansprakelijkheid van de Russische Federatie voor het neerhalen van vlucht MH17	Yes	128/150		PVV, FVD	Negative
<b>Rusland</b>	05-07-2018	Motie van het lid Van Helvert c.s. over de Turkse toenadering tot Rusland en de aanschaf van de S-400 aan de orde stellen	Yes	126/150	PVV	FVD	Possibly negative
<b>Rusland</b>	05-07-2018	Motie van het lid Karabulut over terugdringen van militaire aanwezigheid in het grensgebied tussen Rusland en de NAVO-landen	No	58/150	PVV, FVD		Negative
<b>Rusland</b>	20-12-2018	Gewijzigde motie van de leden Stoffer en Verhoeven over opstellen van een Ruslandstrategie (t.v.v. 33694-36)	Yes	128/150		PVV, FVD	Possibly negative
<b>Rusland</b>	18-12-2019	Motie van de leden Kröger en Van Eijs over het stoppen van de export van verarmd uranium naar Rusland	No	71/150		PVV, FVD	Negative
<b>Rusland</b>	02-07-2020	Motie van het lid Sjoerdsma c.s. over een strategische dialoog tussen de Verenigde Staten en Rusland	Yes	77/150		PVV, FVD	Possibly negative

<b>Rusland</b>	08-07-2021	Motie van het lid Kuzu over een strategie tegen de vaccinatie-diplomatie van Rusland en China	Yes	83/150		PVV, FVD	Negative
<b>Rusland</b>	28-02-2022	Motie van het lid Van Haga over uitspreken dat Nederland zich neutraal opstelt in de oorlog Rusland-Oekraïne	No	25/150		PVV, FVD	Possibly positive
<b>Rusland</b>	28-02-2022	Motie van het lid Van Haga over de Russische bevolking ontzien bij het uitvoeren van sancties	Yes	145/150		PVV, FVD	Positive
<b>Rusland</b>	28-02-2022	Motie van het lid Van Haga over het initiatief nemen voor vredesonderhandelingen tussen Rusland en Oekraïne	No	43/150		PVV, FVD	Negative
<b>Rusland</b>	28-02-2022	Motie van het lid Klaver c.s. over onderzoeken of politieke partijen, politici en belangenorganisaties in Nederland zijn gefinancierd met geld uit de Russische Federatie of met geld van Russische (rechts)personen	Yes	130/150	FVD	PVV	Negative

<b>Rusland</b>	28-02-2022	Gewijzigde motie van het lid Omtzigt c.s. over opzetten van een trustfonds met de bevroren tegoeden van Rusland, Belarus en oligarchen ten einde middelen ter beschikking te hebben voor de wederopbouw van Oekraïne (t.v.v. 36045-19)	Yes	138/150	PVV	FVD	Negative
<b>Rusland</b>	23-02-2022	Motie van het lid Erkens c.s. over een plan om de afhankelijkheid van Rusland op energiegebied af te bouwen	Yes	143/150	PVV	FVD	Negative
<b>Rusland</b>	10-03-2022	Motie van het lid Brekelmans c.s. over maatregelen voorbereiden voor het geval dat Rusland biologische of chemische wapens gebruikt	Yes	140/150	PVV, FVD		Negative
<b>Rusland</b>	10-03-2022	Motie van de leden Van Haga en Smolders over zich actief inzetten tegen discriminatie en uitsluiting van Russen en Wit-Russen	Yes	148/150	PVV, FVD		Positive
<b>Rusland</b>	10-03-2022	Motie van de leden Van Haga en Smolders over niet overgaan tot een boycot van Russisch gas, kolen en olie	No	29/150	PVV, FVD		Positive
<b>Rusland</b>	10-03-2022	Motie van het lid Van Haga over het in kaart brengen van de nevenschade van de sancties tegen Rusland	Yes	148/150	PVV, FVD		Positive

<b>Rusland</b>	10-03-2022	Motie van het lid Kuzu over het veroordelen van kandidaat-lidstaten van de Europese Unie die Rusland steunen	Yes	123/150		PVV, FVD	Negative
<b>Rusland</b>	10-03-2022	Motie van de leden Van der Plas en Kuzu over bezien hoe initiatieven kunnen worden ondersteund om Russen te voorzien van informatie vanuit een ander perspectief	Yes	126/150		PVV, FVD	Negative
<b>Rusland</b>	10-03-2022	Motie van het lid Van Houwelingen over het Nederlandse belang leidend laten zijn bij het conflict tussen Rusland en Oekraïne	No	25/150		PVV, FVD	Positive
<b>Rusland</b>	06-04-2022	Motie van de leden Thijssen en Kröger over de rol van Russische energiebedrijven in het Nederlandse energiesysteem in kaart brengen	No	51/150		PVV, FVD	Negative
<b>Rusland</b>	06-04-2022	Motie van de leden Kröger en Thijssen over concrete besparingsdoelen stellen voor 2022 en deze betrekken in het afbouwplan voor Russische fossiele energie	No	72/150		PVV, FVD	Negative
<b>Rusland</b>	06-04-2022	Motie van het lid Boucke c.s. over het ook zo snel mogelijk afbouwen van de Russische invloed op cruciale infrastructuur	Yes	123/150		PVV, FVD	Negative

<b>Rusland</b>	06-04-2022	Motie van het lid Boucke c.s. over het ontwikkelen van een systeem van garantie van oorsprong voor niet-Russisch gas	No	69/150		PVV, FVD	Negative
<b>Rusland</b>	06-04-2022	Motie van het lid Van Raan over een importverbod op houtige biomassa uit Rusland	Yes	134/150		PVV, FVD	Negative
<b>Rusland</b>	06-04-2022	Motie van het lid Van Raan over een boycot op de invoer van Russische olie en gas voor gebruik in Nederland	No	58/150		PVV, FVD	Negative
<b>Rusland</b>	23-05-2022	Motie van het lid De Roon over niet instemmen met een olieboycot voor Rusland	No	28/150		PVV, FVD	Positive
<b>Rusland</b>	02-06-2022	Motie van het lid Van Haga over het stopzetten van de sancties tegen Rusland	No	25/150		PVV, FVD	Positive
<b>Rusland</b>	11-10-2022	Motie van het lid Van Haga over inzetten op diplomatieke onderhandelingen met Rusland en Oekraïne	No	36/150		PVV, FVD	Negative
<b>Rusland</b>	19-10-2022	Motie van het lid Sjoerdsma c.s. over een speciaal tribunaal voor berechting van personen die verantwoordelijk zijn voor de Russische agressie in Oekraïne	Yes	125/150		PVV, FVD	Negative



<b>Rusland</b>	19-10-2022	Motie van het lid Van Houwelingen over een onderzoek naar de effectiviteit van de sancties tegen Rusland	No	38/150	PVV, FVD	Positive
<b>Rusland</b>	20-10-2022	Gewijzigde motie van de leden Piri en Van der Lee over een versnelling van de afbouw van de import van Russisch lng-gas (t.v.v. 21501-20-1843)	Yes	122/150	PVV, FVD	Negative
<b>Rusland</b>	13-12-2022	Motie van het lid Dassen c.s. over leden van Russische oorlogspartijen op de geconsolideerde EU-sanctielijst laten zetten	Yes	125/150	PVV, FVD	Negative
<b>Rusland</b>	13-12-2022	Motie van het lid Van der Plas over duidelijk maken dat een speciale uitzondering voor diamanten ongewenst is bij een nieuw sanctiepakket voor Rusland	Yes	108/150	PVV, FVD	Negative
<b>Rusland</b>	19-01-2023	Motie van het lid Dekker over garanderen dat Nederland niet in een formele oorlogsverhouding met Rusland betrokken raakt	No	28/150	PVV, FVD	Positive

### Appendix B. Motions Filed in the European Parliament

<b>Search term</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Adopted</b>	<b>Percentage supportive</b>	<b>PVV</b>	<b>FVD</b>	<b>VB</b>	<b>Impact on Russia</b>
<b>Russia</b>	21-01-2021	The arrest of Alexei Navalny	Yes	86%	1/1 against		3/3 supported	Negative
<b>Russia</b>	29-04-2021	Russia, the case of Alexei Navalny, military build-up on Ukraine's border and Russian attack in the Czech Republic	Yes	83%	1/1 against		2/3 against, 1/3 DNV	Negative
<b>Russia</b>	10-06-2021	The listing of German NGOs as 'undesirable organizations' by Russia and the detention of Andrei Pivovarov	Yes	85%	1/1 against		3/3 against	Negative
<b>Russia</b>	16-12-2021	Situation at the Ukrainian border and in Russian-occupied territories of Ukraine	Yes	82%	1/1 against		3/3 abstained	Negative
<b>Russia</b>	16-12-2021	Continuous crackdown on civil society and human rights defenders in Russia: the case of human rights organization Memorial	Yes	86%	1/1 against		3/3 abstained	Negative
<b>Russia</b>	01-03-2022	Russian aggression against Ukraine	Yes	94%		1/1 against	3/3 abstained	Negative
<b>Russia</b>	07-04-2022	Increasing repression in Russia, including the case of Alexey Navalny	No	47%		1/1 DNV	3/3 supported	Negative
<b>Russia</b>	05-05-2022	Impact of Russian illegal war of aggression against Ukraine on the EU transport and tourism sectors	No	29%		1/1 DNV	3/3 against	Negative
<b>Russia</b>	19-05-2022	The fight against impunity for war crimes in Ukraine	No	11%		1/1 supported	3/3 abstained	Negative

<b>Russia</b>	05-07-2022	Negotiations for a cooperation agreement between the EU and Interpol	Yes	96%	1/1 against	3/3 abstained	Negative
<b>Russia</b>	15-09-2022	Human rights violations in the context of forced deportation of Ukrainian civilians to and forced adoption of Ukrainian children in Russia	No	37%	1/1 against	3/3 abstained	Negative
<b>Russia</b>	20-10-2022	Non-recognition of Russian travel documents issued in occupied foreign regions ***I	Yes	93%	1/1 DNV	3/3 supported	Negative
<b>Russia</b>	24-11-2022	Non-recognition of Russian travel documents issued in occupied foreign regions ***I	Yes	93%	1/1 DNV	3/3 supported	Negative
<b>Russia</b>	24-11-2022	Amending Council Regulation (EU, Euratom) 2020/2093 of 17 December 2020 laying down the multiannual financial framework for the years 2021 to 2027 ***	Yes	89%	1/1 DNV	3/3 against	Negative

*DNV = Did Not Vote*