GAS IN THE TANK, DOUBT IN THE UNION: ATTITUDINAL AND ECONOMIC DRIVERS OF SUPPORT FOR PRO-RUSSIAN PARTIES IN THE EU

by

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Abstract

While Ukraine wants to join the EU and fight Russian aggression, a significant portion of Europeans still vote for pro-Russian parties. This research uses panel data regressions on the data from 13 EU member states to explain variation in support for pro-Russian parties in parliamentary elections across countries and over time. The paper examines material (dependency on Russian oil and gas) and ideological factors (support for Euroscepticism and conservatism) and their effects. The literature is complemented by approaching the issue from two sides: Russian economic leverage via energy and trade, and internal electoral demand for such parties explained by ideological values; this allows us to compare the importance of each. In contrast to the common answer, this research did not find any support for the universal importance of energy dependency in predicting electoral outcomes. The data suggests that only Euroscepticism might be a strong predictor for votes for pro-Russian political parties, both across countries and over time.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CEE – Central Eastern European

CR2 – cluster-robust standard errors

ESS – European Social Survey

EU – European Union

FE – fixed effects

NATO – North Atlantic Treaty Organisation

NUTS – Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics

RE – random effects

SE – standard error

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

> *"The threat that I worry the most about vis-à-vis Europe is not Russia, it's not China, it's not any other external actor," Vance said. "And what I worry about is the threat from within, the retreat of Europe from some of its most fundamental values."*
>
> JD Vance, US vice-president
>
> At the Munich Security Conference 2025
>
> (Foy et al.)

In 2025, three years after the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine, a significant portion of Europeans still vote for pro-Russian parties; in Romania, for example, pro-Russian candidate was close to winning presidential elections, Europe is dependent on Russian energy, both gas and oil, and even after the end of the Russia-Ukraine pipeline contract. The EU has done much to reduce dependency on Russian oil, however, it has regressed when it comes to Russian liquefied natural gas (LNG). In 2024, the EU imported a record 16,5 million metric tons of LNG from Russia, surpassing the 15,2 million figure for 2023 (Hockenos). Thus, after the occupation of parts of Georgia in 2008, Crimea and Donbas in 2014 and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, European politicians continue to sponsor the Russian state budget and depend on Russian energy. This study will investigate key determinants of voting pro-Russian in the countries of the European Union. The study should contribute to the literature by combining the supply and demand side of pro-Russian voting, which in this case are Russian energy as a foreign policy tool and social characteristics of voters, who vote pro-Russian. The panel data regression should also be a valuable contribution to a very few quantitative studies.

This paper will try to investigate "To what extent do EU member states' trade and energy dependencies on Russia, alongside voter ideologies such as Euroscepticism and conservatism, explain

the variation in pro-Russian parliamentary representation across countries and over time?" (ChatGPT). The literature suggests that both energy dependency and voter ideologies have an influence on voting for pro-Russian parties. Euroscepticism might be the strongest demand side predictor, while conservatism or anti-immigration are rarely significant (Snegovaya 415). As for the supply side, there is a lack of quantitative studies. However, case studies provide reasonable arguments to support the claim that Russia is using energy as a foreign policy tool to shape both the internal and foreign policies of other countries, with Ukraine being the classical example, but other examples also include various EU countries like Germany, Romania, Bulgaria, Baltic States and many others (Brattberg and Maurer; Ivanov and Laruelle; Ghaleb; Poussenkova). Using cheap energy as a carrot-and-stick policy may push Europeans to vote pro-Russian in the hope of receiving comfy, heated homes in exchange.

The study will employ panel data regression analysis to understand which of the following has a higher effect on pro-Russian voting: trade with Russia (imports / exports), energy dependency (gas / oil), Euroscepticism or conservatism. Such a set of variables should help to understand what has the strongest effect: Russian energy as a part of its foreign policy, or domestic political demand for fringe parties which tend to align with Russia. Our case selection includes a set of 13 EU countries from 2008-2022 (from the Russian invasion of Georgia to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine). This research aims to provide insights into vulnerable aspects of European security and may serve as a trigger to implement new policies on Russian energy and propaganda.

The next section will provide a detailed literature review, which should familiarise the reader with existing theories and serve as a good justification for variable selection, the section will also introduce the research hypothesis; the main goal, however, is to understand how to define "pro-Russian" and how such parties can be classified. The Data and Methods section will provide a deep dive into variables operationalisation and data selection, explain the regression method chosen and election-based dataset construction. The findings section will interpret the regression results, which

will be followed by a discussion section, which aims to fit the results within the broader context of the literature and acknowledge the limitations. The paper ends with a conclusion.

Chapter 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarly identifies two sides of voting pro-Russian: internal demand for far-right or far-left parties, which often hold pro-Russian values, also known as “the demand side”, and external Russian influence using energy dependency as a threat and cheap energy for a carrot-and-stick policy, “the supply side”. In the next three subsections, the literature on (i) defining political parties as pro-Russian, (ii) Russian energy imports' influence on voting and domestic politics, and (iii) Euroscepticism and conservatism as key predictors of internal demand for pro-Russian parties will be discussed.

2.1 How to define a pro-Russian political party?

Despite many papers being written on analysing pro-Russian parties in Europe, it is rather difficult to find one, which will clearly define what is pro-Russian. Many studies focus on within-country qualitative analysis of the most notable cases, like Hungary and Serbia, where the pro-Russian orientation of some is much clearer, as even the presidents of both sometimes show sympathy towards Russia. (Ivanov, Laruelle 8). The scholarship was primarily focused on classifying such parties across the political spectrum as they believed to be radical right. More recent studies, however, suggest that pro-Russian sentiments tend to occupy both far-right and far-left ends of the political spectrum and sometimes can be even conservative right or liberal left (Snegovaya 411).

Davis Stepanovs performed a complex context analysis to identify what unites two different ends of the political spectrum in their positive perception of Russia and what are the main reasons for their sympathy. He finds out that, even though both far-right and far-left are united in their ideological affinity towards Russia, the reasons might be different. While far-right are attracted to Russia’s ultra-conservative policy and its “protection of family values”, far-left converge with the Russian narrative

of the “rise of neo-Nazism in Europe” and see Russia as a global fighter against Nazism. Interestingly, both party families subscribe to the Russian narrative that Ukraine is a “neo-Nazi” state (46 - 47). Both express their anti-Atlanticist and Eurosceptic attitudes, also:

> *There were no major differences among the statements given by far-right and far-left MEPs following the remaining four themes: Conflicts in Ukraine and Georgia as a double responsibility of Russia and the EU/NATO (3); delegitimizing post-Maidan Ukraine and post-2008 Georgia (4); advocating for deeper political and economic ties with Russia (5) and opposition to sanctioning Russia (6)* (Stepanovs 47)

This provides valuable insights into which concepts could be used to predict pro-Russian and how to define them, as the article demonstrates very specific criteria, like " Conflicts in Ukraine and Georgia as a double responsibility of Russia and the EU/NATO" to define them.

Of huge importance is a study by Maria Snegovaya because she managed to construct a reasonably big dataset of pro-Russian parties in Europe and classify them across families. The newly composed dataset lists 40 parties in 15 EU member states, identifying them as being openly pro-Russian. To construct the dataset, the author combined the information from previous studies and consulted 10 European experts on the topic. Importantly for our research, she finds out that in Western Europe it is usually far-right parties which adopt pro-Russian positions, while in post-communist Europe they are more evenly diversified across different party families (411).

2.2 Russian influence via energy and trade

Before analysing the factor of Russian energy, it is worth mentioning that this is not the only instrument Russia uses to strengthen its position in the EU; other methods may include direct

corruption or election interference (Brattberg and Maurer). Both could be interesting for empirical research, however, they are hard to measure, especially cross-nationally, as by definition they are meant to be hidden.

> *Russia enjoys vast energy and mineral resources*
> *which serve as a basis to develop its economy; as an*
> *instrument to implement domestic and foreign policy.*
> *The role of the country on international energy markets*
> *determines, in many ways, its geopolitical influence.*
>
> Vladimir Putin
> Prime Minister of the Russian
> Federation (“Газова зброя”)

Since the collapse of the USSR in 1991, a substantial body of literature has examined the weaponisation of energy by Russia. These studies collectively highlight the use of the "Falin-Kvitsinsky Doctrine" on CEE countries and the huge danger of strong dependency on Russian gas in Europe overall (Ghaleb; Ivanov and Laruelle; Proedrou; Keith C. Smith; Dmytrenko; etc.). Some studies also point to voters' willingness to sacrifice their values in exchange for cheap energy, however, little empirical research has been done on the direct relationship between dependency on Russian energy and electoral results (Ivanov and Laruelle 19). The following paragraphs will examine the importance of gas in foreign politics, the role of energy dependency in forming the voters' opinions and the influence of trade in general.

Before the overview of existing studies, one should understand that the importance of energy as a strategic geopolitical tool for Russia is not a matter of speculation; it has been stated publicly by Russian top officials many times, including Vladimir Putin. It is also supported by the strategy called

"Falin-Kvitsinsky Doctrine", which envisaged replacing the military influence of the USSR, and later Russia, with economic influence through the supply of natural gas (Dmytrenko 106). Ghaleb argues that oil, which used to be the most important energy resource, is now being replaced by natural gas. The author explains that both types of fossil fuels should be studied separately to capture the increasing influence of natural gas. He clearly shows why a part of academia is wrong to believe that Russia needs to export gas rather than Europe needs to import it. Lithuania is a good example as it is completely dependent on Russian gas, making only 1.97 per cent of total Russian natural gas exports (19). However, after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, we have a real case which proves this statement. Not only did Russia decide to sell its natural gas only for rubles, which decreased the volume of exports, but it also suspended its gas supply to Poland and Bulgaria in April 2022, while Bulgaria was 90% dependent on Russian gas. Europe said it was blackmailing (BBC).

Moreover, Russian oil and gas companies such as LUKOIL, Rosneft, Gazprom are actively buying gas and oil infrastructure across Europe and especially in the bordering states. This is when blackmail goes even further. The price of gas for Georgia was increased from $60 to $235 in less than a year when it refused to cede energy infrastructure to Gazprom; the same for Armenia, for Belarus, gas delivery was completely stopped until consent (Poussenkova 117). Inside the EU, Russian attempts to buy the infrastructure are not so aggressive and sometimes unsuccessful, yet Russia has managed to constantly increase its ownership in the last two decades. The decision to use Russian oil and allow ownership over pipelines creates an issue of path dependency because, unlike oil, gas exports are not flexible. Producers and consumers are inextricably linked by a pipeline, which can serve as a geopolitical tool (Poussenkova).

Russia is not only successful in manipulating the Western elites with its energy carrot-and-stick policy but also in persuading European voters to sacrifice their security for a "warm winter". The study of public opinion in Hungary and Serbia shows that although the majority of Hungarians believe that Russia is fully responsible for the invasion and have a negative attitude toward Mr Putin, 72% think Hungary should stay neutral in the Russo-Ukrainian war (Ivanov and Laruelle 12). Most of

them agree with the statement "Given our dependency on Russia's oil and gas it is not wise for us to choose sides now". Of 4% who believe Hungary should support Russia 82% said "We need Russia's energy sources (gas)" (Ivanov and Laruelle 16). Similarly, the majority of Serbians said that they would not support sanctions on Russia if it resulted in higher oil and gas prices (Ivanov and Laruelle 29). Isaacs and Monlar show that Orbán's and Fidesz's popularity correlates with lower gas and oil prices. This clearly shows that Russia can use its energy exports to influence the electoral outcomes in some EU member states.

However, not only energy can be weaponised, foreign trade as a whole under some conditions might serve as a foreign policy tool. The most important condition is likely asymmetric interdependence, when trade relations represent a significantly different share of total trade for each country involved. That is when economic ties are suspended, one part loses more than the other. Moreover, when trade is weaponised to solve geopolitical issues rather than political, conflict usually escalates much further and sometimes leads to an actual war with bullets as a weapon instead of trade. Asymmetric interdependence allows a stronger side to influence a domestic political decision of its vis-à-vis or at least try to do so (Jaeger et al.). Hirshman also points out that when a country is heavily dependent on a few trading partners, a threat to interrupt foreign trade might be as effective as military pressure.

2.3 Factors of internal demand for pro-Russian political parties

The internal demand for pro-Russian politics is probably the most studied subsection of this literature review. This subsection is deeply connected with the first one. As pro-Russian political parties tend to concentrate on the radical edges of the political spectrum, Davis Stepanovs provides a detailed analysis of what is in common between them. Among the key features the author provides are Euroscepticism and anti-Atlanticism, which are expressed in blaming the EU and NATO for

starting the war in Ukraine. Interestingly, far-left tend to criticise the US and NATO more, while the far-right assigns more blame to the EU. Both advocate for closer economic cooperation with Russia and oppose sanctioning.

Except for common reasons for advocating closer relationships with Russia, each side also has its own arguments. Far-left view Russia as a fighter against Nazism. While the far-right enjoy "protection of conservative and family values"; this is no surprise as the position of the far-right on this issues is the same as the Russian government has.

Maria Snegovaya also studied the issue. She classified the parties into far-right and far-left but did not divide them in her qualitative study to explain pro-Russian voting in Europe. The study shows that voters of pro-Russian parties mainly differ from other voters by being strongly Eurosceptic. Conservatism is only significant for post-communist countries, while anti-immigration is never significant. This partially contradicts Stepanovs findings (see Table 1), who suggests that far-right politicians usually criticise Russian attitude towards LGBT (conservatism), but in Snegovaya's dataset, the far-right mostly dominate in Western Europe, while conservatism is significant in post-communist countries, where pro-Russian parties are more evenly distributed across the political spectrum. However, one should understand that they approach it from two different angles. Stepanovs performs a content analysis of speeches in the European Parliament, while Snegovaya analysed voters.

Table 1. Stepanov (2024) and Snegovaya (2022) classification of pro-Russian parties

	Far-left pro-Russian parities	**Far-right** pro-Russian parties
Stepanovs	Nazi fighter	Conservative
Snegovaya	Present more in CEE, the place of concentration of post-communist countries. Only in post-communist countries conservatism is significant	Concentrated mainly in Western Europe, where conservatism is not statistically significant, but should be according to Stepanovs

2.4 Limitations and contribution

The literature provides interesting insights on pro-Russian politics in Europe. However, in the case of energy dependency, it clearly shows the relationship but lacks quantitative cross-country studies; in contrast, the literature on internal demand favours a good empirical study but does not explain the direction of the effect. Studies show euroscepticism as the main feature of voters who vote pro-Russian but that does not mean that an increase in Euroscepticism will lead to a pro-Russian electorate. Some studies do not universally prove but hint that political parties with Russian ties may influence public opinion in favour of Russia (Fisher). Thus, there is a possibility that it is not Eurosceptic vote pro-Russian, but their leaders make them anti-EU and anti-NATO. The literature also does not identify the most important predictor as research on energy and social characteristics are separate.

This study aims to overcome that limitation by using lagged variables to identify the direction of the effect and compare the importance of energy dependency and social characteristics. This results in the following hypothesis:

H1: An increase in a country's reliance on Russian oil leads to a higher share of the pro-Russian electorate.

H2: An increase in a country's reliance on Russian natural gas leads to a higher share of the pro-Russian electorate.

H3: Rising trade volumes (imports/exports) with Russia lead to a higher share of the pro-Russian electorate.

H4: A stronger presence of Euroscepticism among voters leads to a higher share of the pro-Russian electorate.

H5: A stronger presence of conservative ideologies among voters leads to a higher share of the pro-Russian electorate.

Chapter 3

METHODOLOGY

3.1 Temporal and Spatial Coverage

The public attitude of pro-Russian parties towards Russia can be divided into three different stages. Before the annexation of Crimea in 2014 they were openly and actively pro-Russian, the annexation was a turning point when they became a clear minority in their attitude towards Russia, thus they have slightly changed their rhetoric. The last stage began with the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine; after this point, it was not possible to openly sympathise with Russia, so they shifted toward blaming the EU and NATO. Thus, in this period, it became more difficult to clearly define a party as pro-Russian or not. As a result, the post-invasion period is not included in our timeframe (Stepanovs 47). This study focuses on the period from the invasion of Georgia in 2008 to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Georgia was chosen as a starting point to exclude parties which were “pro-Russian” only insofar as they hoped for a democratic and peaceful Russia after the collapse of the USSR, which was clearly not the case after the military invasion. The set of EU member states in this study includes: Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Slovakia and Spain. Country selection is simply limited by credible identification of parties which can be described as openly pro-Russian. We acknowledge this might be a limitation as other countries might not have pro-Russian parties at all.

3.2 Empirical Strategy

This research has several steps before developing the final model in order to achieve robustness and a better understanding of the relationship between variables. Before describing actual models some implementation details should be specified. Variables on trade and energy are averaged over the two calendar years preceding election *t* to mitigate reverse causality. To preserve degrees of freedom, 15 year dummies have been replaced with three period bins: 2008-12, 2013-16, 2017-21. Most models use CR2 cluster-robust standard errors (SE); they should produce accurate p-values even with a small number of clusters (13 countries) and an unbalanced small panel ($t \leq 4$). The CR2 approach will also allow us to keep a single consistent SE strategy across FE and RE tables. The core fixed-effects model is to be cross-checked with Discoll-Kraay SE (lag = 2) to show that the results are stable to an alternative, highly conservative correction.

Before developing the regression models, we begin our analysis by exploring the data to ensure the quality and avoid multicollinearity; this is especially important for supply-side variables. It is no surprise that total trade, imports and exports have a high degree of collinearity, as the first is the sum of the others (see Figure 4 in Appendix B). The imports are kept for two reasons: it explains more variation in the majority of models tested, and the literature suggests that it may have more impact on domestic policy. Even though gas and oil dependency will not appear in our final model, it will still be tested in a different model with a restricted set of variables because they are of major importance for this study.

Two channels are slightly disintegrated: external leverage - Russian energy and trade dependencies, and domestic demand - voter ideology (Euroscepticism and conservatism). Thus, a two-step strategy have been adopted: (1) country fixed effects for energy and trade to absorb time-invariant traits such as bordering Russia, historical ties to Russia, availability of infrastructure to transfer gas and oil, etc. (2) Mundlak within-between RE allows between-country slope for ideology

while retaining FE interpretation for time-varying covariates, in other words, captures only within-country changes in trade but both within and between country changes in ideology. In the end, even though there is no need to add a dummy variable for bordering Russia and make a cross-section check for non-ideological variables. The techniques above should ensure robustness and conservative results, which is important for our small data frame, even though some weak dependencies might be overlooked.

Table 2. Models employed for empirical analysis

#	Table	Model	Estimator / SEs	Significance
1	Table 2 col 1	$PR_{it} = \beta_w E_{it}^w + \beta_b \bar{E}_i + \beta_1 Imports_{it} + \beta_G Gas_{it} + \gamma_p Period_{p,t} + a_i + u_i + \varepsilon_{it}$	FE - Driscoll–Kraay	Final model
2	Table 2 col 2	$PR_{it} = \beta_w E_{it}^w + \beta_b \bar{E}_i + \beta_1 Imports_{it} + \gamma_p Period_{p,t} + a_i + u_i + \varepsilon_{it}$	RE (Walhus) – CR2	Final model, which recovers beten-slope and shows robustness
3	Appendix C	$PR_{it} = \beta_G Gas_{it} + \gamma_p Period_{p,t} + a_i + \varepsilon_{it}$ $PR_{it} = \beta_O Oil_{it} + \gamma_p Period_{p,t} + a_i + \varepsilon_{it}$ $PR_{it} = \beta_G Gas_{it} + \beta_O Oil_{it} + \gamma_p Period_{p,t} + a_i + \varepsilon_{it}$ $PR_{it} = \beta_1 Imports_{it} + \gamma_p Period_{p,t} + a_i + \varepsilon_{it}$	FE – CR2	Documents rejection of H1/H2
4	Appendix D	$PR_{it} = \beta_w E_{it}^w + \beta_b \bar{E}_i + \beta_1 Imports_{it} + \boldsymbol{\beta_2 Border_i} + \gamma_p Period_{p,t} + a_i + u_i + \varepsilon_{it}$ $PR_{it} = \beta_w E_{it}^w + \beta_b \bar{E}_i + \boldsymbol{\beta_{wC} C_{it}^w} + \boldsymbol{\beta_{bC} \bar{C}_t} + \beta_1 Imports_{it} + \gamma_p Period_{p,t} + a_i + u_i + \varepsilon_{it}$	RE – CR2	Double checks for geographical effects and addresses second "demand side" variable – conservatism
5		$\overline{PR}_i = \theta_1 \overline{Gas}_i + \theta_2 \bar{E}_i + u_i$	OLS	Checks for at least between-country gas effect

Source: Table by author

PR_{it} – pro-Russian vote share

E – Euroscepicism

C – Conservatism

Imports / Gas / Oil – 2-yr lagged average share of Russian import / dependency on Gas or Oil

Border – dummy = 1 if country imports Russia

Period – three time dummies: 2008-12, 2013-16, 2017-21

a_i – country fixed effect

u_i – random intercept

ε_{it} – idiosyncratic error

$\overline{Variable}$ – country mean of specific variable for between effect

i – country

t – time

β – slope coefficient

Chapter 4

DATA

This chapter presents the dataset constructed to test the six hypotheses outlined above. First, the unit of analysis is introduced, and the temporal-spatial coverage is restated. Following with the dependent variable - the share of pro-Russian voters in the country - and then the key independent variables capturing a) Russian economic leverage and b) voter ideology.

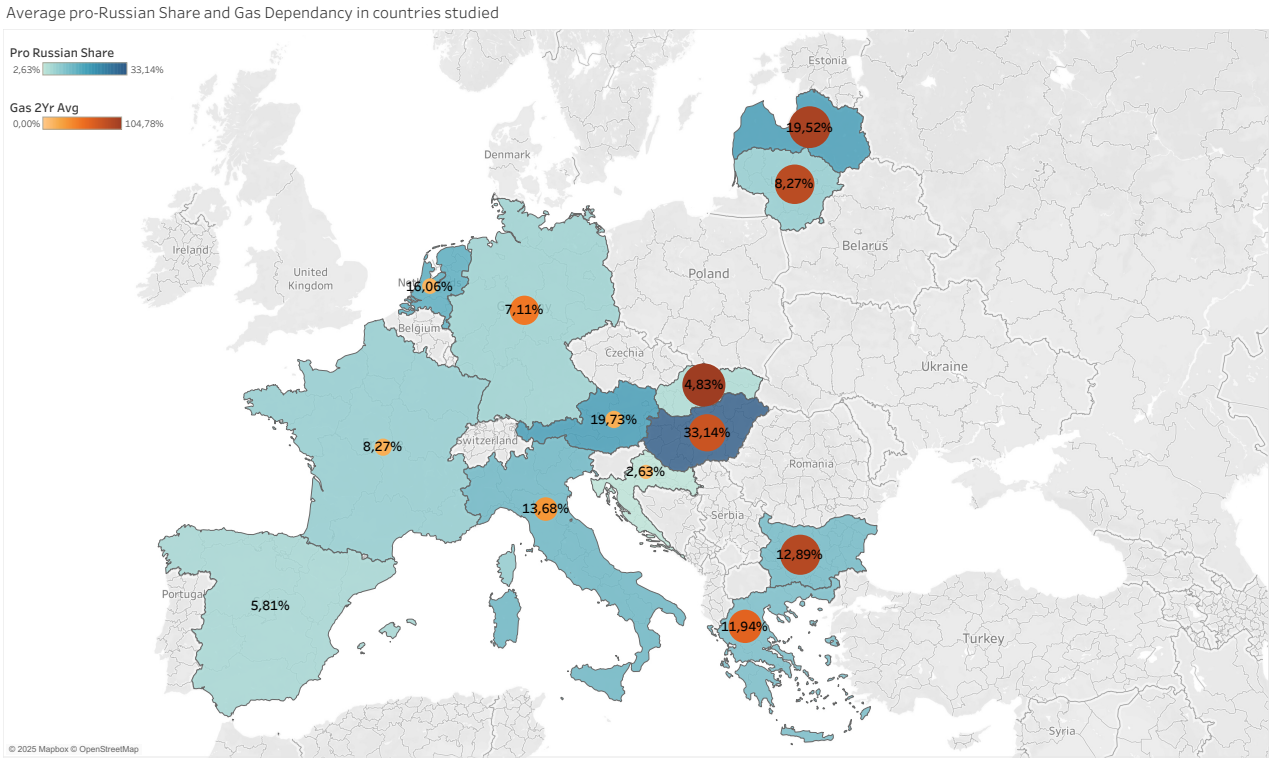
A country-year unit of analysis is being used where each observation corresponds to one election year *t* and country *i*. The sample includes 13 EU member states observed from 2008 to 2021. Most countries had three to four election cycles in the given timeframe, which resulted in 43 observations. The dataset is relatively small, we understand and acknowledge this limitation. The sample is, first of all, limited because of the short time period suitable for the research and justified in the methodology section. The limitation of a relatively small set of countries, though, still the majority of the EU member states could have been overcome with the analysis on the EU NUTS level, but not for energy trade as it is done more on a state level and potentially may affect the dependent variable on a state level too.

4.1 Pro-Russian Voting

The pro-Russian share represents the percentage of votes that political parties defined as pro-Russian managed to get in national parliamentary elections. It was calculated from actual voters, not the whole electorate. The list of pro-Russian parties was composed by Snegovaya; her dataset collates the information from earlier studies and complements it with new entries, validating it with 10 experts on the topic. One limitation of the research is that we assume these parties did not majorly change their ideologies through the years, and their pro-Russian status represents their orientation for the entire scope of this paper. The dataset with election results was composed by Schraff et al. and

published in the Harvard Dataverse. The election results were initially reported at the NUTS-2 level. The data have been aggregated to the national level, and then the pro-Russian share has been calculated as the votes for identified pro-Russian parties divided by the total national vote.

Figure 1. Map of pro-Russian votes and average gas dependency in the studied EU member states. The percentage display pro-Russian share, all the values are averaged across all election cycles



Source: Visualisation by author based on the data from the International Energy Agency (IEA)

4.2 Independent Variables

The demand side variables were composed to study the relationship between values and pro-Russian voting. They include two concepts: Euroscepticism and conservatism. Both of them were operationalised with questions from the European Social Survey. Euroscepticism was measured on a scale from 1 to 10 with the question, "Has the European integration gone too far?"; conservatism uses a 1 to 5 scale with the question, " Gay men and lesbians should be free to live their own life as they

wish. Do you agree with the statement?". The same data, but on the voter rather than the national level, was used by Snegovaya; this will allow us to compare our findings. The data was aggregted with analytical weight, as recommended by the ESS, to represent the national-level results. Only responses in those scales were taken into account; other options like refuse to answer or "I don't know" were omitted. ESS surveys are conducted every two years; however, the majority of countries did not participate in every round, and the gaps between surveys might be as huge as six or even 8 years in the case of Greece. However, considering that elections are conducted on a four-year basis, the gap of six years, which is only for a few countries, is not crucial. To fill the gaps in sociological data, values with the lowest absolute distance between the year of the ESS round and the election year have been used.

The data on trade and energy includes gas and oil dependency as well as share of imports, exports and total trade. Dependency on fossil fuels was calculated by the International Energy Agency as imported fuel divided by consumed. This share can exceed one if the country imported more then consumed, which is sometimes the case for Lithuania. To provide more insights on cause-effect direction, the lagged data is used. It is calculated as a two-year average before the election year.

Chapter 5

RESULTS

Even a 13-country panel with up to four election cycles each revealed some empirical insights. Significant portion of Europeans vote for pro-Russian political parties after the invasion of Georgia, the occupation of Crimea and Donbas and even after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Our results suggest a deeper insight into the reasons for pro-Russian voting and identify the single most important predictor of such voting. The following sections are organised as follows: (i) exploring our best models and results, (ii) a deeper investigation of economic factors, and (iii) final results and discussion.

5.1 Core findings

Ideological demand may be much more important for voters in the European Union than economic incentives. For this section, our core model was used (see Table 2), with two concepts inside – Euroscepticism and imports. Euroscepticism has two variables, euroscepticism_bar and euroscepticism_w, to check for both between and within-country effects. These predictors tend to be the most important in the majority of the models tested; set of variables is limited to save degrees of freedom, which is essential given the small size of our data frame.

The results suggest that Euroscepticism is the single strongest empirical predictor of pro-Russian voting in Europe; it is significant in explaining the within-country variation of pro-Russian votes at the level of 0.05 and marginally significant for between-country variation at the level of 0.1 under Driscoll–Kraay standard errors, fixed effect (within) correlation is also significant under CR2 SEs. The share of Russian imports is insignificant, with a p-value of at least 0.17 depending on the SEs. The Breusch-Godfrey/Wooldridge test for serial correlation in panel models shows a serial

correlation in idiosyncratic errors, meaning that errors are not random, which may affect the reliability of the results. However, Euroscepticism is significant under both CR2 and DK highly conservative standard errors, which (DK) accounts for such correlation. The significance under both types of SE shows the robustness of the result. There is weak evidence of a Europe-wide dip in pro-Russian voting immediately after the 2014 Crimea annexation (–2 pp, p≈0.03 with DK SEs), but this period effect is not robust once switched to the different type of SEs.

Table 3. Ideology vs. Trade: Within- and Between-Country Effects

	FE (p-value)	Mundlak RE (p-v)
Euroscepticism (Within)	0.041***	0.041**
	(0.00)	(0.05)
Euroscepticism (Between)		0.081*
		(0.108)
Imports from Russia (%)	0.218	0.256
	(0.173)	(0.362)
Period 2013-16	-0.023**	-0.021
	(0.033)	(0.363)
Period 2017-21	0.000	0.003
	(0.973)	(0.910)
Num.Obs.	43	43

Driscoll–Kraay SEs for FE; CR2 cluster-robust SEs for Mundlak RE;
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.10.

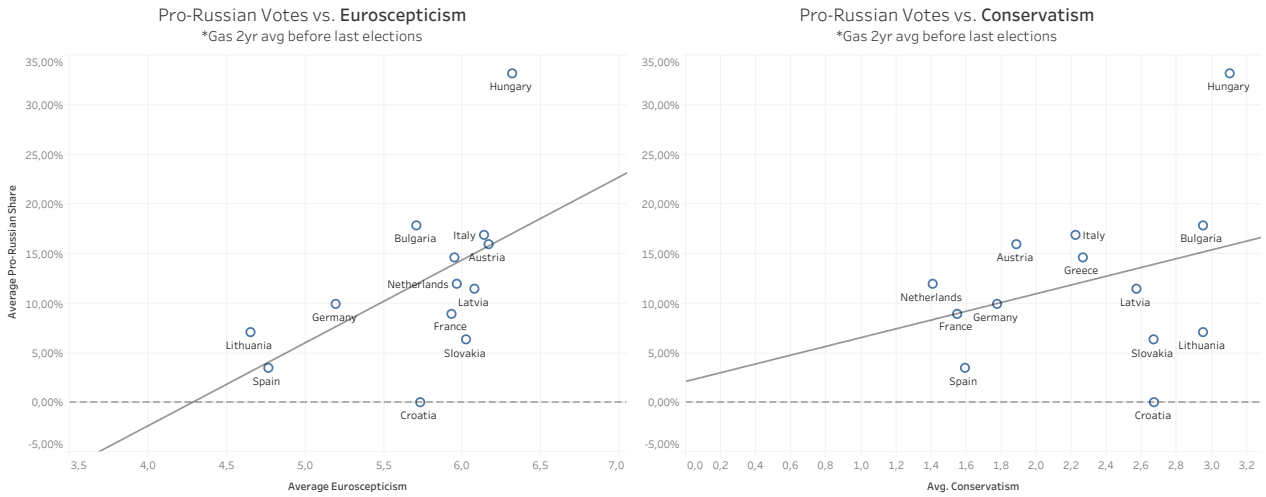
Source: Author's calculations

Later, two models, including conservatism and a border dummy (see Table 6 in Appendix D), are constructed to check all ideological demand variables and double-check that geographical proximity to Russia does not affect our results, even though it should not, due to the method chosen. Results suggest that there is not enough evidence to say that conservatism has any effect on the dependent variable, which aligns with Snegovaya's findings, and the border dummy indeed does not affect the results.

To conclude, our final model, which was developed by creating three time periods, dropping highly insignificant predictors and evaluated with both CR2 and DK standard errors to ensure robustness, suggests that the within-country variation in Euroscepticism is the most important predictor of voting pro-Russian in the EU countries. One unit increase in Euroscepticism results in a

4% estimated average increase in the share of pro-Russian votes. Between-country variation might also be important but fragile, meaning that nations with a higher share of scepticism for the EU tend to have a higher share of pro-Russian voting. However, it is logical to assume that if an increase in Euroscepticism within a nation increases pro-Russian votes, then nations with higher Euroscepticism will likely have a higher share of pro-Russian votes. This provides support for H4, rejects H3 and hints towards H6.

Figure 2. Relationship between ideological demand (Euroscepticism and conservatism) and share of pro-Russian votes in the last election cycle



Source: Author's calculations; data from ESS, Eurostat

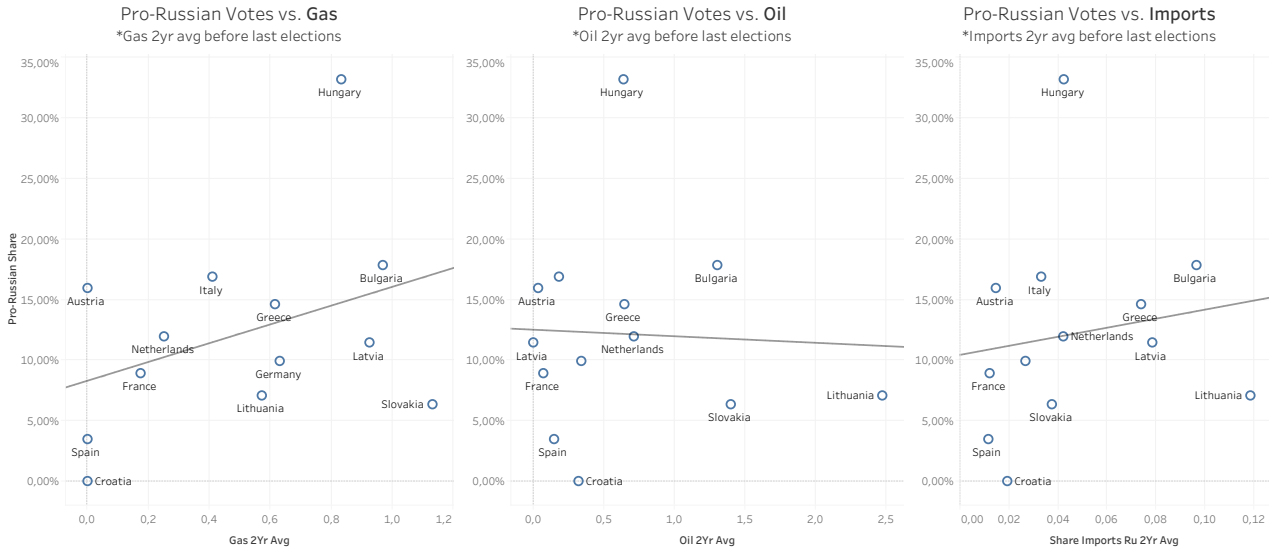
5.2 Economic ties

Since imports and especially energy dependency are not significant in combination with Euroscepticism, but initially, they were a central part of the research, we tested more models to explore the "supply-side" variables and explicitly accept or reject H1-3. However, even the simplest models with one predictor each (see Table 5 in Appendix C) do not show any relationship between Russian energy or imports from Russia and voting results. Although some variables are close to significance at the level of 0.1, for example, the oil when tested in the model with gas dependency

shows a p-value of 0.109 and the expected effect direction. Also, in one of the first models tested, imports were statistically significant, but that was a model with almost all variables inside and also a dummy for each year, which resulted in low DF, and the effect vanishes under any parsimony or small-sample correction—hence we label it fragile and do not treat it as evidence for H3; the same is true for oil and H1. Moreover, both variables lose significance after controlling for Euroscepticism.

All of the above hint that some supply-side variables might indeed be important, even though we did not find enough evidence to support that in our limited sample. Thus, supply-side hypotheses H1-3 are rejected, and it is concluded that Russian economic leverage, whether via trade flows or energy, does not systematically translate into electoral support once ideological demand is controlled for. The results do not find more universal support for findings about the importance of Russian energy for electoral results in Hungary and Serbia described by Ivanov and Laruelle, nor do they support any other literature on energy and trade described in this research.

Figure 3. Relationship between pro-Russian votes and economic leverage (Gas, Oil and Imports). Created based on the data for the last election cycles



Source: Author's calculations; data from Schraff, Eurostat

The most obvious reason is that there is simply not enough data for credible support of the hypotheses. Theoretically, one can overcome this limitation by employing a larger time period.

However, such an approach will have limitations of its own. Firstly, there is not much space for a longer panel; the data before 2000 might raise concerns, as some countries like the Baltic states were a part of the Soviet Union, and others like Poland or the Czech Republic were in the communist bloc. In less than 10 years after the Soviet collapse, the trade structure and electoral results might have a deep contention with this event, potentially reinforcing both positive and negative relationships. Another issue is methodological and ideological. Russia in the late 1990s and early 2000s was quite different from Russia in the last two decades, and there was essentially nothing wrong with trying to make a better relationship with a new, big and powerful democratic state. Thus, it would be very difficult to identify which parties were pro-Russian because of the absence of important markers like who is responsible for the war in Georgia and Ukraine, should Russia be sanctioned, even to say, "We should enforce trade with Russia" in the 1990s is not the same as in 2014 when other parties are lobbying sanctions against Russia. Thus, it is unclear if such parties were pro-Russian or just wanted economic gains from trade and cheap imports.

Another potential reason for the insignificance of our variables is the bad operationalisation of the concept. Literature indeed suggests the positive relationship between Russian gas and electoral results; however, it does not always discuss the dependency on Russian energy. Often, Russians use blackmail or price fluctuations. Thus, there is a chance that the price of Russian energy resources might be a better predictor of voting for pro-Russian political parties. Nevertheless, in this research, our data does not suggest any credible relationship between the share of Russian imports or dependency on Russian energy and pro-Russian voting in Europe.

5.3 Discussion

To conclude, we did not find enough evidence to support any hypothesis related to trade or energy; conservatism is also statistically insignificant. Both within and between-country variation in

Euroscepticism is the only important predictor in our data, suggesting that ideological demand is more important in increasing the success of pro-Russian parties than Russian energy resources, supporting the H6.

We acknowledge this research has some limitations, with the main being small, unbalanced panel (N=43). As described above, the time scope cannot be directly increased, however, there is a possibility to measure something similar like sociological surveys of attitudes towards Russia instead of election results. It is not necessarily that they will directly convert to a number of seats in the parliament, but they can be collected on a yearly basis, and this will allow for an increase in the number of observations. Also, it might be worth trying to analyse the data on the European NUTS level, even though slightly methodologically problematic for imports and energy, as they are naturally only available on a country level. Another limitation is the assumption that parties which we treat as pro-Russian were actually pro-Russian throughout the whole period. This limitation, as well as a limitation on the limited number of countries studied because of the lack of classification of parties as being pro-Russian in other states can be both overcommed by creating a more detailed dataset of pro-Russian parties in all EU member states. The last limitation we are aware of is non-continuity in ESS data, which does not necessarily question the results but fails to prove the cause-and-effect direction. Thus, we actually cannot fully accept H4, because from the statistical point of view, the direction of the effect might be the opposite; however, according to the logic and literature, Euroscepticism leads to an increase of pro-Russian votes and not vice versa.

For further research in the area of Russian economic leverage, one may try to use the price of Russian energy instead of measuring its share in total consumption. There might be two reasons for such an approach, firstly, literature suggests that Russia might use price for blackmailing, secondly, voters are interested in cheap energy and not necessarily from Russia (Poussenkova). This is supported by Stepanovs' findings that a significant portion of voters in Hungary and Serbia are ready to stop sanctioning Russia for the exchange of cheap gas.

This paper starts with a quote from JD Vance, and the results show that he might actually be right about the threat from within, but in a different way. The radical right political parties are increasing their support, which, in combination with sympathy towards Russia, makes Europe more vulnerable to external threats as well. This research shows that it is happening primarily not because of external economic leverage but because of a rise in internal electoral demand. European anti-disinformation policy already exists, but the results show it is not successful enough. Europe should focus not only on fighting direct Russian propaganda but also internal one, including from such parties (Datzer). Also, in order to decrease the scepticism, the EU should invest in communication and counterpropaganda; the union should explain why certain initiatives are important and certain ideas are dangerous. That is not only fight propaganda but also clearly communicating its actions to increase trust in the Union. Europe should also act proactively against a new, increasing threat – AI-generated content, creating policies for social media platforms to at least mark content as AI-generated, the Union should not wait until this will become a serious problem to react.

Chapter 6

CONCLUSIONS

This thesis set out to ask whether Russian economic leverage or domestic ideology better explains electoral support for pro-Russian parties in European parliaments. Using a 13-country panel with up to four election cycles each, with lagged economic variables, we find out that:

- One unit increase in Euroscepticism leads to an estimated average increase of 4 percentage points in the pro-Russian vote share.
- Between country relationship between Euroscepticism and pro-Russian voting is weaker, with a p-value of 0.0108, but points in the same direction.
- Unlike Euroscepticims, both within and between country variation in conservatism is not significant.
- Neither gas nor oil dependence nor the share of Russian imports remains significant once ideology is controlled for.

Thus, we conclude that internal demand is a stronger predictor of electoral results than Russian economic leverage. At the same time, we acknowledge the limitations and understand that economic variables might reach significance in a bigger and more robust dataset. The direction of the effect between Euroscepticism and voting outcome, however, remains unclear as we did not use lagged variables for internal demand because of ESS data limitations.

Even though we did not test conservatism in interaction with a post-communist dummy, our results align with those of Snegovaya, who finds that Euroscepticism is the strongest predictor, while conservatism is only significant for post-communist countries. If the insignificance of economy-related variables is not driven by a small sample, that still does not mean that our results contradict the literature. The simple explanation might be that economic ties matter in individual cases (e.g. Hungary, Serbia), but they do not travel across the EU sample once ideological demand is accounted for.

In the last few years, the EU has tried to get rid of its dependency on Russian oil and natural gas, although not always very successfully, as we describe in the first chapter of this paper. However, this study shows that they should work harder on the information policies and countering Russian propaganda. The EU can invest more in explaining the importance and benefits of the Union to its citizens through various channels, including new, highly influential social media like TikTok. The people of the EU should also decide on their answer to the complex dilemma of how to fight Russian disinformation without limiting free speech too much.

For future research, we would suggest analysing the data on the European NUTS level, which may partially help to overcome the limitations of a small panel and may provide a more credible result for a cross-sectional study. Other suggestions may include measuring the variation in the price of Russian energy or the sociological importance of cheap energy for citizens, instead of a fraction of Russian energy in the whole energy structure.

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APPENDIX A

Table 4. Pro-Russian parties in the European Union

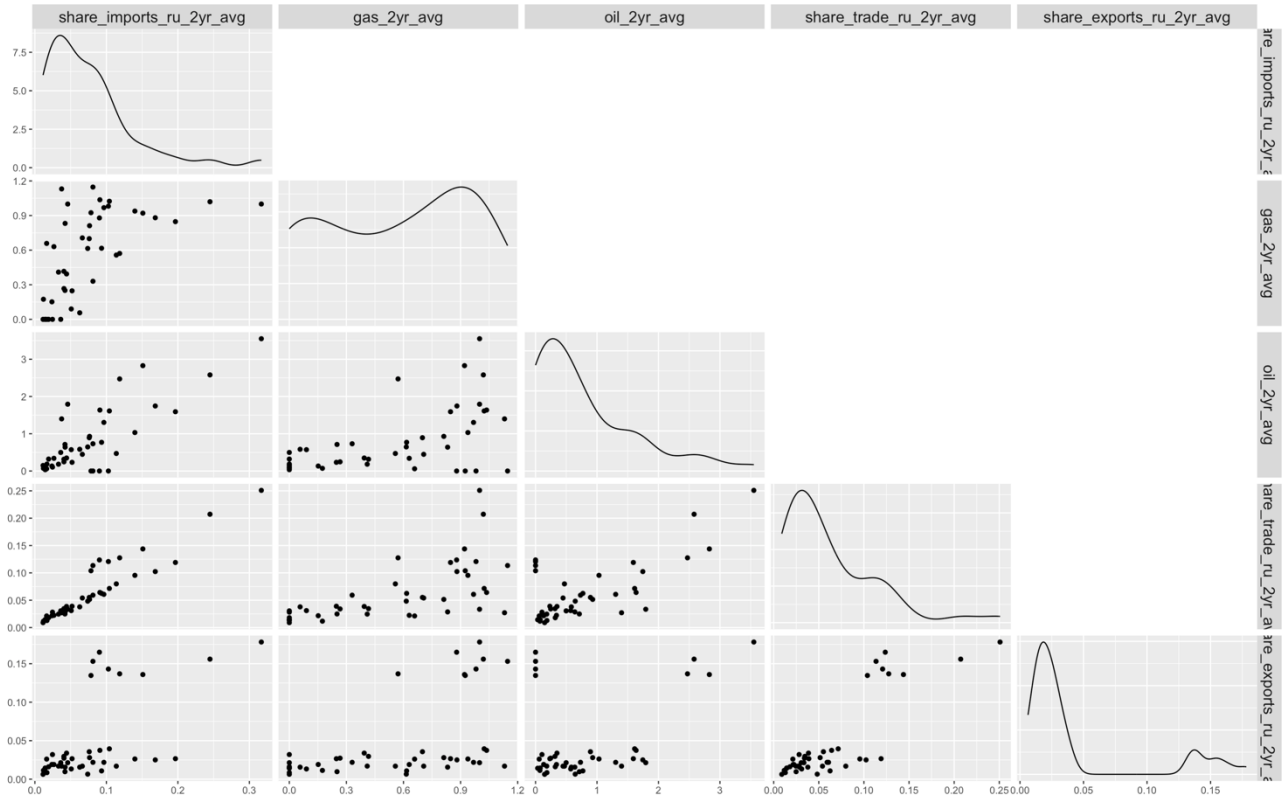
Country	Radical right	Conservative right	Undefined	Liberal Left	Socialist Left	Radical Left
Austria	Freedom Party of Austria					
Bulgaria	Attack	Patriotic Front		Movement for Recharging Bulgaria	Bulgarian Socialist Party Alternative for Bulgarian Rebirth	
Croatia		Croatian Party of Rights	Human Shield Party			
Czech Republic	Dawn – National Coalition Freedom and Direct Democracy				Party of Civic Rights	Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia
France	National Front (National Rally)					La France Insoumise
Germany	National Democratic Party of Germany Alternative for Germany					Die Linke
Greece	Golden Dawn Independent Greeks					Syriza
Hungary	Jobbik Mi Hazank	Fidesz – Hungarian Civic Alliance Christian Democratic People's Party				
Italy		Northern League Brothers of Italy	The Five Star Movement			
Latvia					Latvian Russian Union Social Democratic Party Harmony	
Lithuania		Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania – Christian Families Alliance		Labor Party		

		Order and Justice				
Netherlands	Forum for Democracy Party for Freedom					
Slovakia	Kotleba-People's Party Our Slovakia	We are family Slovak National Party				Communist Party of Slovakia
Spain						The Coalition of the Radical Left (Podemos)
United Kingdom	UK Independence Party					

Source: Snegovaya, Maria. "Fellow Travelers or Trojan Horses? Similarities across pro-Russian Parties' Electorates in Europe."

APPENDIX B

Figure 4. Correlation between variables



Source: Author's calculations

APPENDIX C

Table 5. Supply-Side Fixed-Effects Models (Satterthwaite p-values)

	Gas only	Gas + Oil	Oil only	Imports only
Gas dependence (%)	-0.052	-0.066		
	(0.333)	(0.199)		
Oil dependence (%)		0.051	0.041	
		(0.109)	(0.165)	
Imports from Russia (%)				0.231
				(0.318)
Num.Obs.	43	43	43	43

Country fixed effects and three period dummies included. Stars reflect CR2 Satterthwaite p-values *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.10.

Source: Author's calculations

APPENDIX D

Table 6. Robustness to Border Status and Conservatism (Satterthwaite p-values)

	Border robustness	Conservatism
Constant	0.551*	0.551**
	(0.068)	(0.047)
Euroscepticism (Within)	0.041**	0.033***
	(0.049)	(0.009)
Euroscepticism (Between)	0.082	0.082
	(0.110)	(0.105)
Imports from Russia (%)	0.266	0.252
	(0.365)	(0.428)
Borders Russia (dummy)	-0.012	
	(0.830)	
Conservatism (Within)		0.033
		(0.589)
Conservatism (Between)		-0.002
		(0.948)
Num.Obs.	43	43

CR2 cluster-robust standard errors in parentheses
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.10.

Source: Author's calculations