

Putin could be a winner in European parliamentary vote if far right gains ground

By [Griff Witte](#), Published: May 18 | Updated: Monday, May 19, 7:00 AM

LONDON — When voters across Europe go to the polls this week to elect a new Parliament, far-right parties are expected to be among the winners. But one of the election's biggest beneficiaries could be a man whose name isn't on the ballot: Vladimir Putin.

Even as mainstream European leaders sputter their condemnation of Russian aggression, voters appear poised to reward parties that make no secret of their fawning admiration for the way the Russian leader has defied the West and dismembered Ukraine.

The result could deliver a fresh blow to a foundering European effort to take a tough and united line against Russia. For months, European leaders have dithered over how and when to escalate sanctions against Moscow. Some of the continent's heaviest hitters have argued for restraint as the best way to influence Russian behavior and as offering the best chance to preserve the extensive economic ties between Russia and Europe.

But many of the far-right parties — as well as a smaller number on the far left — have openly cheered Russia's moves in Ukraine, accusing the European Union and the United States of provoking a crisis on a continent long accustomed to peace.

“The far right and the far left like the fact that Putin is angering the European mainstream,” said [Simon Hix](#), an expert on European politics at the London School of Economics and Political Science. “And they like the fact that this whole situation illustrates the hypocrisy of the established elite, which had been sucking up to Putin, then said they were going to get tough on him, but they're not.”

The far right's surge of representation in Europe's 751-member Parliament won't give it direct say over future sanctions decisions, which will continue to be made by national governments dominated by mainstream parties. And even in the Parliament, center-right and center-left parties will almost certainly continue to hold sway.

But projections show that the far right could double its share of seats and that together with the far left, it could make up as much as a third of the body, which is based in Strasbourg, France. In the public relations war that has been crucial in the battle for Ukraine, those sorts of results are likely to give Putin new ammunition.

“It'll be easier for Putin to make fun of the Europeans. ‘Who do you represent? You don't even represent your own people.’ He will play that card,” Hix said.

And indeed, the Russian media has begun to do just that, highlighting far-right leaders as the legitimate representatives of Europe. Those leaders, in turn, have eagerly embraced their moment in the Russian spotlight.

As pro-Russian forces wreaked havoc in eastern Ukraine last month, the head of France's far-right National Front was in Moscow telling reporters that "a Cold War on Russia has been declared in the European Union."

Marine Le Pen, whose anti-immigration party is likely to triumph in the French portion of the European vote, used her Moscow visit to meet with the leader of the Russian parliament, Sergei Naryshkin, who has been slapped with E.U. sanctions for helping to stir unrest in Ukraine.

Le Pen's spokesman, Ludovic de Danne, had earlier told Voice of Russia radio that the Western sanctions were "not justified" and that Crimea belonged with Russia because the Crimean people share "some kind of dream to go back to the motherland."

Crimea was annexed by Russia in March after an influx of Russian troops and a referendum measure approved — according to official results — by 95 percent of voters. The ballot was condemned as a sham in Western capitals but was endorsed as free and fair by numerous far-right European politicians invited to the Black Sea peninsula to observe the vote.

Werner Neubauer, a member of Austria's Freedom Party, celebrated the referendum as a "train of freedom" that was on its way to Europe and would help liberate countries from the E.U. His party colleague, Andreas Mölzer, compared the E.U. unfavorably to the Third Reich and said Europe was in danger of becoming "[a conglomerate of negroes](#)" who lacked the work ethic of Austrians and Germans.

Nigel Farage, leader of the U.K. Independence Party and [a frequent guest on the pro-Kremlin television network RT](#), has cited Putin as the foreign leader he most admires and asserted on national television that the 28-member E.U. [has "blood on its hands" for its handling of Ukraine](#).

The Bulgarian extremist Ataka party went so far as to kick off its European election campaign from Moscow. Its leader, Volen Siderov, has said the United States is trying to provoke "a third world war through which Russia should be brought to its knees."

While Europe's far-right parties differ in many respects, they share a desire to weaken the influence of the Brussels-based E.U. and "to pursue a similarly nationalist and authoritarian line" to that embraced by Putin, said Hajo Funke, a German political analyst and expert on right-wing extremism.

Indeed, in many respects, Putin is an ideological soul mate. He rails against Western decadence and liberalism and speaks in favor of an orthodox and conservative nationalism that rejects gay rights and commands adherence to traditional values.

“The far-right parties see Europe as being in decline because of cosmopolitanism and pro-Americanism,” said Peter Kreko, director of the Hungary-based research and consulting firm [Political Capital](#). “Putin offers an alternative model — a leader who openly says he supports Christian views, who doesn’t think human rights are so important and who believes in a strong hand.”

If the far-right parties do as well as expected in this week’s vote, they could have a much more prominent platform from which to promote that sort of vision for Europe. Le Pen and her allies may be on the verge of having enough support to [form their own bloc in Parliament](#), which would give them access to public financing and greater influence over legislation.

“If there’s a strong anti-Europe caucus in the Parliament, they can do a lot to shift the focus,” Kreko said. “They won’t form a majority, but they can vote to support Russia’s interests and articulate Russia’s views.”

One area where that could be particularly important is in negotiations over a sweeping new U.S.-E.U. trade pact. The Obama administration has made the deal a priority, but Europe’s far right and far left both adamantly oppose it, favoring closer economic ties with Moscow instead.

Although they probably will lack the votes to scuttle the deal on their own, they could put enough pressure on the mainstream parties that agreement becomes impossible.

“The populists with their pitchforks are going to be rallying against this,” said Hix, the London professor. “They don’t like globalization, and they don’t like the urban elite. They want to stand up for the little guy, which is going to make it very difficult for the center-right and center-left to get this done. It’s going to get ugly.”

Stephanie Kirchner contributed to this report from Berlin.