The Effect of Russia's Invasion of Ukraine on the Political Imaginary of European Right-Wing Populist Parties

A Narrative Analysis on the Effect of Russia's Invasion of Ukraine on the Political Imaginary of the Freedom Party, the National Rally, and the Sweden Democrats.

Abstract

The polarizing effect on the relationship between the West and Russia poses poses challenges to the otherwise close ties between right-wing populist parties and Russia. The thesis utilizes political imaginary in conjunction with political narratives to understand the impact of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 on the political imaginaries of the Sweden Democrats, the National Rally, and the Freedom Party The study specifically explores how these parties perceive Russia as their leader, their opposition to the European Union (EU), and thus also the underlying tension between populism and liberal democracy. Using a narrative analysis of debates in the European Parliament from 2019 to 2023, the study finds that the conflicts between national-patriotism and cosmopolitan-globalism, as well as between the elite and the people, continue to be central to the parties' political imaginaries, even after Russia's invasion. However, there has been a change in the imaginary regarding the conflict between the people and the elite, due to the parties' evolving understanding of Russia's leadership. Despite the change, the tension between liberal democracy and populism remains. The findings align with the understanding that different parts of the political imaginary are more or less rigid.

Keywords: Western right-wing populist parties, Russia, Political imaginary, Political narratives

1   Introduction

Populism is widely believed to be in tension with liberal democracy, with some researchers describing it as the mirror-opposite of liberal democracy (Wolkenstein 2019:330, Pappas 2019:70). The political imaginary of populism, that is the representations of the world that influence how humans experience their political world (Diehl 2019:414, 417) is in part made up of the conflict between the elite and the people. The people are conceived as a homogeneous group, represented by one charismatic leader. Interlinked with populism's understanding of the people as homogenous is its anti-pluralistic feature in which the unified people is opposed to ethnic minorities and immigrants and the denial that politics must be sensitive to the needs of those excluded groups to be legitimate (Saffon and Urbinati, 2013:451, Ungureanu & Popartan 2020:42). As the leader claims to represent the true will of the people, the checks and balances of liberal democracy hinder the fulfillment of the people's will (Weyland 2018:320). Populism, hence, inhibits several autocratic tendencies (Weyland 2018:331).

Liberal democracy is based on the recognition that society is made up of divisions that generate conflict, but that society needs to seek consensus and positive-sum outcomes, which it reaches by, amongst else, upholding minority rights (Pappas 2019:70). Values that the EU could be argued to uphold and promote within its member states (European Union n.d.) The tension between populism and democracy thus stems from the fact that democracy portrays politics as an arena characterized by a conflict between ideologies and interests rather than a conflict between the people and the elite. Democracy hence defies populism's mythical notion of the people as a homogeneous group that is represented by one charismatic leader (Saffon and Urbinati, 2013:451, Ungureanu & Popartan 2020:42). WERPPS (Western European Right-Wing Populist Parties) can thus be argued to exemplify the conflict between autocracy and liberal democracy.

The relationship between populism and liberal democracy has become intertwined with populist parties' relationships with Russia and Putin. The political imaginary of populist

parties is partly based on the conflict between national-patriotism and cosmopolitan-globalism, a re-imagination of the former captitalist-communist divide (Diesen 2020:182, Arridu & Molis 109:165). One part of their national-patriotic stance is their aim to defend the nation from foreign cultural influence, and infringements on national sovereignty, which leads them to oppose the EU (Carlotti 2021:188, Polyakova 2014:37-38). WERPPS, therefore, praise Putin for his ability to protect Russianness and prioritize the interests of Russians, positioning Russia as the leader of the conservative world (Carlotti 2023:4-5, Arridu & Molis 2019:166, Polyakova 2014:38).

The relationship between Russia and WERPPS has thus come to be because of the mutual benefits the parties may gain from it (Polyakova 2014, Carlotti 2023). For right-wing populists, the relationship therefore seems to illustrate their opposition to the EU and the favoring of national-patriotism over cosmopolitan-globalism (Diesen 2020:182). For Russia, the relationship can be argued to work as a means for Russia to weaken the West and split European societies (Futàk & Campbell 2020:35).

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has, however, polarized the relationship between Europe and Russia as the EU and its member states have condemned the invasion and expressed their support for Ukraine (Consilium 2023). Sweden, France, and Austria have all three provided Ukraine with economic, humanitarian, and/or military aid (de Riviere 2022, Regeringskansliet n.d., Swaton 2023). Russia's invasion of Ukraine at the beginning of 2022 could thus pose a potential challenge to right-wing populist parties' relationships with Russia, as the relationship between Europe and Russia hardens.

The increasing political influence of right-wing populist parties (Akkerman et al. 2016:1) alongside the polarizing effect Russia's invasion of Ukraine has had on the relationship between the West and Russia, makes it of academic interest to understand how the war in Ukraine has affected WERPPS' relationships with Russia. However, because Russia has been cast as the leader of the conservative world, their relationship with Russia is interlinked with their relationship with liberal democracy and the EU.

The thesis will thus examine the political imaginary of three European populist parties, namely the Sweden Democrats, the French National Rally, and the Austrian Freedom Party. By exploring how these parties make sense of the political, insights may be derived into how

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has affected its role as the leader of the conservative world among European populist parties, and thus what ramifications the invasion has had on the parties' political imaginaries of liberal democracy and the EU. The political imaginaries of the parties are presented in the narratives which are disseminated by the party's representatives. This thesis thus complements the theory of political imaginary with that of political narratives and utilizes a narrative analysis of debates in the European Parliament from 2019 up until 2023.

The thesis so far has introduced the examined problem. This is followed by a presentation of the purpose of the study as well as an account of the research question. The following segment maps previous literature on political imaginary and political narratives on the topic of populism and a discussion of previous literature on the relationship between WERPPS and Russia. The succeeding segment undertakes a discussion on the political imaginary of the National, Rally, the Sweden Democrats, and the Freedom Party in terms of the perceived dichotomy between the ruling elite and the conflict between national-patriotism and cosmopolitan-globalism. Following that, the theoretical framework of political imaginary and political narratives are accounted for , along with an explanation of how these are used in this thesis. Thereafter, the method section elucidates the rationale behind the case selection, the utilized materials, and finally the analytical framework employed in the analysis. The ensuing segment is the analysis in which I will explore the narratives of the parties' representatives and how these present the political imaginaries of the parties.. The findings derived from the analysis are explored further in the ensuing discussion and lastly, culminating in the conclusion the conclusion will provide an overview of the findings of the thesis and answer the research question.

2 Purpose and research question

Therefore, the purpose of this thesis is to examine how Russia's invasion of Ukraine has affected the political imaginary of the Sweden Democrats, the National Rally, and the Freedom Party in terms of liberal democracy, Russia, and the EU. To that end, the thesis is guided by the following research question: How has Russia's invasion of Ukraine affected European right-wing populist parties' political imaginary in terms of Russia and the EU and how does this affect the conflict between populism and liberal democracy?

The political imaginary refers to the meanings and representations that influence how we experience the political world, in other words how the political is known and created (Diehl 2019:414). The political imaginary of populist parties understands the political world as being characterized by two conflicts. The first one is the conflict between the people and the elite which is the root of the tension between populism and liberal democracy. The second conflict is that between national-patriotism versus cosmopolitan-globalism which leads the parties to oppose supranational bodies such as the EU and position Russia as the leader of the conservative world. The positioning of Russia as the leader of the conservative world, the autocratic tendencies of populism, and its EU-opposition are hence manifestations of the two aforementioned conflicts.

To be able to identify changes in the political imaginary of the parties, the analysis will be guided by the following questiosn: What are the changes and continuities of the parties' narratives after Russia's invasion of Ukraine? What changes does these signify in the parties' political imaginaries in terms of the conflicts between the people and the elite and national-patriotsim versus cosmopolitan-globalism? How do these changes affect the conflict between populism and liberal democracy?

To answer these questions, I will utilize the theory political narratives to identify expressions of the parties' imaginaries and thus also continuities and changes. I will, therefore, perform a narrative analysis to identify the narratives that are disseminated by the parties in the

European Parliament, and what political imaginaries are expressed through these narratives. The European Parliament has been chosen as a focus for the study since it is an arena where European politicians express their parties' narratives illustrating their political imaginary in questions relating to the conflict between the people and the elite, and the conflict between national-patriotism and cosmopolitan-globalism. To be able to identify changes, the analysis will begin by analyzing the political imaginary as expressed through narratives of the chosen parties before the invasion, and follow with an analysis of the political imaginary and political narratives disseminated by the parties after the invasion.

3   Previous research

In this section, I will map previous research on political imaginary and political narratives concerning populism followed by an overview of previous literature on the factors uniting the relationship between WERPPS and Russia, which I argue are manifestations of the populist parties' political imaginary.

3.1 Political Imaginary and Political Narratives

Political imaginary is a beneficial tool for understanding questions linked to how the political world is experienced and created (Diehl 2019:414). Based on previous research, the political imaginary of populist parties makes out a challenge to the dominant imaginary as they aim to "give power back to the people" and defy the idea of politics as an activity carried out by politicians (Moreno Barrenche 2019:38, Abts & Rummens 2007:408). This conflict has also been understood as an integral part of populism by other researchers, even though these have lacked the perspective of political imaginary (Saffon and Urbinati, 2013:451, Ungureanu & Popartan 2020:42, Rooduijn et al. 2012:564, Mudde 2014). Another conflict that has been recognized as important for populism's understanding of the political world is that between national-patriotism and cosmopolitan-globalism, which is a re-imagination of the former capitalist-communist divide (Diesen 2020:182). Previous research on populism has thus largely lacked the perspective of political imaginary, but still furthered the understanding regarding the political imaginary of populism.

Previous research has lacked the perspective of political imaginary but still advanced the understanding of the effect of events on the political imaginary of populists. Research has focused on how the politics and populist rhetoric of populist parties have been affected by electoral success (Akkerman et al. 2016). Previous research has also focused on how populist parties express their understanding of the political world, i.e. their political imaginary,

through films (Håkansson 2021:138). Attempts to understand populist parties' understanding of the political world also dive into the driving factors behind the populist surge experienced in the West (Arridu & Molis 2019, Fukuyama 2018, Rohac et al. 2017).

This thesis utilizes political narratives to understand the political imaginary of the parties and how it has changed and thus departs from an understanding of political narratives as signifiers of the parties' imaginary. Previous research on populism has understood it as a specific kind of communication, or political narrative (Unguereanu & Popartan 2020, Jagers & Walgrave 2007). The dominant populism is not based on a set of policy proposals, arguments, and general principles, but rather on emotionally loaded narrative figures such as the myth of the villain or the myth of the decayed world. The people, or its leader are portrayed as the hero while the elite is represented as the enemy. The populist narrative is made up of stories that generate a strong immediate emotional impact. Essential for the perspective of populism as a political narrative is thus narrative patterns, antagonistic emotions, and myth-making (Ungureanu and Popartan 2020:39-42). This thesis will, however, depart from this understanding of populism as a specific kind of narrative and utilize the perspective of political narratives to understand what narratives the populist parties communicate and how they express their political imaginaries.

3.2 The relationship between WERPPS and Russia

The theoretical framework of political imaginaries and political narratives allows for insights into how the war has affected the parties' understanding of the political in terms of liberal democracy, Russia as the leader of the conservative world, and the EU. Carlotti (2023) has studied the effects of the war on Italian right-wing populist parties' relations with Russia Lacking from previous research on the relation between WERPPS and Russia has been the perspective of political imaginary and thus also an understanding of how the war has affected the parties' understanding and experience of the political (Diehl 2019:414). Another focus of research on the effect of the war in Ukraine on right-wing populism in Europe has centered on the effects on public perception of populist parties and how the parties have utilized war-related issues for electoral gain (Ivaldi & Zankina 2023).

Previous research concerning the uniting factors in the relationship between right-wing populist parties and Russia is used to guide the analysis of this thesis. This research does not employ the theoretical framework of political imaginary, but anyhow contribute to the understanding of the political imaginary of populist parties, and will be utilized for that purpose. This is because the uniting factors in the relationship between Russia and WERPPS can be understood as manifestations of the political imaginary of populist parties.

One uniting factor in the relationship between WERPPS and Russia identified by previous research is the populist framing of the good people versus the corrupt elite. This imaginary manifests in the parties' positioning of Russia as the leader of the conservative world (Carlotti 2023:4). Another factor is opposition toward the EU (Arridu & Molis 2019:165, Carlotti 2023:4). EU-opposition refers to hostility toward the EU's institutions, its policies, and its political elite as well as the political community as a whole and the consequences of European integration (Carlotti 2021). EU-opposition, the admiration of Putin's leadership and right-wing ideology have been the focus of previous research on the relationship between WERPPS and Russia (Carlotti 2023). This thesis will similarly study the parties' opposition toward the EU and the positioning of Russia as the leader of the conservative world, but view them as manifestations of the parties' political imaginaries. The thesis will not delve into the parties' expressions of right-wing ideology, as their right-wing nature is expected to remain consistent.

4   The World According to WERPPS

In this segment, I will discuss the political imaginary of WERPPS and particularly, the National Rally, the Freedom Party, and the Sweden Democrats. I will begin by discussing the political imaginary as grounded on the conflict between the people and the elite and then discuss the political imaginary in which the political world is divided by national-patriotism versus cosmopolitan-globalism.

The political imaginary of WERPPS is grounded on a conflict between national-patriotism versus cosmopolitan-globalism (Diesen 2019, Arridu & Molis 2019:165). Nationalism refers to the wish of nation-states to be politically independent as well as the expression of love toward their own nation (Cambridge Dictionary n.d. - a). Interlinked with this is patriotism which can be understood as the exaltation of the own nation (Cambridge Dictionary n.d. - b). Globalism represents the idea that events in one nation cannot be separated from the events in another nation, and thus foreign and economic policy should be planned internationally (Cambridge Dictionary n.d. - c). A cosmopolitan nation has elements which originate from various countries (Merriam Webster n.d.). This leads populist parties to oppose transfers of power away from the people and the nation, such as the EU.

The National Rally expresses this nationalistic-patriotic stance as they emphasize protecting French sovereignty and integrity, aiming to reclaim French sovereignty from the EU. Additionally, the party intends to preserve French cultural exceptionalism (Identity and Democracy n.d. - a, France 24 2014). Exceptionalism refers to the idea that a country or political system (as well as an individual) can differ from, and perhaps also be better than, another (Cambridge Dictionary n.d. - d). The Austrian Freedom Party held strong anti-communist and anti-Soviet stances after the Second World War. However, as the party grew increasingly concerned about the EU's and the USA's progressive liberal economic and cultural agenda it has come to view Russia as a counterweight (Heinisch & Hofmann 2023). The party has thus adopted an "Austria-first" agenda in which the party expressed opposition toward globalization and increased European integration as well as immigration (Heinisch &

Hofmann 2023). The National Rally and the Freedom Party are, therefore, members of the European Parliament group Identity and Democracy. The priorities of the group in the period of 2019-2024 are safeguarding national sovereignty within the EU, and protecting the European civilization, its Christian heritage, and national identities (Identity and democracy n.d. - b).

The Sweden democrats similarly aim to end further transfer of power to Brussels and increase the possibility for member states to decide to what degree they want to take part in the European cooperation (Sverigedemokraterna 2019). The party seeks to transfer power back from the EU to the individual nation-states, which preferably is to be achieved by working from within the EU. The party is thus a part of the European Parliamentary group the European Conservatives and Reformists which promotes decentralization of the EU to ensure greater popular sovereignty as well as having a focus on safety and security (Åkesson 2019, European Conservatives and Reformists n.d.). While the Sweden Democrats recognize the benefits of EU- cooperation, it withholds that Sweden should act with greater confidence and toughness since the EU is dependent on Swedish competence and natural resources (Åkesson 2019).

Populist parties also understand the political imaginary in terms of conflict between the "people" and the "elite", where the elite is argued to be disconnected from the people and their interests (Rooduijn m.fl. 2012:564, Mudde 2014). This understanding of the world is expressed by the National Rally, the Freedom Party as well as the Sweden Democrats. The National Rally expresses this imaginary in their aim to "give back the voice to the French people" (Identity and Democracy n.d. - a, France 24 2014). Similarly, the Sweden Democrats describe themselves as non-elitist (Sverigedemokraterna n.d. - b).

Additionally, it is typical of right-wing populist parties to exclude ethnic and religious minorities and immigrants (Rooduijn et al. 2012:564, Mudde 2014). The exclusionary nature of right-wing parties can be argued to illustrate the conflict between the people and the elite which underpins their political imaginary. The exclusion of minorities and immigrants is expressed by the parties' strict migration policies. This is true of the National Rally as they want to limit migration to defend the French way of life (Identity and Democracy n.d - a. Rassemblement National n.d.). The Sweden Democrats similarly fear the Swedish community having to adapt to foreign cultures and thus want to not only limit immigration

but also toughen the Swedish integration policy, putting higher demands on citizenship with requirements such as possessing knowledge about the Swedish society and culture (Sverigedemokraterna n.d. - d). For the party perceives Sweden as being in a state of deterioration caused to a great extent by mass immigration, a development which the party faults all remaining Swedish parties for (Sverigedemokraterna n.d. - a, Sverigedemokraterna n.d. - c). Similarly, the Freedom Party wants to limit immigration in Austria also emphasizing integration into the Austrian society, culture, and German language as requirements for citizenship (Freedom Party of Austria 2011).

5 Theory

The purpose of the thesis is to understand how Russia's invasion of Ukraine has affected the political imaginary of the Sweden Democrats, the National Rally, and the Freedom Party in terms of Russia, liberal democracy, and the EU. In this section, I will explain the theories of political imaginary and political narratives as well as discuss how these will be utilized in conjunction with each other to answer the research question.

The social imaginary is the individual and collective capacity to create presentations and self-presentations of being as well as of society. It is thus not a set of ideas but what enables, through making sense of, the practices of society (Taylor 2004:1). Browne and Diehl (2019:393) then understand the political imaginary as a "collective structure that organizes the imagination and the symbolism of the political". It refers to the values, symbols, meanings, and representations of the world, which influence how humans experience their political world, in other words, how we know the political and how the political is created. Moreover, the imaginary is constantly transformed, even though different aspects of it are more or less rigid (Diehl 2019:414, 417).

Political imaginary allows insight into how populist parties imagine and understand the political in terms of liberal democracy, the EU, and Russia. The political imaginary of the National Rally, the Freedom Party, and the Sweden Democrats can be argued to be based on a conflict between national-patriotism versus cosmopolitan-globalism (Disen 2020:182) as well as a conflict between the people and the elite (Moreno Barrenche 2019:38). These two conflicts are the root to the tension between populism and liberal democracy, positions Russia as the leader of the conservative world and gives rise to their opposition of the EU (Arridu & Molis 2019:166, Saffon and Urbinati, 2013:451, Ungureanu & Popartan 2020:42). The conflict between the people and the elite is for example showcased by the Sweden Democrats who describe themselves as non-elitist (Sverigedemokraterna n.d. - b). It is also exemplified in the National Rally's aim to "give back the voice to the French people" (Identity and

Democracy n.d. - a). The conflict between national-patriotism and cosmopolitan-globalism is exemplified by the Freedom Party's "Austria-first" agenda (Heinisch & Hofmann 2023).

Andrews (2014:2) argues that "imagination" is a central part of narratives, at the same time as narratives are a vital part of imagination. This liaison between narratives and imagination allows political imaginary to be complemented with the theoretical framework of political narratives. Narratives are the stories people construct to make sense of themselves and the world (Andrews et al 2015:141). Political narratives can be understood as the stories people tell of how the world functions, whom they view as members of their groups, what they see as drivers of political change, and how they view their roles. They thus play a key role in how people understand politics and how it is exercised. Political narratives engage the imagination in constructing stories about the present and the past, as well as formulating a vision of an alternative world. For policy to be efficient it demands a coherent story for why it is needed. Political narratives thus play an essential part in creating and recreating history, on an individual, societal, and national level (Andrews 2014:86-88).

To conclude, political imaginary refers to the way humans experience and know the political world (Diehl 2019:414). Political imaginary is utilized to understand how the National Rally, the Sweden Democrats, and the Freedom Party have come to re-imagine their political imaginary because of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. This thesis understands the political imaginary of the parties as being based on the conflict between the elite and the people, and the conflict between national-patriotism and cosmopolitan-globalism (Disen 2020:182, Moreno Barrenche 2019:38). Political imaginaries can thus be understood as the broader ideas which culminate in and are expressed through political narratives. The narratives of the parties will hence be seen as manifestations of the parties' political imaginary, and narratives are, therefore, used to gain insights into the political imaginary of the parties.

6 Method

In this section, I will begin by motivating the focus on the European Parliament, and then explain the selection of the three chosen parties, namely: the French National Rally, the Austrian Freedom Party, and the Sweden Democrats. The section will thereafter establish the analytical framework used, that is narrative analysis, and describe the themes guiding the analysis.

6.1 Case Selection

The thesis aims to understand how the war in Ukraine has affected European populist parties' understanding of liberal democracy, the EU, and Russia. To understand this, a narrative analysis is applied to statements made by the respective parties' representatives in the European Parliament in the period between 2019 and April 2023. The European Parliament is an arena where these parties engage in politics and questions expressing their narratives surrounding the EU and Russia, thus making it a valuable forum to understand the parties' relationship with Russia. Furthermore, the European Parliament is the only directly-elected institution in the EU. Populations in the member states thus vote for their representatives meaning that their thinking should represent that of their general voters (European Parliament n.d.).

Due to a limitation of time, the thesis focuses on three right-wing populist parties. The chosen parties are the French National Rally, the Austrian Freedom Party, and the Sweden Democrats. The chosen parties are all represented in their respective national parliament, meaning that their politics to various degrees influence the policies of respective nation-states. The selection of parties has been made based on the parties' relations with Russia. Where the Freedom Party and the National Rally are alike in their stance relationship with Russia but differ in their countries' general attitudes toward Russia. The Sweden

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Democrats, however, differ from the two aforementioned parties in terms of their relationship with Russia. These similarities and differences will be elaborated further below.

The Freedom Party and the National Rally are similar in the sense that they traditionally have expressed a more positive stance on Russia (Amaro 2022, RadioFreeEurope RadioLiberty 2016). The National Rally has described Russia as a French ally and the party has received financial lending from Russia (Amaro 2022, Rettman 2017). Similarly, the Freedom Party has signed a "cooperation pact" with United Russia, the Putin-loyal leading party in Russia. The pact represented a five-year agreement wherein the parties pledged to strengthen economic and political ties between Austria and Russia (RadioFreeEurope RadioLiberty 2016). The party ended up in turmoil in 2017 after having been exposed discussing exchanging lucrative public contracts allowing the niece of a Russian oligarch to gain control of Austria's largest tabloid in exchange for campaign support. Moreover, Austria's former foreign minister, appointed by Freedom Party, invited Putin to her wedding and danced with him (Oltermann 2019). France and Austria do, however, differ in their relations with Russia as Austria distinguishes itself in terms of its generally warmer history with Russia. The country has historically viewed itself as a bridge-builder between the East and the West (RadioFreeLiberty RadioLiberty 2016).

The Sweden Democrats make an interesting party of comparison since it has been accused of being irresolute in its relation with Russia. For example, the party described Russia as a threat on the national level in 2015, while their representatives in the European Parliament voted similarly to more openly Russian-friendly parties such as National Front and the British Ukip. Additionally, while the party denies that there would be any pro-Russian segment in their party (Ekström & Byström 2015), the party is recurrently framed as a threat to Sweden because of its argued Russian-friendliness (Johansson Heinö et al. 2023, Gustavsson 2022, Socialdemokraterna 2022). This perceived threat is based on incidents such as one prominent Sweden Democrat being involved in the blog 'Samnytt' whose former chief editor has been denied access to the Swedish Riksdag due to his contacts with Russian intelligence services (Johansson Heinö et al. 2023). The party leader, Jimmie Åkesson has also been interviewed by the pro-Russian media channel Russia Today (Sima 2022). The Sweden Democrats thus differentiate itself from the National Rally and the Freedom Party as it does not present itself as pro-Russian in the same sense as the other two parties.

6.2 Material

This thesis aims to further knowledge surrounding the potential effects the war in Ukraine has had on European right-wing populist parties' relationship with Russia, liberal democracy, and the EU. This relationship will be examined by performing a narrative analysis of statements made by the political representatives in the European Parliament. The WERPPS' relationships with Russia are analyzed based on the theme of national-patriotism versus cosmopolitan-gloablism, which illustrates their understanding of Russia, liberal democracy, the EU, and Russia's invasion of Ukraine. There is a risk that a bias informs the selection. This risk is, however, mitigated as the theme guiding the analysis is based on previous research.

The limitation of the material used in the narrative analysis is that representatives primarily communicate in their native language in the European parliament. This limitation is not present for a majority of the spoken statements as translations are provided by official EU translators. However, some spoken statements lack translated versions, while written statements are not translated by the EU at all. The thesis includes some written statements as well as some spoken statements where translated versions are not available. The language barrier only exists in the Austrian and French statements. This limitation is mitigated by contextualizing the material within earlier research.

Russia invaded Ukraine on the 24th of February 2022. The chosen period for the thesis ranges from 2019 up until the latest statement used on the 19th of April 2023. The thesis does hence not depict the relationship during Russia's annexation of the Ukrainian peninsula in 2014. The current representatives in the European Parliament were elected in 2019. The period selected thus enables an overview of potential changes or continuities in the narratives communicated by the same party representatives, before and after Russia invaded Ukraine in early 2022.

6.3 Analytical Framework

The purpose of the thesis is to understand how Russia's invasion of Ukraine has affected European right-wing populist parties' political imaginary in terms of Russia, liberal democracy, and the EU. Utilizing a comparative small-n case study it allows for an in-depth analysis of the political imaginaries of the Sweden Democrats, the National Rally, and the Freedom Party, thus increasing the internal validity of this thesis (Halperin & Heath 2017:233-235).

To analyze the parties' relation to Russia, the analysis will utilize the theories of political imaginaries and political narratives. The parties' narratives are seen as manifestations of their political imaginaries. The thesis will thus utilize a narrative analysis to identify the political parties' narratives in which the parties' imagination of the political is expressed. By studying narratives it is possible to gain insight into how people understand experiences and imbue these with meaning. It also allows for an understanding of how identities are shaped and preserved (Robertson 2018:220, 224). Robertson (2018:242-244), however, highlights that on a different level, another narrative is at work: namely the researcher's narrative. This is because all reading is subject to interpretation. To achieve reliability in narrative analysis, the researcher can include citations, and relate the material to the research community and earlier research, so-called consensual validity. The analysis is guided by themes that are derived from previous research and includes citations in the case of the Sweden Democrats where the language is not a barrier, thus combating this pitfall.

The analysis will be guided by a set of themes based on previous research surrounding the political imaginary of populist parties, that is how they experience and know the political world (Diehl 2019:414). The political imaginary of the parties is partly characterized by an understanding of the political world grounded on a conflict between the elite and the people. This imaginary manifests in the autocratic tendencies of populism which leads to the strained relation between populism and liberal democracy (Weyland 2018:331). Populist parties praise Putin for protecting Russianness and prioritizing the interests of Russians (Polyakova 2014:38, Carlotti 2023:4-5). The parties' relation with Russia represent the conflict between populism and liberal democracy, because Russia's positioning as the leader of the conservative world is interlinked with the conflict between the elite and the people (Carlotti 2023:4). By examining the parties view of Russia, it is possible to gain insight into how the

war has affected their imaginary and hence the conflict between populism and liberal democracy.

The political imaginary of populist parties is also based on a division of national-patriotism versus cosmopolitan-globalism (Diesen 2020:182). By utilizing this conflict as a theme, it is possible to gain insight into the parties' EU-opposition, which is a uniting factor in the relation between WERPPS and Russia. Since the EU promotes the values of liberal democracy (European Parliament n.d.), changes or continuities in the parties' opposition to the EU reveal the conflict between populism and liberal democracy. Right-wing populist parties tend to conceptualize their EU-opposition in terms of defending the nation against foreign cultural influence as well as infringements of national sovereignty, which has led the parties to praise Russia and Putin (Carlotti 2021:188, Polyakova 2014:38, Carlotti 2023:4-5). The narrative depicting Russia as the parties' leader thus also illustrates the conflict between national-patriotism and cosmopolitan-globalism. The parties' EU-opposition and perception of Russia as their leader is expressed through the parties' narratives.

The analysis explores each party's relationship toward Russia, differentiating between statements made before February 2022 and statements made afterward. Russia invaded Ukraine on February 24, 2022, however, the division of the analysis has been made at the beginning of February since the parties express their attitudes toward the invasion in the run-up to the war.

7   Analysis

In this section, I will analyze the statements made by the representatives of the National Rally, the Sweden Democrats, and the Freedom Party, from the perspective of political imaginary and political narratives. The analysis is guided by the understanding of the parties' political imaginary as characterized by two conflicts. The first conflict is between the people and the elite, which is the root of the tension between populism and liberal democracy. The second conflict is between national-patriotism and cosmopolitan-globalism, which is expressed through the parties' EU-opposition and their perception of Russia as their leader. The analysis begins by examining the parties' statements made before February 2022, based on the two aforementioned conflicts. The second part of the analysis treats the statements made from February 2022 and forward, concerning the two conflicts.

7.1 Before February 2022

7.1.1 National-patriotism versus cosmopolitan-globalism

This theme is presented through the parties' narratives of EU-opposition, which may be expressed both in terms of foreign cultural influence and infringements of national sovereignty (Carlotti 2021:188).

Political narratives are people's accounts of how the political world functions (Andrews 2014:86-88). Essentially, the narratives of all three parties center on the importance of national sovereignty. Vilimsky (2021b), the representative of the Freedom Party conveys the narrative by utilizing a parable between an increased European centralization to the creation of a European Union according to the model of the USA to convey this narrative. Due to the fact that such a union would infringe significantly on the national sovereignty of the union's member states (Haider 2021). The European States are described as competent enough to handle the majority of their problems by themselves (Vilimsky 2020a, 2020b, 2020c, 2021a, 2021b). The narrative of the Freedom Party thus illustrates the party's imaginary as

characterized by the juxtaposition of national-patriotism and cosmopolitan-globalism, and their national-patriotic stance. The party thus illustrates that it experiences the political world as characterized by this conflict (Diehl 2019:414).

The Sweden Democrats' narrative of Sweden as being in a state of societal deterioration as a result of migration showcases that the Sweden Democrats similarly ground their imaginary on the conflict between national-patriotism and cosmopolitan-globalism. For the reason that Sweden's deterioration is attributed in part to the EU's infringement on national sovereignty in limiting its member states' ability to rule over their respective migration policies (Weimers 2023). Weimers could hence be argued to, similarly to Vilimsky (2020b), present the EU, and thus cosmopolitan-globalism as the source of some of the problems experienced in the union's member states.

The narrative of the importance of national sovereignty is also presented by the National Rally's representative Lebreton (2021) who criticizes the EU's infringement on national sovereignty. The party hence also expresses the juxtaposition of national-patriotism and cosmopolitan-globalism in its imaginary. Unlike the representatives of the Sweden Democrats and the Freedom Party, however, Lebreton (2021) also expresses the National Rally's narrative surrounding the concern for the EU's erosion of the member states' national identity and cultural traditions. This narrative thus also portrays the party's political imaginary of national-patriotism versus cosmopolitan-globalism, where the nation is cherished and cosmopolitan-globalism is portrayed as a threat to national sovereignty and national cultures. By expressing these narratives, the parties also create the political, as characterized by this conflict between national-patriotism and cosmopolitan-globalism (Diehl 2019:414).

7.1.2 The People Versus the Elite

This theme is presented through the narrative which focuses on the people as the basis of the political power and criticism of the elite's detachment from the people. Furthermore, the theme is presented through the parties' understanding of Russia who is praised for its ability to protect and prioritize the Russian people (Polyakova 2014:38, Carlotti 2023:4-5).

The narratives communicated by the representatives of the National Rally also reveal the conflict between the people and the elite as the basis of the party's imaginary. One example is Mariani's (2021d) portrayal of the provocative behavior of the EU and the USA as against the interest of the European people, as the European people are argued to enjoy no benefits from the EU challenging its Russian neighbor. The EU, influenced by the USA, are portrayed as advancing their interests rather than that of the people. Another example is the narrative communicated by Garraud (2020) accused the EU of being blind to the suffering of the European people in terms of the Islamist threat. The National Rally's representative Griset (2020) frames egalitarianism and the individualism of liberal democracy as threats to women's role in European societies. The narrative thus essentially frames liberal democracy as a danger to traditional values.

Vilimsky (2019) also expresses the Freedom Party's narrative stressing the importance of popular sovereignty, which conveys the conflict between the people and the elite as integral to the party's imaginary. When discussing Brexit, Vilimsky (2019) argues that it does not matter what anyone thinks of Brexit except for the British people, who have voted to leave the EU. Another example is Haider's (2021a) criticism of policies for jeopardizing people's health, jobs, and individual freedoms. The Sweden Democrats' representative Weimers presents the party's narrative which accuses the European politicians of not understanding the effects of their politics on the European people (Weimers 2020, 2021b). All three parties thus express their experience of the political in terms of the conflict between the people and the elite. By expressing these narratives, the parties also create the political with regard to the conflict between national-patriotism and cosmopolitan-globalism.

While the Freedom Party and the Sweden Democrats have been active in their criticism of the EU, they have been significantly quieter in their attitudes toward Russia. The Sweden Democrats only present criticism of Russian attempts to buy influence through European parties (Weimers 2019). The narratives of the National Rally's representatives depict Russia as a respectable state deserving the treatment of a partner which is subject to insults and ideological attacks from the warmongering EU (Mariani 2020, 2021a, 2021c, Lebreton 2019, Lacapelle 2021). Mariani (2019b) instead encourages a reintegration of Russia into Europe and re-establishing a dialogue with Russia. The narrative of the representatives of the National Rally displays the party's positive attitude toward Russia which showcases a re-imagination of the former capitalist-communist divide where the West opposes a

threatening Russia into one of national-patriotism versus cosmopolitan-globalism where Russia is placed on the national-patriotic side alongside the party (Diesen 2020:182).

7.1.3 Summary

Based on the analysis of the narratives in the section above, the imaginary of the conflict between national-patriotism and cosmopolitan-globalism is expressed by all three parties through the narrative of the importance of national sovereignty. This narrative is discussed in terms of their opposition to the EU's infringement on national sovereignty. The National Rally also discusses the narrative concerning the EU's erosion of European national cultures and identities.

The analysis shows that the characterization of the political imaginary in terms of the conflict between the elite and the people is presented by the narratives of all three parties. The National Rally also presents a narrative which depicts Russia as a partner and illustrates the party's understanding of Russia as the leader of the conservative world. The National Rally's representative, furthermore, identifies liberal democracy as a danger to the traditional values that secure women's role in European societies.

7.2 February 2022 and Forward

7.2.1 National-patriotism versus cosmopolitan-globalism

The theme is presented through the parties' narratives of opposition toward the EU, which are expressed through narratives of foreign cultural influence and infringements of national sovereignty (Carlotti 2021:188).

All three parties maintain the pre-war narrative which displays the importance of national sovereignty. This narrative is framed by the Sweden Democrats' representative Weimers (2023) who presents the attempt to increase European centralization as an attempt to create a United States of Europe (Weimers 2022j, 2023). Weimers (2022e, 2022j, 2023) points to the fact that the EU is composed of sovereign nation-states and that the EU thus, wrongfully transfers power away from "away from democratic, legitimate national parliaments".

Nissinen (2022, 2023) criticizes the Swedish Moderate party for "thinking European" which according to the Sweden Democrats entails giving up national interests. This narrative clearly illustrates the conflict between national-patriotism and cosmopolitan-globalism which underpins the party's imaginary. The Sweden Democrats illustrate their national-patriotic stance and favoring of national sovereignty while the EU is portrayed as an attempt to further the cosmopolitan-globalist agenda.

Vilimsky (2022b) presents the Freedom Party's narrative which depicts globalization and internationalization as the root of many of the problems experienced by European states. This is described as the reason why the EU fails to work as a problem solver. Instead, the European States are described as competent enough to handle the majority of their problems by themselves (Mayer 2022). Vilimsky (2023a) therefore praises the Sweden Democrats for standing up for Sweden and the Swedish culture. Viliksmy's expression of the Freedom Party's narrative surrounding globalization clearly illustrates the party's opposition to cosmopolitan-globalism as a sustained part of the party's political imaginary.

The narratives of the National Rally' representatives continue to display their opposition to the EU as Lacapelle (2022a) calls for a Europe of nations instead of a European federation. Mariani (2022) and Bardella (2022a) accuse the EU of utilizing crises to further the agenda of creating a super-European state, which Chagnon (2022) frames as an attempt to destroy nations. Lebreton (2023) opposes further expansion of the EU's power, such as through the creation of a European army, especially one under the influence of Nato. Jamet (2022) criticizes globalism and withholds the National Rally's respect for national sovereignty and economic patriotism. The National Rally thus continues to shape the imaginary in terms of the conflict national-patriotism versus cosmopolitan-globalism.

Moreover, the National Rally's EU-opposition continues to be grounded in a criticism of the influence of the USA on the union. Bardella (2023) maintains the party's pre-war narrative in which the EU is accused of being under American influence during the past two decades. The relationship is argued to have created an imbalance in the EU's relationship with Russia. The underlying sentiment of this narrative is that the EU should have engaged in a closer relationship with Russia, which presents the idea of Russia as a potential partner. This narrative is similarly presented by the Freedom Party's representative Vilimsky (2022a) who

calls for a solution to the conflict between Europeans, Russians and Ukrainians without the influence of the USA who are cast as provocateurs by attempting to expand Nato.

7.2.2 The People Versus the Elite

This theme is expressed through narratives regarding the parties' understanding of the conflict between the people and the elite. Furthermore, the imaginary is expressed through the parties' narratives regarding their relation with Russia, since Russia is praised for its ability to protect Russians and their interests (Polyakova 2014:38, Carlotti 2023:4-5).

Vilmsky (2022c, 2022d) presents the Freedom Party's narrative of criticism toward the EU's sanctions and embargoes against Russia by framing them as damaging for the European people instead of Putin and Russia. Furthermore, the European and American elite are accused of imposing the sanctions while themselves being spared from their effects. The narrative encapsulates the conflict between the people and the elite as a part of the Freedom Party's imaginary. Additionally, Vilimsky (2022g) praises the Hungarian president Órban for prioritizing the interests of the Hungarian people. The conflict between the people and the elite thus seems to still view the political as divided by the conflict between the people and the elite.

The Freedom Party's create-peace narrative (see 5.2.1) expressed by Vilimsky (2022a, 2022c) frames the creation of peace to be in the interest of the people. Narratives reveal how people understand their role in the political world (Andrews 2014:86-88). The party's narratives thus seem to portray an understanding of themselves as the voice of the people. Similarly, the National Rally's narratives which are presented by Beigneux (2022) express the party's understanding of their role in the political world as the voice of the people and the defender of national sovereignty. Beigneux (2022) withhold that the people have voted for the National Rally because the party defends France and no other nation. The Sweden Democrats narrative surrounding the EU continues to criticize the effect of the union's policies on the people of the member states. The EU's policies are argued to render Swedish workers unemployed (Weimers 2022f). The narrative illustrates the parties' juxtaposition of the people and the elite, and the portrayal of the elite as separated from the interests of the people.

Many right-wing populist parties conceive Russia as the leader of the conservative world (Arridu & Molis 2019:166). This idea is dismissed by the Sweden Democrats, whose narrative centers on the understanding of Russia as an unreliable partner, which Weimers (2022h) describes as unlikely to change during our lifetime. Additionally, Weimers (2022h) is saddened that "some on the right have become infatuated with Putin's pretend conservatism". The Sweden Democrats' narrative withholds that Russia is not a traditionalist bulwark that holds off the weak woke West. Rather, Russia is portrayed as anti-Christian, partly due to the invasion of Ukraine. The party's narrative regarding Russia is expressed by Weimer who describes Russia as "a pariah, a menace, a rouge state" and an aggressive imperialist (Weimers 2022g, 2022d, 2022h). While the party has showcased a political imaginary based on the division between national-patriotism and cosmopolitan-globalism in terms of their emphasis on national sovereignty, the party does not position Russia as the leader of national-patriotism.

Both the National Rally and the Freedom Party have also condemned Russia's invasion of Ukraine (Bardella 2023, Vilimsky 2022b). The Freedom Party's narrative regarding Russia's invasion of Ukraine is expressed by Vilimsky (2022c), as the reason for the death of the friendship between the Freedom Party and Russia which led to the cooperation pact between the party and United Russia. An interesting note of the narrative is that it presents Russia as a former friend of the party. In the run-up to Russia's invasion of Ukraine in the beginning of February 2022, Vilimsky (2022a) stated that he liked both Americans and Russians and that his only goal is to secure peace in Europe in the long run (Vilimsky 2022a). The narrative thus illustrates how the party's understanding of Russia has changed and could indicate the end to the understanding of Russia as the leader of the conservative world. This narrative thus shows how the political imaginary of the party has changed in its understanding of Russia.

However, it is noteworthy that the narratives of the Freedom Party and the National Rally frame the invasion as a response to provoking attempts to expand the EU and Nato (Bardella 2022a, Vilimsky 2022a, 2022b). Interlinked with this narrative, the party emphasizes the pursuit of peace in Europe as its primary goal (Vilimsky 2022a, 2022e). Part of the narrative entails blaming weapons export from the USA and Europe to Ukraine for working against peace and seeing the current situation as an escalation spiral. Instead, negotiations are presented as the route to peace (Vilimsky 2022g, 2022h, 2022k). The narratives of the National Rally similarly center on the European duty to create peace and ensure that the rest

of Europe does not fall into war. Lebreton (2022) dismisses that military means are the solution to the conflict, instead emphasizing ceasefires and negotiations as the route to peace. Europe is urged by Lebreton (2022) not to give in to blind warmongering. One part of this narrative of creating peace is the idea that an expansion of the EU and Nato is the wrong route as it will escalate the conflict (Bardella 2022a).

The Freedom Party, however, also portrays Ukraine as working against the creation of peace by rejecting peace talks and requesting more weapons (Vilimsky 2022i, 2022k). The Freedom Party thus takes on a different stance compared to the National Rally and the Sweden Democrats who both have recognized Ukraine's legitimate right to defend their territory and integrity (Bardella 2023, Weimers 2022).

7.2.3 Summary

The narratives analyzed in this section show that the National Rally, the Freedom Party, and the Sweden Democrats maintain a narrative that emphasizes the importance of national sovereignty which leads them to oppose increased European centralization. The parties' narratives hence signifies the continued understanding of the political imaginary as based on the conflict between national-patriotism and cosmopolitan-globalism.

The parties' maintain the imaginary of the juxtaposition of the elite and the people. However, they differ in their understanding of Russia. The Sweden Democrats have been consistent in their narratives of Russia as an unreliable partner, presenting Russia as anti-Christian and aggressive, officially dismissing Russia as the conservative leader. The Freedom Party frames the invasion as the end to their friendship with Russia, which is interesting both in the sense that they would denote Russia as a friend before the invasion and in the sense that the framing should indicate that the party no longer views Russia as their leader. However, the narratives of both the Freedom Party and the National Rally portray the invasion as a result of provocations from the EU and the USA, which makes the parties' understanding of Russia as their leader harder to distangle. This is discussed further in the following section.

8   Discussion

This thesis provides insights into the relationship between the political imaginaries of the Sweden Democrats, the National Rally, and the Freedom Party in terms of Russia, the EU, and liberal democracy. The following section discusses the principal findings of the analysis.

Based on the analysis the parties continue to base their imaginary on the conflict between the elite and the people as well as the conflict between national-patriotism and cosmopolitan-globalism after Russia invaded Ukraine. According to Diehl (2019:414, 417) the imaginary is constantly in transformation, though some parts of it are more or less rigid. These conflicts thus seem to be more resistant to change. The conflict between national-patriotism and cosmopolitan-globalism is continuously depicted in the parties' narratives concerning their opposition to the EU, a position they uphold. Since the parties continue to portray the relationship between the people and the elite as antagonistic, and their opposition to the EU remains, the conflict between populism and liberal democracy prevails. This is because the relationship between populism and liberal democracy has become intertwined with the relationship between populist parties and Russia and its leader, Putin. This is due to the fact that the parties' engagement with Russia stems from their perception of the relationship between the elite and the people as inherently antagonistic.

The Sweden Democrats' limited involvement in discussions regarding Russia prior to its invasion of Ukraine, makes it challenging to untangle their pre-war stance on Russia based on their narratives. After the invasion, however, the party displays a particularly strong stance against Russia after the invasion, rejecting the idea of Russia as the leader of the conservative world. The Sweden Democrats and the Freedom Party have significantly fewer representatives in the European Parliament than the National Rally. Therefore, the relative "silence" of the Sweden Democrats and the Freedom Party compared to that of the National Rally in the pre-war period may be attributable to the difference in the parties' number of representatives rather than necessarily indicating a symbolic "silence". Notwithstanding, the

Sweden Democrats' narratives regarding Russia after February 2022 present a trial for the WERPPS' positioning of Russia as the leader of the conservative world.

In contrast, the Freedom Party and the National Rally present contradictory narratives regarding Russia post-invasion. The parties condemn the invasion, with the Freedom Party going as far as describing the invasion as the death of their friendship with Russia. Thus also indicating a previously friendly relationship. However, the parties present the invasion as a response to provocations by the EU and the USA. Moreover, the Freedom Party frames Ukraine as obstructing peace since the country opposes peace talks. These narratives are particularly interesting because of Russia's similar framing of the invasion as a response to provocations and reports of Russian attempts to create anti-war sentiments in Europe (Belton et al 2023, Ragozin 2021).

It is hardly surprising that among the three parties, the Sweden Democrats, who previously were the most distanced from Russia, demonstrate the most assertive stance against Russia following the invasion. According to Akkerman et al. (2016:4) assuming office is supposed to have a moderating effect on populist parties, since it at least in democracies in Western Europe, requires forming coalitions. When doing so, differences have to be bridged, meaning that populist parties have to adjust their positions to those of mainstream right-wing parties since it increases their chance to assume office. The Sweden Democrats are, as of September 2022, a part of the Swedish government cooperation for the first time in history. The party's aim in early 2022 to enter office thus might have contributed to the party's strong stance against Russia. The Freedom Party has, however, been in office while expressing a positive stance on Russia. This might be attributed to Austria's generally closer ties with Russia.

Academics have characterized the connection between WERPPS and Russia as a strategic alliance, indicating that both parties gain from the relationship (Polyakova 2014, Carlotti 2023). Given that the relationship between the West and Russia has become increasingly polarized in light of the war, populist parties' alignment with Russia likely poses challenges to their popular support. Earlier research has found that populist parties possess remarkable adaptability, enabling them to quickly adapt to shifts in public opinion (Carlotti 2023). The changes in the parties' narratives regarding Russia may thus be ascribed to the war's polarizing effect on the relationship between Russia and the West. This explanation seems to

be of relevance when attempting to explain the parties' narratives regarding Russia post-invasion.

The thesis adds value to the discussion of the relationship between WERPPS and Russia as well as an increased understanding of the political imaginary of right-wing populist parties and how these are expressed through narratives. The external validity of the The study aims to contribute to increased insights into the relationship between Western European right-wing populist parties and Russia, as well as an increased understanding of the political imaginary of right-wing populist parties and how these are expressed through narratives. The thesis illustrates the fruitfulness of utilizing the perspective of political imaginary and political narratives to understand the effect of events on populist parties. The narratives expressed by the parties mean that the parties also create the political world as being set apart by this conflict.

9 Conclusion

The purpose of this thesis is to examine how Russia's invasion of Ukraine has affected the political imaginary of the Sweden Democrats, the National Rally, and the Freedom Party in terms of Russia, and the EU and thus also liberal democracy. To that end, the thesis is guided by the following research question: How has Russia's invasion of Ukraine affected European right-wing populist parties' political imaginary in terms of Russia and the EU and how does this affect the conflict between populism and liberal democracy? Based on the analysis, the parties' exhibit an overall continuity in its narratives, with the exception of their view on Russia. The consistency in the parties' narratives regarding the EU, indicate that the conflict between national-patriotism and cosmopolitan-globalism as well as the conflict between the people and the elite continues to shape the political imaginary of the Sweden Democrats, the National Rally, and the Freedom Party post-invasion.

However, different parts of the political imaginary exhibit varying degrees of rigidity. The political imaginary of the parties' has changed in terms of the parties' understanding of Russia. Unsurprisingly, the Sweden Democrats who previous to the invasion had the least closest relationship with Russia, also have expressed the strongest stance against Russia since the invasion. Freedom Party and the National Rally's stances on Russia have been more difficult to disentangle. While they both have toned down their relationship, the Freedom Party outright declaring it the end of their friendship with Russia, they also present narratives which indicates that the parties have not completely turned on its former ally. How does the invasion then affect the conflict between populism and liberal democracy? Based on the analysis the conflict between the people and the elite continues to shape the parties' political imaginary and their opposition to the EU remains, the tension between populism and liberal democracy, therefore, prevails.

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