



THE SPECTER OF AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES IS HAUNTING EUROPE

POPULIST FRIENDS
SEEK TO HELP LOWERING
THE EU'S GUARD

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This is a short summary of the results of a two-year-long research project of Political Capital Institute and its partners on authoritarian influence in the European Union, and particularly in the European Parliament.

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POLITICAL CAPITAL
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SUMMARY

METHODOLOGY

We collected and analyzed the results of over 90 [votes](#) cast in the EP since 2 July 2019 to measure the openness of Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) to authoritarian influencing efforts. Then, we categorized the votes into five groups: Chinese Communist Party-critical, Kremlin-critical, Counter-authoritarian pushback, Information sovereignty, and Common EU Foreign Policy. After giving a weight to all possible voting outcomes (for, against, abstain, did not vote, was not MEP), we calculated MEPs' scores on the five indexes corresponding to the five categories mentioned above. In all cases, the lowest value (0) signifies that the given MEP is open to supporting authoritarian interests in the EU. The highest value (100) indicates that they are completely against authoritarian interests. These are the index scores depicted and analyzed in this short summary. For the complete methodology, please [click here](#). The previous version of our efforts focusing on 2019-2020 is available [here](#).

- **Authoritarian influence in the European Union primarily targets individual member states, not European institutions.** The vast majority of the members of the European Parliament, the only directly elected EU institution, are highly supportive of strong European measures against autocratic interference, disinformation and human rights abuses. Therefore, hostile foreign states are more likely to target individual member states and politicians to have an impact on European foreign policy. 53% of the 680 MEPs we could categorize based on our criteria (casting the required number of votes) belong to the group of *Integrationist Hawks*, who both recommend taking a critical line on authoritarian regimes and seek to provide the EU the means to put these policies into practice.
- **Not all populists are the same when it comes to stepping up against authoritarian countries.** *Establishment-critical Hawks* condemn authoritarian regimes and support measures to counter their influence but also either reject further EU integration in the field of foreign policy or disagree on key strategic questions. 26% of MEPs belong in this group, including the majority of the Eurosceptic ECR Group, such as the PiS, and key ruling parties from the CEE region, like ANO 2011. *Sovereignist balancers* are willing to condemn autocrats on a case-by-case basis. The group made up of right-wing representatives is highly critical of China, and even votes against Russian interests on some occasions. However, they clearly reject EU action against disinformation or a more coordinated EU foreign policy. This group, making up 8% of all MEPs, includes forces such as Lega, Fratelli d'Italia and Vox. *Hypocritical pacifists* are almost never critical of Russia, but sometimes condemn actions by China or other authoritarian regimes. This group encompassing 6% of MEPs includes political parties such as the FPÖ or Syriza. *Eurosceptic dictator-huggers* are the only group that seem to reject any and all forms of foreign policy cooperation or action against authoritarians. This group, including around 8% of MEPs, has the AfD and the French National Rally in its ranks.

- **Chinese soft and sharp power efforts are relatively unsuccessful within the European Parliament.** China is supported blindly and openly by some far-left political forces. A substantial part of the far-right ID group is rather critical of China, particularly Lega. Thus, the Chinese regime is likely to rely on a combination of hard and sharp power directed at the national and personal levels to gain allies in Europe. This combination includes leveraging attempts exploiting China's massive internal market and economic prowess, efforts to – at the very least – create the perception that Beijing offers advantages to states that support its interests, and benefits for local elites via economic cooperation and people-to-people contacts.
- **The Kremlin has much broader appeal.** Ideologically, Moscow's policies might be considered as examples to follow by the far right. However, the Putin regime has successfully been able to portray itself as a superpower economically, militarily, politically, which ensures that both the far right and the far left see it as a counter-pole to US influence and a role model. This might also be a reason why some mainstream forces argue for resetting relations with Russia.
- **Authoritarian alliances with European political forces might not last forever.** A very significant shift in the past year is that Lega changed its voting behavior on Russia substantially in late 2020. The formerly pro-Russian Jobbik's sole MEP is highly critical of the Kremlin in the European Parliament. However, there are examples for the reverse of this trend, a party becoming more pro-Russian over time, too. This reverse trend was exhibited primarily by the Les Républicains party, whose Kremlin-critical Index score degraded considerably over the research period. These moves are often dictated by domestic political circumstances – e.g.; preparing to become a major coalition partner in the former case, or losing a party's most pro-Western politicians to another force in the latter one.
- **There is an almost unanimous support for action against authoritarian regimes other than Russia or China.** For instance, over 80% of representatives supported action against the Lukashenko and Assad regimes, while criticism against authoritarian practices in Chad, Haiti or Pakistan was supported by over 90% of MEPs. However, MEPs in all caucuses support such resolutions somewhat selectively in a limited number of cases. The center-left is more reluctant to condemn left-leaning regimes, while the center-right is more likely to avoid criticizing right-leaning regimes and policies that fit their own agenda (e.g., tougher stance on migration).
- **The fight against disinformation can be more contentious.** The Greens and the ECR are considerably less likely to support EP proposals on disinformation than the other three mainstream caucuses, but their refusal of such initiatives is based on policy disagreements. The Greens have raised concerns about the freedom of speech, they – for instance – said it needs to be clarified who decides how problematic contents are removed from online platforms. The ECR has raised questions about the alleged ideologization of the concept of hate speech, fearing that platforms might remove contents that simply disagree with certain viewpoints. In contrast, the far right and the far left uses pro-Kremlin narratives to attack the EU in these debates; e.g., accusing the EU of spreading disinformation itself.

- **The formulation of a common EU foreign policy will prove to be the toughest challenge**, as the parliamentary majority behind such action is the slimmest. For instance, the report on the implementation of the Union's Common Foreign- and Security Policy in 2020 - advocating for qualified majority voting in the EU in some cases in international affairs - was approved by only around 50% of representatives casting a vote. However, this is among the most important areas covered by the Parliament, as the Union will presumably remain unable to follow actions proposed by a wide range of MEPs against Russia, China and other authoritarian regimes with unanimity voting in place.
- **The European Parliament will likely continue carving an even greater role for itself in foreign policy.** This is, for instance, visible in how MEPs pushed for further sanctions against members of the Belarusian regime, and their decision to freeze the ratification of the EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment. Backed by a large majority of MEPs, the institutions could exert further pressure on the Council to follow its recommendations.

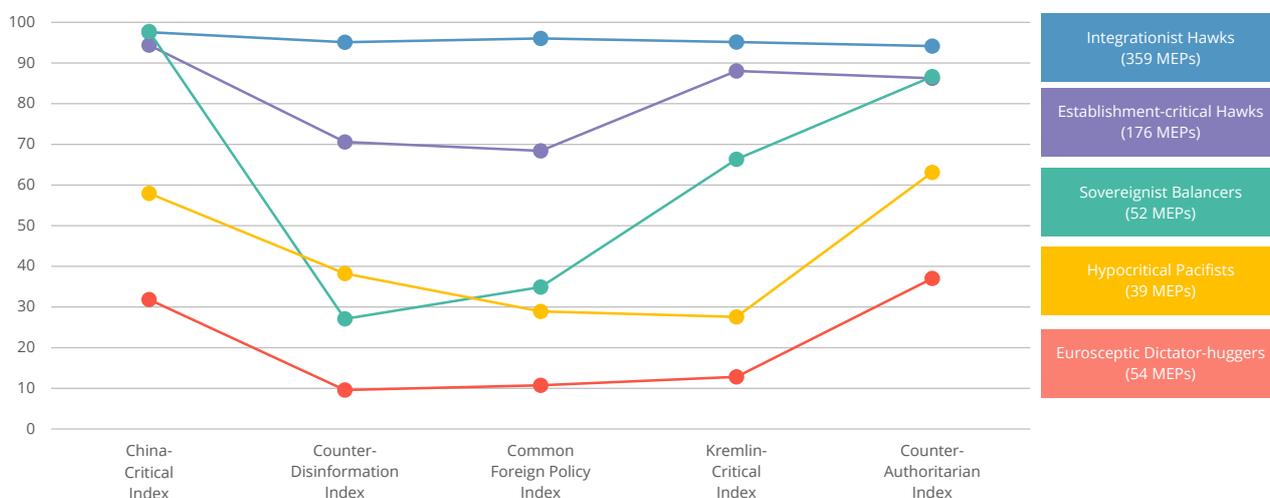
POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Moving to qualified majority decisions in foreign policy should be a key topic in the Conference on the Future of the European Union.** It is crucial to address the risks posed by the unanimity rule that cripples rapid and effective EU action. Countries supporting the transition and the EP must make sure this topic is articulated frequently during the Conference.
- **A solution can also be found without entering the black hole of treaty change.** For instance, member states could turn more frequently to constructive abstention, an action that allows a given member state to abstain on and not apply an EU decision without vetoing it, while accepting that it binds the EU as a whole.
- **Countries willing to coordinate their foreign policy should form “coalitions of the willing” within the EU and involve reluctant states over time.** Brussels could push for introducing QMV in some segments of EU foreign policy by activating the so-called “passerelle clause” allowing the alteration of legislative procedures without treaty amendment. Over time, this could establish the culture of QMV. Meanwhile, the “coalition of the willing” countries should start coordinating their position as groups within the EU.
- **The CEE region could be an important resource in the fight against authoritarian regimes if western allies can win the hearts and minds of the local populations and elites, and help the democratization and anti-corruption efforts of these states.** The West needs to show the region that they have more to gain from a strong commitment to western alliances than from cooperation with eastern autocrats.
- **Bottom-up solutions are key in fighting hostile electoral interference.** Civil society should focus on proposing bottom-up solutions to protecting elections from hostile influence instead of top-down political actions only. On the Commission’s side, they could do more to monitor discrepancies in member states’ capacities to manage the challenges of interactions with hostile foreign regimes. Investigative journalism and cross-border editorial cooperation should receive more support.
- **Transparency, especially lobbying rules, must be enforced on both the EU and national levels.** Cutting off the financial channels of corrupt foreign influence should be a matter of utmost urgency. In order to deactivate authoritarian “Trojan Horses” in EU institutions, the enforcement of transparency regulations need to be improved. Rules should be made to stop ‘revolving door’ type of corruption; i.e., former top politicians taking up jobs at Russian state companies, such as Gazprom.
- **The European market must be protected from investments by hostile third countries aiming to achieve diplomatic goals within the EU; the existing investment screening mechanism must be enforced consistently.** EU institutions have to protect its financial interest from harmful foreign investment and hostile takeover in a more efficient way. Circumventing the Union’s recommendations based on FDI screening should lead to tangible consequences to member states.

- **The United States should and could do more to push back against authoritarian foreign influence in the EU and build alliances against China.** Coordination should take place especially between Congress and the European Parliament to build support for coordinated action and avoid unilateral decisions.
- **FDI-related corruption should be a key matter for Washington and Brussels.** The EU and the US should also impose a coordinated set of sanctions on relevant political and economic stakeholders via coordinated criteria and announcements.

FIVE DIFFERENT APPROACHES TO EU FOREIGN POLICY

Figure 1: Average index scores within the five subgroups of MEPs



METHODOLOGY

We classified MEPs based on their scores on the five indices using K-means cluster analysis. Five subgroups emerged from the clustering. Not all MEPs were included in the analysis. Only those, whose number of valid votes (for, against or abstain) reached a certain limit. The limits for the categories are the following (the numbers in the parenthesis represent the total number of votes in the respective category): China-Critical Index: 4 (6), Counter-Disinformation Index: 4 (7), Common Foreign Policy Index: 10 (17), Kremlin-Critical Index: 15 (25), Counter-authoritarian index: 20 (37). 680 MEPs met these criteria.

- We separated five groups of MEPs based on the patterns of their voting behavior in the EP (see figure 1).
- The largest group can be labelled “*Integrationist Hawks*.” MEPs in the group do not only recommend taking a critical line concerning authoritarian regimes but support providing the means to the Union to carry out these proposals effectively through a common foreign policy. This group includes 53% of the 680 MEPs meeting our criteria, mainly from the EPP, Renew and S&D groups.
- “*Establishment-critical hawks*” is composed of a diverse group of different political forces. The group’s common trait is that they support strong action against authoritarian regimes but often reject further EU integration in the field of foreign policy or criticize proposed common EU strategies (e.g., on disinformation, EU-Asia relations, etc.). This group consists of about 26% of MEPs, primarily from the Eurosceptic ECR, including the PiS, who are in favor of national approaches instead of a common European one. Numerous Green MEPs also fall in this group, as they are sometimes concerned by their priorities not being taken into account (e.g., removing a paragraph on the EU-Mercosur trade deal from the 2020 CFSP report). We can also find Andrzej Babis’s ANO 2011 in the group’s ranks.

- Fidesz, Hungary's ruling party traditionally considered to be strongly supportive of authoritarian regimes, interestingly, belongs to *Establishment-critical Hawks* as well based on their behavior in the EP, as the party seeks to present its "European face" in the institution and only abstain on or reject resolutions that constitute a red line to it (e.g., Nord Stream II, Rosatom, QMV in foreign policy). However, **we might see a gradual shift in Fidesz MEPs' voting behavior to a more dovish direction over time, mainly due to the breakup between the EPP and the Hungarian ruling party.**
- "*Sovereignist Balancers*" are highly critical of China and other authoritarian regimes, but not necessarily of Russia. They almost completely reject further EU integration in the field of foreign policy or any proposed common EU strategies. **They might support EU action on a case-by-case basis.** This group of 8% of MEPs include the Italian far-right party Lega and Fratelli d'Italia, and the Spanish Vox, among others. It must be noted that Lega is moving towards a more hawkish approach to Russia.
- "*Hypocritical pacifists*" only criticize authoritarian regimes in a limited number of cases, and reject most common EU action or strategies. This attitude often comes with false equivalences, relativism and whataboutism: the argument that the EU, NATO or the United States are similarly aggressive on the international field as authoritarian regimes. **They might still be willing to engage on a small number of topics with the European mainstream.** This is the smallest group (6% of MEPs), including Syriza, FPÖ, and Podemos – among others.
- "*Eurosceptic dictator-huggers*" support authoritarian regimes almost without exception, and refuse any common EU foreign policy action or strategies. **They are unlikely to support EU action in any case.** The group consisting of around 8% of MEPs includes representatives primarily from the AfD, National Rally, and the Forum for Democracy.

STRONG, BUT NOT UNITED AGAINST CHINA

- **There is little love for Beijing in the EP.** Chinese soft power efforts seem to be relatively unsuccessful, only far-left MEPs support Beijing openly in most cases. They often present EP resolutions on China as the extension of “US propaganda.” EU member states with relatively large far-left delegations in the EP tend to perform poorer on the China-critical Index, as the radical left is the most supportive of the CCP (see figure 2).
- **China is a counterweight to the West to some.** A number of far-right national parties (e.g., AfD) criticize Beijing’s policies rhetorically but generally abstain when it comes to condemning China through votes. They likely refrain from doing so because they see China, like Russia, as a balance to the liberal US- and EU-led western order they reject – a political stance Beijing can easily exploit.
- **With few overt cheerleaders, China must turn to malign means of influence.** Beijing is likely to rely on a combination of sharp and hard power to lobby for its interests: leveraging attempts exploiting China’s massive internal market and economic prowess, efforts to – at the very least – create the perception that Beijing offers advantages to states that support its interests, and benefits for local elites via economic cooperation and personal contacts. EU member states that have the most to profit from relations with China are the most likely to push for cooperation between the Union and Beijing.
- **The European Parliament showed that it is willing to act even when the stakes are high.** The Parliament’s decision to freeze the ratification of the EU-China investment deal (CAI) showed that the EP can act even when MEPs’ votes have tangible consequences. The institutions will need to remain resilient because Germany and the Commission have not given up hope on pushing the CAI through.

Figure 2: The China-critical score of EP political groups on a scale of 0-100, where a higher value indicates a more critical stance towards China

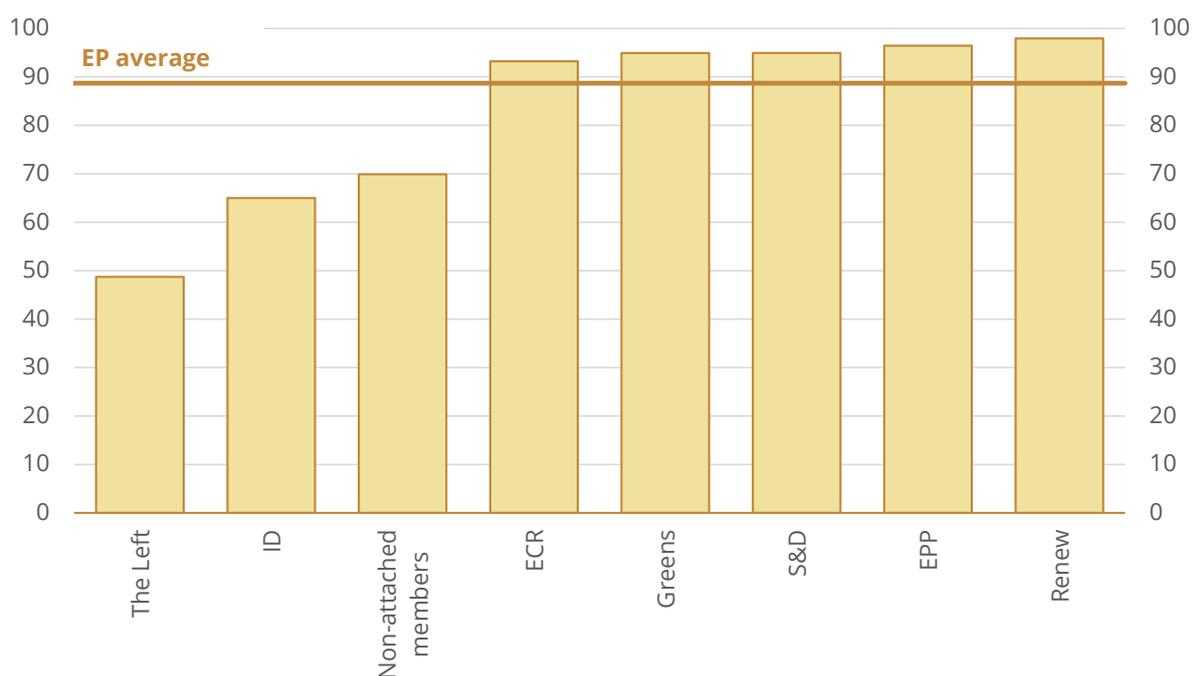
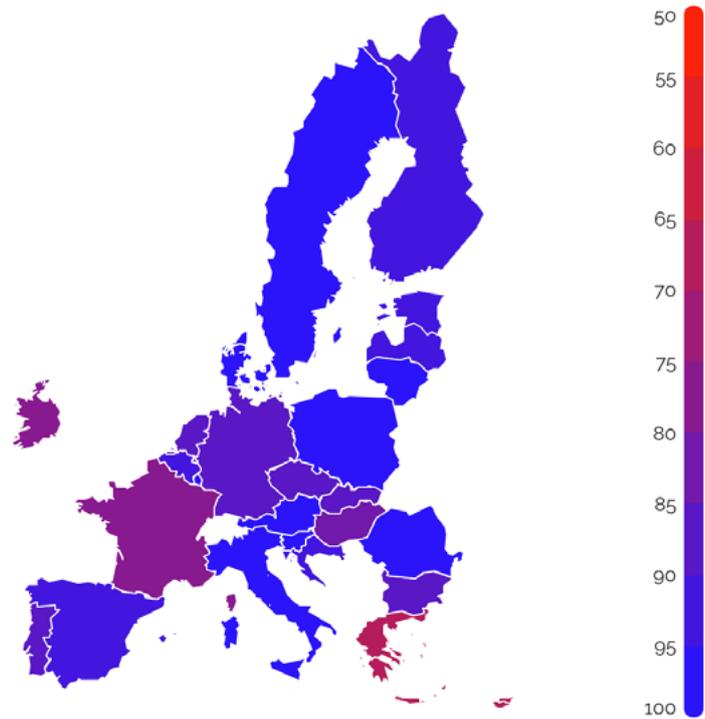


Figure 3: The China-critical score of national delegations on a scale of 0-100, where a higher value indicates a more critical stance towards China

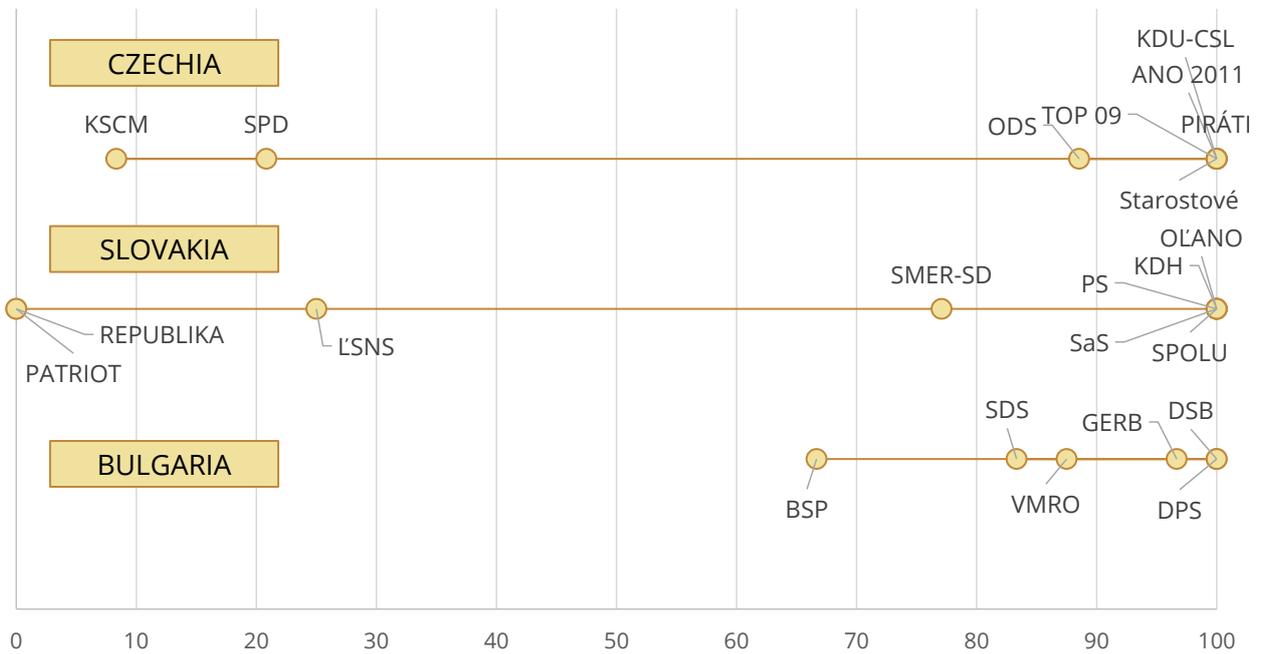


- **Not everyone sees China as a golden opportunity.** None of the dozen projects Romania agreed on with Beijing in 2013 have come to fruition, while the Lithuanian foreign minister has recently said that the 17+1 program brought “almost no benefits” to the country. Both these countries’ EP delegations are extremely high on our China-critical rankings.

CHINA AND THE CEE: VULNERABLE SPOTS

- **EU member states might return China’s economic “favors.”** Hungary is conducting joint projects with China potentially profiting local pro-government businesses, such as the Budapest-Belgrade railway renovation. The government has vetoed EU statements on China in the Council, and Fidesz MEPs were among the few voting against freezing the EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment’s (CAI) ratification process.
- **Individual relationships with hostile third regimes constitute a risk.** Czech conservative MEP Jan Zahradil’s Chinese connections show that individual relationships with authoritarian regimes can influence behavior. Zahradil’s China-critical Index score is considerably lower than that of the other three MEPs from his ODS party (see figure 4).
- **The Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) is among the most China-friendly mainstream parties.** BSP representatives did not show up to vote on resolutions concerning Uyghurs and Hong Kong – one of the few occasions when MEPs from a single party seem to have stayed away from voting in a coordinated manner.
- **The Slovak far right and Slovak socialists are both divided on China.** One extremist MEP (Milan Uhrík) generally voted in line with China interests, Miroslav Radačovský voted against them. Smer-SD’s Monika Beňová and Robert Hajšel criticized Beijing, while Miroslav Číž generally abstained on relevant resolutions.

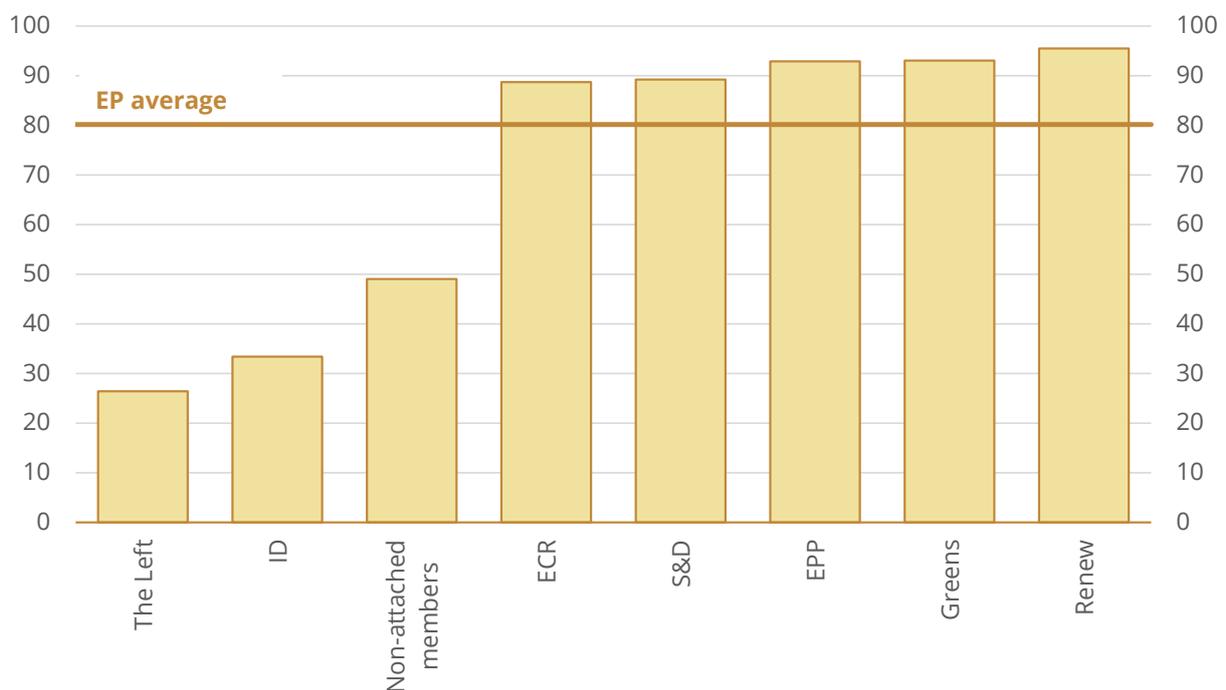
Figure 4: The China-critical score of individual political parties from Bulgaria, Czechia and Slovakia on a scale of 0-100, where a higher value indicates a more critical stance towards China



PUTIN'S MORE POPULAR THAN XI JINPING IN EUROPE

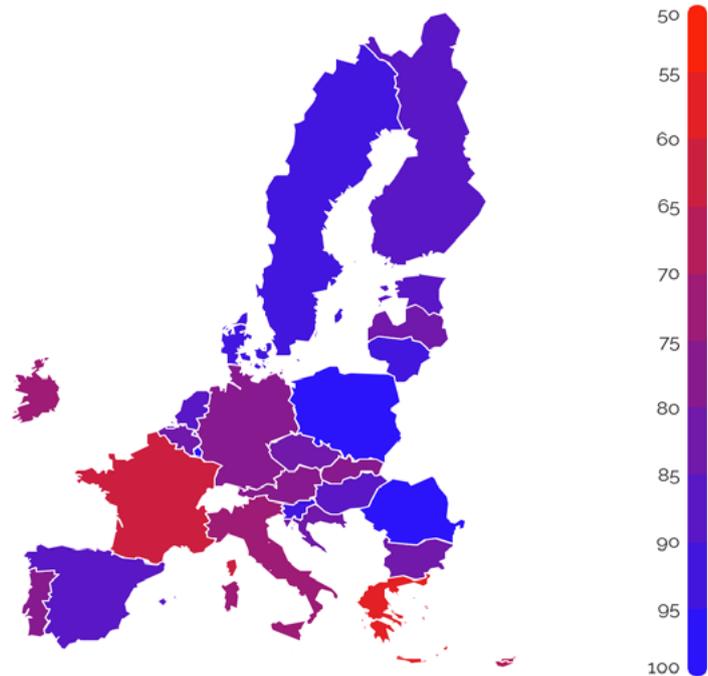
- **Russia has much wider appeal than China.** Its interests are backed by both the far left and the far right in the European Parliament, who regularly repeat pro-Kremlin narratives in plenaries. Member states with large far-left and far-right delegations perform substantially worse on our Kremlin-critical Index (KCI).
- **The image of strong Russia lives on.** The Russian regime has been successful in portraying the country as stronger than it really is economically, militarily and politically. This could convince both the European far right and far left to see Moscow as a counter-pole to the West, the US and liberalism that they reject.
- **The successful portrayal of Russia as a superpower can convince mainstream political parties to advocate for rethinking relations with Moscow.** Russia's efforts to leverage its financial and natural resources can also disrupt EU unity, which is visible – among others – in the case of Nord Stream 2, supported by otherwise rhetorically Kremlin-critical parties who back the EU's sanctions policy, such as the majority of the CDU/CSU and the ÖVP.

Figure 5: The Kremlin-critical score of EP political groups on a scale of 0-100, where a higher value indicates a more critical stance towards the Kremlin



- **The Kremlin's European alliances can be changing constantly.** The Putin regime seeks to support any forces that aim to change European policy towards Russia, prompting it to forge ties with political parties across the EU. These “alliances” do not always last forever. Lega's voting behavior on Russia changed in late 2020, possibly to present itself as a more legitimate, acceptable political party at home. Such trends can go the other way: MEPs from Les Républicains have gradually become more friendly to the Kremlin in the EP over the research period.

Figure 6: The Kremlin-critical score of national delegations on a scale of 0-100, where a higher value indicates a more critical stance towards the Kremlin



- **Russia has failed to have the EU’s sanctions policy abolished, but its allies might limit the potential of initiatives calling for tougher EU action.** While Russia has had allies in the Foreign Affairs Council, it has not been able to influence EU policy substantially, as European sanctions against the country remain in place. Still, anti-sanctions narratives by EU allies could limit European ambitions for further punitive measures against Russia, particularly the extension of sectoral sanctions, as EU officials will not propose action that is certain to be vetoed. The incumbent Hungarian ruling party has been particularly active in promoting the narrative that sanctions against Russia have caused massive damages to Hungary and the EU.

RUSSIA AND THE CEE: IT’S COMPLICATED

- **States neighboring Russia are particularly tough on the Kremlin.** Poland and Romania rank very high on our KCI ranking (see figure 6). They are likely to consider Russia as a larger threat than others due to their geopolitical proximity and their foreign policies are more aligned with the US in general.
- **Austrian parties, politicians view Russia as a political or economic opportunity.** The Austrian FPÖ has a close connection to the United Russia party (see figure 7). Meanwhile, politicians from both the SPÖ and the ÖVP have become members of the board of Russian state companies. Third, several companies with ties to the state or the ÖVP have a strong presence on the Russian market. Viewing Russia solely as a political or economic opportunity could limit the Austrian elite’s willingness to act against the Kremlin’s influencing efforts.
- **The domestic situation of individual political parties can affect their voting behavior in the EP as well.** Two Slovak SMER-SD MEPs changed their voting behavior on Russia around the time of the party’s removal from the Slovak government, as party leader Robert Fico stopped camouflaging his openly pro-Russian attitudes.
- **The Bulgarian Socialist Party seems to try to “cover up” their views on Russia.** MEPs from the BSP seem to use staying away from voting on Russia-related issues in a coordinated manner as a strategy to cover up their policy preferences concerning the Kremlin’s actions.