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To cite this article: Vassilis Petsinis (20 Aug 2025): Croatia's 'new' national conservatives: the 'Homeland movement', European Politics and Society, DOI: [10.1080/23745118.2025.2546798](https://doi.org/10.1080/23745118.2025.2546798)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/23745118.2025.2546798>



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Published online: 20 Aug 2025.



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Croatia's 'new' national conservatives: the 'Homeland movement'

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ABSTRACT

This article introduces the national conservative party of the Homeland Movement (*Domovinski Pokret*, DP). This is Croatia's third largest party and, since 8 May 2024, a government partner to the (centre-right) Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ). This article explores how the Homeland Movement draws inspiration from the longer trajectory of Croatian ethno-nationalism to legitimize its prerogatives and mobilize its support bases. It also seeks to determine whether there is something innovative or idiosyncratic about the party's engagement in domestic and European politics.

First, this piece introduces Croatia's 'Homeland War' (1991–1995) as a master symbol of ethno-nationalist imageries. Then the empirical component concentrates on the Homeland Movement, its outlooks on identity politics in Croatia and Europe, its stance vis-à-vis the EU, and the bases of support. The Homeland Movement draws much of its inspiration from the 'Homeland War'. However, the party embeds this symbolic capital into 'pro-welfare' proposals and an elaborate Eurosceptic platform. This resonates with the political values and aspirations of the party's target groups. In all this, the Homeland Movement comes across as a predominantly national conservative party, comprising elements of ethno-nationalism, nativism, social conservatism, soft Euroscepticism, and malleable anti-establishment tones.

KEYWORDS

Southeastern Europe;
Croatia; national
conservatives; European
politics; ethnopoltics

The Homeland Movement/DP (*Domovinski Pokret*) is Croatia's third largest party and, since 8 May 2024, a government partner to the (centre-right) Croatian Democratic Union/HDZ. How does DP draw inspiration from the longer trajectory of Croatian ethno-nationalism to legitimize its prerogatives and mobilize its bases of support? Is there something *innovative* about DP's engagement into domestic and European politics?

DP operates as a 'bridge' between the 'right-wing faction' of HDZ and more radical/extreme right-wing actors. This specificity places into context the high diversity and fluidity within the European far right – the latter perceived as an 'umbrella-concept' that hosts sub-categories such as the *national conservative*, the *radical*, and the *extreme right* (Pirro, 2023, p. 103).

This enquiry has relied on a qualitative content analysis (Hermann, 2008; Schreier, 2012) of programmes and declarations issued by selected political actors. Expert reports, public surveys, press articles, and interventions on the social media (Instagram, Facebook, and X) have been of complementary importance. The primary sources issued by DP have been selected and analysed, based on their timeliness and relevance to the thematic areas of this piece (ethno-nationalism, nativism, Euroscepticism, and anti-systemic/anti-establishment disposition).

The analysis centres on the utilization of a jargon (expressions and slogans) by DP that hints at: (a) an *anti-establishment* rhetoric ('the *brotherly/sisterly* parties of HDZ and SDP'); (b) the perpetuation of nationalistic imagery through the proposal of *concrete* measures ('special benefits for war veterans', 'against the defamation of veterans/*branitelji*'); (c) an incentive to resonate with the welfare expectations among their target groups in the rural constituencies of Slavonia ('for the *revitalization* of the village!').

DP draws much of its inspiration from the *Domovinski Rat*/'Homeland War' (1991–1995). The party embeds this symbolism into 'pro-welfare' proposals and a Eurosceptic platform which resonate with the political values of its target groups. DP is a *national conservative* party, comprising ethno-nationalism, nativism, social conservatism, soft Euroscepticism, and malleable anti-establishment tones.

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Conceptual frames

Ethno-nationalism

Empirical research has demonstrated how political actors utilize the identity and memory politics from the wars of secession across the former Yugoslavia (1990s) to legitimize their platforms and augment their bases of support (Damčević, 2023; Glaurdić et al., 2022). This enquiry prioritizes a discussion of ethno-nationalism and nativism. This is because these two concepts, coupled with an emphasis on 'law and order' and varying shades of Euroscepticism, constitute the 'host ideologies' among all sub-categories of the far right (Mudde, 2019; Rydgren, 2017). Of particular relevance is the *ethno-symbolic* approach that explores the socio-psychological components of modern nationhood.

Smith (1999, p. 11) conceptualizes the *nation* as 'a named human population, sharing a historical territory, common myths and historical memories, a mass public culture, a common economy and common legal rights and duties for all its members'. Meanwhile, the *ethnos* is 'a named human population with myths of common ancestry, shared historical memories and one or more common elements of culture, including an association with an ancestral homeland' (Smith, 1999, p. 13).

These myths and historical memories forge an imagined continuity through the ages (Anderson, 1983). This piece pays primary attention to collective myths that rest on a cultural continuity with the direct or 'imagined' ancestors (Petsinis, 2022a, p. 27). This spiritual kinship seeks to trace a 'historical' link between the present ideals of the group and those of the previous generations.

Cultural-ideological myths stress certain types of collective virtue (e.g. the 'heroic spirit'). By locating the present inside the context of the past of a group, they interpret social changes and collective aspirations in a way that satisfies the drive for meaning. Such core myths persist and are espoused through official rituals even in states with a pronounced 'civic' character (e.g. the 'Remembrance Day' rituals in the UK) (Mach, 1989, pp. 101–110).

Their mobilizing potential rests in that these myths and historical memories pertain to the non-rational domain of nationhood. They endow the nation with a near universality through the employment of images (e.g. home, forefathers, brothers and mother) that create a subconscious bond of integrity among its members (Petsinis, 2022a, pp. 27–28). This is of vital importance for mass mobilization since, as Connor phrases it, 'people do not voluntarily die for things that are rational' (Billig, 1995; Connor, 1993, p. 206).

The ethno-symbolic approach demonstrates how the political and cultural/socio-psychological components of modern nations can overlap. This outlook can enhance our understanding of how and why the imageries built around the 'Homeland War' have been a major source of inspiration for Croatia's far right.

Nativism

Nativism is a sub-branch of ethno-nationalism with concrete emphasis on anti-immigration. Nativists hold that primacy must be given to the political rights, the economic needs, and the cultural identity of the ethnic/native members of a titular nation.

According to Pappas (2018, pp. 151–152): (a) nativists usually cluster under the category of 'conservative right'; (b) nativism forms component of 'right-wing policy packages'; (c) the common denominator among nativist parties across Europe revolves around the prerogative to restrict freedom of movement, often downplaying those aspects that might fragment the main body of 'native' society – e.g. anti-elitism. This cautious stance vis-à-vis an anti-elitist rhetoric differentiates nativists from (anti-systemic) populists.

However, nativism also provides a common ground for the target groups of far-right parties. Far-right actors differentiate between a virtuous native ingroup ('us') and an, frequently unreliable, alien outgroup ('them') (Pirro, 2023, p. 105). This designation of exclusion and inclusion along sociocultural criteria renders *belonging* to the titular nation a 'pre-politically settled' fact that is not negotiable (Wolkenstein, 2019, p. 334). This is why nativist standpoints (against new/prospective incomers) are becoming as crucial as the ethno-nationalist ones (e.g. against older/'settled' ethnic minorities) for far-right parties across Central and Southeastern Europe.

Euroscepticism

Schematically, Euroscepticism is the 'outright and unqualified opposition to the process of European integration' (Taggart, 1998, pp. 365–366). Hard Euroscepticism may demand the withdrawal of states from the EU or object to their prospects of EU membership (Kopecky & Mudde, 2002; Taggart & Szczerbiak, 2002, p. 4). Soft Euroscepticism does not unconditionally oppose European integration but centres on areas of divergence between the 'national interest' and the EU trajectory (Taggart & Szczerbiak, 2008).

Flood (2002, p. 5) proposes a classification of party-based Euroscepticism that comprises the revisionist, reformist, gradualist, maximalist, minimalist, and rejectionist categories. Revisionists opt for a return to the situation prior to a major EU treaty whereas reformists desire the modification of EU institutions and practices. Gradualists endorse the European integration process albeit at a slower pace (Flood, 2002, p. 5). Maximalists are in favour of pushing forward with the integration process as rapidly as is practicable whereas minimalists accept the status quo but resist further integration (Flood, 2002, p. 5). Lastly, rejectionists oppose participation in the EU.

Across Central and Eastern Europe, Euroscepticism has acquired powerful ideological underpinnings. In Hungary, Euroscepticism is anchored into the promotion of *illiberal democracy*, by PM Viktor Orbán and the Civic Democratic Union/FIDESZ, as an 'alternative' model with a greater stress on national and Christian values and a leader-centred pattern of governance (Brubaker, 2017; Palonen, 2018). This outlook has been shared by former Polish PM Jarosław Kaczyński and the party of Law and Justice/PiS.

Pirro (2023, p. 104) contends that 'the "illiberal democratic" attribute can be appended to those political actors that acknowledge the procedural vestiges of democracy such as elections, but then hollow out its liberal content, contesting or violating political rights and civil liberties'. Through their formal acknowledgement of democratic procedures, illiberals do not fashion their political engagement as 'anti-democratic' but as a response to the alleged excesses of contemporary liberalism (e.g. 'rootless' individualism, alienation from 'traditional' values, etc.) (Smilova, 2021, p. 178).

(Right-wing) illiberals converge along their prerogative that the EU must 'return' to fundamental norms that have been allegedly forgotten. Party-based Euroscepticism in Hungary can be categorized as an ideologically *conservative* one that fluctuates along the 'hard-soft' continuum and comprises *revisionist* and *reformist* components. This discussion is necessary to assess whether the Croatian far right has been inspired from the emergence of these brands of party-based Euroscepticism or harbours more idiosyncratic stances.

The far right in Central and Southeastern Europe

One can sketch out certain features which are endemic in radical right-wing parties: (a) varying shades of ethno-nationalism, nativism, and Euroscepticism; (b) anti-establishment rhetoric and an overriding distinction between the people and the elite (Betz & Johnson, 2004; Mudde, 2010); (c) insistence on 'hard borders' and law and order.

Academic experts in the radical right have highlighted a qualitative difference between the political engagements of radical right-wing parties in Western and Eastern Europe. Whereas within the former context, emphasis is laid on anti-immigrant rhetoric, within the latter, ethnic minorities have been the main scapegoats. As Bustikova puts it, 'in the more ethnically pluralistic societies, (radical right-wing) parties seeking electoral support mobilize against constitutive, larger ethnic groups, with a high degree of politicization' (e.g. in Slovakia and Latvia) (Bustikova, 2018, pp. 566–567).

During the 1990s and 2000s, the radical right across Central and Eastern Europe started building their Eurosceptic platforms on allegations that the EU 'imposes' minority rights and weakens national sovereignty (Bjorkman & Johansson, 2004, pp. 83–84; Petsinis, 2022a, pp. 101–103; Pirro, 2014, pp. 616–617). Bustikova outlines two additional features that demarcate East European radical right-wing parties from Western ones: (a) 'pro-welfare' stances on the economy; (b) the coexistence of radical right-wing parties with 'radicalized' mainstream ones (Bustikova, 2018, p. 568).

Instead of clustering all actors beyond the (conservative) centre-right under the umbrella of the 'radical right' this piece counter-proposes an alternative scheme. This scheme introduces the *far right* as a multifaceted notion, paying attention to political origins, evolutionary trajectories, and patterns of active engagement alongside ideology. The boundaries inside this scheme are not fixed, but 'porous' and malleable.

Resulting from the impact of domestic and international politics, it is possible for political actors to reform and either 'de-radicalize' or 'radicalize' – transitioning from one of these categories to another.

The last decade has witnessed the transformation of political actors, previously oscillating between the radical and the extreme right, into 'moderate' parties of the conservative right (e.g. Hungary's Jobbik). Meanwhile, radical right-wing parties may also host more extremist wings (e.g. AfD's *Flügel*/'Wing' and EKRE's *Sinine Áratús*/'Blue Dawn') (Pirro, 2023, p. 108).

The European radical right comprises influential political actors such as Austria's Freedom Party/FPÖ and Czechia's Freedom and Direct Democracy/SPD. These parties scrutinize constitutional order but promote their political cause(s) via the parliamentary institutions. Radical right-wing parties may be by-products of top-level formation processes that came into being after the: (a) reformation or merger of already existing parties (e.g. the Finns Party in Finland and the Conservative People's Party/EKRE in Estonia); (b) secession of 'splinter groups' from larger parties (e.g. the Independent Greeks/ANEL and the Hellenic Solution/EL in Greece). On some occasions, radical right-wing parties joined governing coalitions (e.g. the Finns Party in Finland, EKRE in Estonia, and ANEL in Greece).

One more category of right-wing parties beyond the mainstream centre-right are the *national conservatives*. These parties maintain ethno-nationalist and nativist components, as well as pledges to protect 'naturally ascribed' gender norms and religious values, but their anti-establishment tones are less emphatic in comparison to the radical right. Prominent examples from Central and Eastern Europe are FIDESZ in Hungary, PiS in Poland, and the National Alliance/NA in Latvia.

Bustikova addresses the cases of FIDESZ and PiS as 'radicalized' parties of the (formerly mainstream) conservative centre-right (Bustikova, 2020, pp. 1–10). Throughout the last decade, the 'radicalization' of these parties has consisted in defending their opposition to immigration and/or the introduction of controversial policies contradicting the rule of law.

When FIDESZ and PiS entered the halls of power, their objective became to consolidate their dominant status. Correspondingly, they refashioned their active patterns of policymaking from anti-establishment rhetoric and mass mobilization towards the adoption of quasi-authoritarian governance. In this piece, such political actors are treated more accurately as parties of the (established) national conservative right rather than parties of the radical right with an articulate pattern of a, 'bottom-up', anti-systemic engagement into politics.

Lastly, parties of the extreme right may attempt to substitute state institutions (e.g. via self-styled 'patrolling operations'). Such parties have come into being through processes spearheaded by a grassroots nucleus, often aided by semi-paramilitary groupings, opting for a militant engagement (e.g. against political rivals and/or immigrants). Parties of this category with a non-negligible public appeal became active across Central and Southeastern Europe and include 'Our Slovakia' (*Ľudová Strana Naše Slovensko*), Bulgaria's 'Ataka,' and Greece's Golden Dawn (Drábik, 2022; Ellinas, 2015; Sygkelos, 2015). Their anti-democratic inclinations resulted in clashes between extreme right-wing parties and the state (e.g. the conviction of Golden Dawn and 'Our Slovakia' by the Greek and Slovak courts of justice based on criminal charges in October 2020).

This overview is necessary to position DP as a national conservative party. Furthermore, during the 1990s, certain parties in Croatia (e.g. the Croatian Party of Rights/HSP) and elsewhere (e.g. the Serbian Radical Party/SRS) dispatched paramilitary units (e.g. the Croatian Defence Forces/HOS under HSP) that were charged with atrocities (Bakic, 2009, p. 205). Meanwhile, the same actors resorted to violent mobilization against political rivals and minority groups at home (on SRS: HCHRS, 1997, pp. 34–35). Therefore, the wars of secession boosted the 'radicalization' of right-wing actors and often blurred the distinction between the radical and the extreme right in the successor states.

Croatia: trajectories of ethno-nationalism and the far right

'Homeland war' (1991–1995)

'Homeland War' is the conflict over Croatian independence fought by the country's military, first against the Yugoslav army (1991–1992) and then the 'Serb Republic of Krajina' (*Republika Srpska Krajina*) (1992–1995). Its interpretations vary and are subject to political cleavages (Banjeglav, 2012; Cvikić et al., 2014). All understandings converge in recognizing the 'Homeland War' as the ultimate foundation of Croatian statehood.

The eastern Slavonian town of Vukovar is a landmark of the 'Homeland War' due to the resistance that the Croatian forces put up against their adversaries from August to November 1991. Between 2013 and 2016, massive protests against the official use of the Serb Cyrillic script were held there. The protesters deemed it unacceptable that the Serb Cyrillic script would be used in a town with traumatic memories and a centrality in the 'Homeland War' (Koska & Matan, 2017).

Coming back to the socio-psychological approaches to the 'non-rational' component of nationhood (Connor, 1993; Smith, 1999), the mobilizing power of the *Domovinski Rat* and its symbolism revolve precisely around imageries of a diachronic resilience and survival of the Croatian nation. This mobilizing impetus intensifies: (a) in the regions that paid a particularly heavy material toll (e.g. Slavonia, Lika, and parts of Dalmatia) (Cvikić et al., 2014); (b) among social/occupational categories (the veterans/*branitelji*) that played a vital part during the war and are eligible to a special set of welfare benefits (Dolenec, 2017; Sokolić, 2018, pp. 141–164) that DP desires to increase.

Croatia's far right before DP

Croatia hosts parties that oscillate between the radical and the extreme right. Formed between the early 1990s and the 2000s, these include HSP, the Croatian Pure Party of Rights/HČSP and the Authentic Party of Rights/A-HSP.

They all converge along the commitment to safeguard the legacies of the 'Homeland War' and combat any alleged attempts at its defamation (HČSP, 2021; HSP, 2018). These parties oppose collective rights for ethnic minorities (HSP, n.d.), assume 'pro-life' stances, and reject LGBTQI rights while advocating for 'the inclusion of Croatian traditional values into everyday life' (HSP, 2018; HČSP, 2021).

Another area of convergence is that all three parties have been accused of historical revisionism about the Fascist *Ustaše* ('Insurgents') movement during the Second World War and fomenting ethnic hatred against Serbs (Damčević, 2023). These political actors harbour sovereigntist and hard Eurosceptic stances while not endorsing NATO. Meanwhile, they do not opt for 'alternative' (non-Western) partners in international politics (e.g. Russia, China, the BRICS) (Petsinis, 2024a, pp. 331 and 334).

Neither HSP, nor HČSP or A-HSP, have been represented at the national assembly (*Sabor*) for longer than a decade. Correspondingly, this article prioritizes an overview of the 'right-wing faction' within HDZ whose successful engagement is to account for the marginalization of Croatia's radical and extreme right. This is the most ideologically adjacent segment to DP inside Croatia's largest party of the centre-right. Especially since DP's inclusion into the governing coalition, this 'right-wing faction' has been acquiring an ambivalent significance for DP – operating as both a contender and a 'bridge' between HDZ and DP.

HDZ's 'right-wing faction'

HDZ's 'right-wing faction' endorses nationalistic and socially conservative outlooks on minority issues, gender, immigration, and the implementation of stricter 'law and order' agendas – combined with the communication of soft Eurosceptic standpoints. Between 2013 and 2016, this faction mobilized amid the demonstrations against the public use of the Serb Cyrillic script in Vukovar.

This involved the coordination among party-affiliates and extra-parliamentary actors such as the Croatian War Veterans Association/UHRV (Petsinis, 2022a, p. 64). Between 2017 and 2018, HDZ's 'right-wing faction' shifted its focus against the Istanbul Convention and mobilized its target groups in cooperation with Catholic Church groupings (Milekić, 2018; Grozdanov & Zelić, 2023, pp. 160 and 167–168).

The 'right-wing faction' ostensibly conforms to the endeavour among national conservative parties (e.g. PiS) to portray their pleas for EU's socially conservative turn as appeals for a 'return' to norms that have been 'betrayed' (Čepo, 2017; Zakošek, 2010, pp. 6–10). The 'right-wing faction' enables HDZ to attract votes from the socially conservative layers in Dalmatia and Slavonia (Petsinis, 2022a, p. 190; Grdešić, 2021, p. 21). Of particular interest is to assess what *innovative* DP has introduced to the Croatian far right as an intermediate pole between HDZ's 'right-wing faction' and the radical/extreme right-wing spectrum.

Table 1. The results in the IV. electoral unit (parliamentary elections of 5 July 2020) – largest coalitions.

Parties and coalitions	Number of votes	Percentage
HDZ-led coalition	61,204	44.03
SDP-led coalition	28,479	20.48
DP-led coalition	23,020	16.56
MOST-led coalition	6705	4.82
HNS-led coalition	6423	4.62

Source: <https://www.izbori.hr/arhiva-izbora/index.html#/app/parlament-2020> (accessed 13 January 2025).

Enter Domovinski Pokret

DP comes into existence (29 February 2020)

DP was established by, former singer and TV-host, Miroslav Škoro¹ and other former HDZ-affiliates who were dissatisfied with HDZ's 'centrist' shift under Plenković (Čagalj, 2024, p. 40; Raos, 2020). The party built its stronghold across Slavonia (Virovitičko-podravska and Osječko-baranjska; IV. and V. electoral units) and, secondarily, Lika (Čagalj, 2024, p. 46 and 59) (Tables 1 and 2). Both regions were scarred by warfare in the early-mid 1990s. DP benefited from the weakening of HDZ's 'right-wing faction' across Slavonia.

This became relevant when the then Vukovar mayor, Ivan Penava, departed from HDZ (20 May 2020) and joined forces with Škoro because of his discontent over: (a) delays in the investigation of atrocities committed during wartime by Serb auxiliary units; (b) alleged symptoms of corruption in the financial management of Vukovar; (c) the alleged assignment of the census of local minorities to representatives of ethnic minority parties (e.g. the Serb Democratic Independent Party/SDSS).²

The state of disarray along the far-right angle (e.g. the feebleness of HSP, HČSP, A-HSP, as well as the 'Bloc for Croatia' and the Croatian Conservatives/HKS) augmented the chances of DP. In the parliamentary elections of 5 July 2020, DP garnered 10.89 percent of the vote, appointed 16 deputies to the *Sabor*, and occupied the third spot after HDZ and SDP. Owing to his popularity, on 9 December 2021, Penava replaced Škoro as leader.

Interethnic relations

Soft Euroscepticism interweaves with the management of interethnic relations in the party's discontent over the pressures from the EU on Croatia (2000–2002) for the adoption of the 'fixed' quota arrangement toward the representation of ethnic minorities in the *Sabor* (DP, 2020b, p. 32). Croatia's *Constitutional Law on the Rights of National Minorities* (2002) stipulates that eight seats are reserved for the representation of national minorities ('District 12') on a proportional basis (three seats to the ethnic Serbs; one seat to the ethnic Hungarians, Italians, Czechs and Slovaks, Bosnjaks, and Albanians).

Nevertheless, DP holds that apart from Croatia, Slovenia, and Hungary, 'this model is mostly applied outside of Europe (e.g. Armenia, China, Cyprus) ... Western democracies no longer implement this model' and that 'this arrangement has mostly enabled individuals and groups to serve their private interests' (DP, 2020b, pp. 31–32). Consequently, DP calls for its abolition (DP, 2020b, pp. 32).

Table 2. The results in the V. electoral unit (parliamentary elections of 5 July 2020) – largest coalitions.

Parties and coalitions	Number of votes	Percentage
HDZ-led coalition	67,345	47.81
DP-led coalition	27,878	19.79
SDP-led coalition	27,079	19.22
MOST-led coalition	8145	5.78
Živi Zid-led coalition	2590	1.83

Source: <https://www.izbori.hr/arhiva-izbora/index.html#/app/parlament-2020> (accessed 13 January 2025).

Gender

DP pledges to 'safeguard traditional family values' (DP, 2020a, p. 2) and defines 'marriage as the union between a man and a woman, as stipulated by the Constitution ... this guideline must be respected' (DP, 2020b, p. 20). Moreover, it objects to the adoption of children by same-sex couples. One might argue that DP re-appropriated standpoints from older grassroots groupings, affiliated to the Catholic Church (namely, *U ime obitelji*/'In the Name of the Family') (Petsinis, 2022b, p. 77).

Immigration

PM Plenković (HDZ), and before him PM Milanović (SDP), refrained from a cultural argumentation against the accommodation of refugees and migrants from MENA in Croatia (2016–2019). Instead, they adopted a 'humanitarian' jargon and hinted at a limited infrastructure (Petsinis, 2022a, p. 75).

These observations align with Kocijan and Kukec's (2016, pp. 42 and 56) and Samardžija's (2016, pp. 125 and 135–140) argument that Croatia's dependence on the EU over financial aid and regional security regulated any propensities to a conflict with Brussels during the migration crisis. DP did not show great interest in 'weaponizing' the area of immigration either. However, the party holds that 'the management of the latest migration crisis and the protection of national borders must be assigned to the authorities of sovereign states within the EU' (DP, 2020b, p. 29).

European integration

DP's soft Euroscepticism culminates in its framing of the EU as 'a confederal union of sovereign states and not as a supranational, federal, state with the prospects of becoming unitary' (DP, 2020a, p. 3). DP prescribes that Croatia must develop closer relations with the 'Visegrad Four' because of 'the shared historical experiences and the similar positions and outlooks on the European and global developments with this group of countries' (DP, 2020b, p. 30).

Despite its soft Euroscepticism, DP never advocated for the development of more extensive relations between Croatia and 'alternative (non-Western) partners' in global politics, like Russia, China, or the BRICS. Since its beginnings, DP aligns with the idiosyncratically sovereigntist stances regarding relations with both the West and non-Western powers that characterize most parties to the right of HDZ in Croatian politics (Petsinis, 2024b, p. 91).

It is precisely the 'softness' of DP's (reformist and revisionist; Flood, 2002, p. 5) Euroscepticism, and its declared intention to negotiate the terms of Croatia's participation in the EU instead of ruling it out, that sets this party apart from the Euro-rejectionism of HSP and/or HČSP (HČSP, 2021), and projects a more 'realistic' Eurosceptic option to its target groups. Meanwhile, the 'uniform' programmatic sovereigntism of DP also differentiates the party from Eurosceptic trends elsewhere across the former Yugoslavia. In Serbia, for instance, softer (e.g. the governing Serbian Progressive Party/SNS) and harder Eurosceptics (e.g. the national conservative NADA/'Hope' and the radical right-wing *Dveri*/'Gates') converge along their preference for a *multipolar* international system where global actors such as Russia and China enjoy an invigorated status vis-à-vis the US and the EU (Petsinis, 2022a, p. 214).

DP today: political engagement, ideological prerogatives, and bases of support

How 'anti-systemic' is DP?

Empirical research has demonstrated that DP has been keen on an anti-establishment rhetoric. Here, attention is paid to the anti-systemic engagement of DP via social media platforms such as Facebook (Abramović & Paša, 2021). DP's anti-systemic utterances have targeted Croatia's largest mainstream parties (HDZ and SDP) and SDSS. The latter is the largest party of the ethnic Serb minority and had been a government partner with HDZ until the latest parliamentary elections.

DP has contended that 'elite-level politics do not uphold the values that the defenders (of Croatia) gave their lives for (during the 'Homeland War')'. The party accused HDZ and SDP of 'jointly dragging Croatia towards the bottom' (Abramović & Paša, 2021, p. 68). Between 2020 and 2021, DP accused these two parties of

complementing each other's policies and reckoned that 'HDZ's "sister-party" of SDP and its leadership are as guilty as HDZ' (Abramović & Paša, 2021, p. 68). Meanwhile, DP pledged allegiance to 'our voters' and expressed solidarity with 'the ordinary people' (Abramović & Paša, 2021, p. 68).

Moving to 'unreliable others', DP-affiliates drew linkages between Serbia's alleged interference in Croatian politics and the role of SDSS. DP deemed it unacceptable that the HDZ-led government: (a) allocated funding to 'SDSS (the Serbs)' from the state budget; (b) allegedly turned a blind eye to Serbia's interference through tourist investment in Zadar (Abramović & Paša, 2021, p. 69). According to Rydgren's typology (2017), DP's anti-elitist utterances against HDZ and SDSS were anchored in the core-elements of ethno-nationalism and nativism (also, financial protectionism).

Regarding green/leftist *Možemo!* ('We Can!'), this political actor has been charged by DP with 'promoting pro-LGBTQI agendas and woke culture' (Petsinis, 2024b, p. 90). During his campaign for the mayorship of Zagreb (May 2021), Škoro dubbed his rival, Tomislav Tomašević from *Možemo!*, a 'foreign sellout' ('*strani plaćenik*').³ Škoro's ally, Zlatko Hasanbegović, regarded *Možemo!* not as an ecological movement but as 'a well-known foreign franchise' adding that 'in Zagreb, we have a leftist hegemony'.⁴ DP's nativist principles manifested via charging Croatia's new left with functioning under the control of 'foreign decision-making centres' and accusing them of importing 'alien' cultural norms (e.g. 'gender ideology').

Following the negotiations between HDZ and DP (April-May 2024), a faction departed and launched a new (national conservative) party – 'Home and National Gathering', abbreviated as DOMiNO, on 28 September 2024. DOMiNO comprises formerly prominent members of DP such as Mario Radić, Branka Lozo, and MEP Stephen Bartulica. The new party retains DP's prerogatives on national sovereignty, the reversal of demographic decline, and the preservation of Christian and family values.⁵ However, DOMiNO's leadership voiced their indignation with the Penava-Plenković pact which they regard as a compromise that serves private interests and not those of the people.⁶

Furthermore, it is not clear whether the departure of this splinter-group was conditioned by ideological disagreements or the inter-personal clashes and allegations over Penava's intra-party authoritarianism since spring 2024.⁷ Nevertheless, DOMiNO's formation resulted in the shrinkage of DP's parliamentary representation from 14 (17 April 2024) to, currently, 8 out of 151 deputies.

The speed with which DP concluded the coalition with HDZ and the flexibility with which any obstacles were bypassed hint at a political actor keener on engaging from within the halls of power instead of uncompromisingly opposing the establishment. One should also keep in mind that, on 16 March 2024, Penava did not rule out the prospects of cooperation with SDP, either, as long as SDSS and *Možemo!* did not participate in the coalition.⁸

The public events coordinated by DP may occasionally comprise the display of paraphernalia associated with the *Ustaše* (Hajdari, 2024). Nevertheless, based on decision-making and political values, DP fits the prototype of a national conservative party which is flexible to negotiate its anti-elitist principles. This observation is reinforced by the DP's joining the ECR group in the European Parliament after the European elections.

The findings of the 2024 *Chapel Hill Expert Survey* on the positions of European political parties additionally substantiate the classification of DP as a national conservative party. On identity politics, along the scale of 1–10, DP scored high in the persistence of ethno-nationalism (9.8/10), nativism/anti-immigration (9.23/10), and its opposition to multiculturalism (8.68/10) (Rovny et al., 2024). Meanwhile, the party does not endorse an extension of the EU's authority on foreign and security policy (1.5/10) while voicing a milder criticism over the free movement of goods, services, and capital inside the EU-space (6/10), (Rovny et al., 2024). Lastly, DP maintained a moderate stance on the primacy of 'the people' over the elite (6.5/10); although the anti-elitist utterances during its electoral campaign of 2024 were relatively stronger (7.9/10) (Rovny et al., 2024).

Ideological prerogatives

This sub-section pays attention to DP's *Ustani i Ostanii!* ('Stand Up and Remain!') programme which the party launched for the national and European elections (2024). Complementary reference is made to the reiteration of DP's standpoints on the social media (X, Instagram) (2023–2024).

Ustani i Ostanii! underlines that 'Croatia materialized its freedom and political independence, according to the will of the majority of its citizens, through the 'Homeland War' where it defended itself from armed

aggression and emerged victorious' (DP, 2024a, p. 16). DP reaffirms that 'the "Homeland War" represents the foundation of Croatian statehood ... for DP, the dignity of the veterans ('defenders'/*branitelji*) and their families is invaluable' (DP, 2024a, p. 28). The party urges for safeguarding the legacies of the *Domovinski Rat* from defamation – purportedly orchestrated either by political actors (e.g. SDSS) or media broadcasts that 'demonize the veterans' (DP, 2024a, pp. 23 and 28).

Moving to other ethno-nationalist prerogatives, the same document underlines that 'the things that Croatia must demand without compromise from Serbia, which committed aggression on Croatian territory, are payment of war reparations, a thorough search for missing persons, and the return of cultural treasures that were stolen during the war' (DP, 2024a, p. 28). DP accuses the Serbian government of 'promoting the ideology of Greater Serbia and endorsing Russian aggression against Ukraine' (DP, 2024a, p. 28) and opposes Serbia's accession to the EU.

Regarding soft Euroscepticism, DP reiterates that it views the EU as 'a community of equal and sovereign states and nations rooted in Christian foundations ... the detachment of the EU from its Christian roots has resulted in identity confusion' (DP, 2024a, p. 28). The party contends that 'decisions about Croatia must be taken by Croatian politicians in Zagreb and not by Brussels-based officials' (DP, 2024a, p. 28). On national defence and the EU's strategic autonomy, DP holds that any projects designed to bolster EU defence policy must not be misused by Brussels to weaken national sovereignty (DP, 2024a, p. 28).

Party candidates incorporated slogans related to EU's policies into their social media campaigns. Stipo Mlinarić reiterated that 'Serbia cannot join the EU before it pays Croatia war reparations for the villages and towns that it destroyed' (DP, 2024d). Meanwhile, other party candidates (Stephen Nikola Bartulica) pledged to fight for 'a Europe that respects its Christian foundations' (DP, 2024e), reiterated that 'Croatia must retain its sovereignty in Europe' (Ivan Penava), (DP, 2024f), and underlined that 'Christianity is the foundation of the EU', (Branka Lozo), (DP, 2024g).

DP appears to have concretized an eclectic pattern of engagement into national and European politics that consists of: (a) a veneration of the 'Homeland War'; (b) calls to 'semi-securitize' relations with Serbia and veto its accession to the EU; (c) an insistence on the protection of national borders; (d) sovereigntism and opposition to any extension of the EU's jurisdiction.

Regarding the 'Homeland War', one should bear in mind that, especially across Slavonia, veterans constitute the backbone of DP's electorate. There, DP's standpoints for reversing demographic decline and revitalizing the countryside have additionally bolstered the party's appeal in the less developed constituencies where it draws most of its electoral support.

Correspondingly, the main standpoints for the national and European elections in the party's official page on Instagram urged: 'For the demographic rebirth of Croatia and Europe!', 'Rebirth of the village for the rebirth of Croatia and Europe!' (DP, 2024c). Furthermore, *Ustani i Ostani!* comprises an articulate 'Strategy for Demographic Recovery and Protection of the Family' (DP, 2024a, pp. 6–10).

'Demographic measures' feature regularly in the platforms of several radical right-wing (e.g. EKRE) and national conservative parties (e.g. FIDESZ, NA, and PiS) across Central and Eastern Europe (Jakobson et al., 2020; Scoggins, 2022). The following sub-section illustrates how this combination of ethno-nationalist, socially conservative, and 'demographic' prerogatives has enabled DP to mobilize its bases of support.

Bases of support

Grdešić (2021) draws a distinction between 'red' (left-leaning) and 'black' (right-leaning) constituencies across Croatia. 'Red' Croatia comprises Zagreb, Zagorje, Međimurje, Zagreb, and Kvarner (Grdešić, 2021, p. 21). 'Black' Croatia consists of Slavonia, Baranja, Lika, and several Dalmatian constituencies (Grdešić, 2021, p. 21). According to the author, this divide has been subject to economic development (e.g. industrialization during the Communist era), ethnic homogeneity/heterogeneity, and the legacies of groundbreaking historical events (Second World War and *Domovinski Rat*) (Grdešić, 2021, pp. 22 and 25).

For instance, Istria possesses a developed tourist industry, boasting a tradition of multiethnic cohabitation and resistance to nationalizing tendencies, emanating from Zagreb, since the 1990s (Stjepanović, 2018, pp. 49–100). On the contrary, Grdešić observes a correlation between the high frequency of veterans among the population and right-leaning preferences (HDZ and DP) in less developed parts of the country that were ravaged during the 'Homeland War' (Slavonia, Lika, and parts of Dalmatia) (Grdešić, 2021, pp. 27–29, 36–38).

Table 3. The results in the IV. electoral unit (parliamentary elections of 17 April 2024) – largest coalitions.

Parties and coalitions	Number of votes	Percentage
HDZ-led coalition	84,712	41.81
SDP-led coalition	51,065	25.20
DP-led coalition	26,478	13.07
MOST-led coalition	12,249	6.04
Možemo-led coalition	11,133	5.49

Source: <https://www.izbori.hr/arhiva-izbora/index.html#/app/parlament-2024> (accessed 13 January 2025).

Čagalj (2024; pp. 46–47, 49, 51–53, 55–56, 57–60) further elaborates on Grdešić's observations regarding a correlation between right-wing leanings and the combined impact of economic stagnation, interethnic cleavages, and the persistent legacies of the *Domovinski Rat* on the regional and local levels. The author adds that DP remains a preferable option among those (ethnically Croatian) voters who reside in electoral constituencies with a dense ethnic Serb population (e.g. around Vukovar) (Čagalj, 2024, p. 48).

As Glaurdić et al. (2022, p. 1098) argue, 'the distinction between the nationalist right and the social-democratic left in Croatia could not be clearer than when it comes to their attitudes toward war veterans'. Two decades later, the legacies of the *Domovinski Rat* may not merely be 'an expression of another political fault line that predates the war, but it even may be a cleavage-like fault line in its own right' (Glaurdić et al., 2022, p. 1103).

Correspondingly, DP galvanized the cohesion of its electorate in the Slavonian strongholds (IV. and V. districts). There, it remained the third political force, after HDZ and SDP, in the national and European elections held in 2024 (Tables 3 and 4). Regarding grassroots mobilization, between 2013 and 2016, Penava was prominent member of a nexus that comprised components such as UHRV, HDZ-affiliated 'backbenchers' (e.g. Zlatko Hasanbegović at that time), and local representatives of HDZ's 'right-wing faction' (Petsinis, 2022a, pp. 64–65). The demonstrations against the official use of the Serb Cyrillic script in Vukovar granted this nexus an opportunity to protest any (perceived) external interference to Croatia's domestic affairs and the sovereignty of the national majority inside their homeland.

Nowadays, DP does not solely profess its commitment to the 'Homeland War' and praise the *branitelji. Ustani i Ostani!* also proposes: (a) new sets of benefits for young families and families with many children ('Strategija demografskog oporavka', p. 6); (b) the 'revitalization of the village' through the increase of state funding towards the improvement of the economic and technical infrastructure in rural communities ('Ruralne sredine – Naselimo selo!', p. 8); (c) the allocation of financial incentives for the return of emigrants to depopulated areas ('Povratak iseljenika', pp. 8–9).

These standpoints resonate with the toll of economic stagnation on the rural districts across Slavonia. Apart from warfare, Slavonia is a region that was negatively affected by Croatia's economic recession (2009–2015). This manifested through emigration out of rural areas, the intensification of urban–rural divide, and a decrease in purchasing power (Tica, 2011, pp. 1–19; Szilard, 2014, pp. 87–105). 'Umbrella-populist' ('Human Blockade'/*Živi Zid*) and left-wing (*Možemo!*) actors communicated various types of pro-welfare agendas since the economic crisis.

Nevertheless, DP cushions these pro-welfare standpoints into an ethno-nationalist jargon with an emphasis on national survival: the increase of ethnically Croatian birth-rates and the revitalization of the countryside as the hearth of national culture. This ethno-nationalist matrix consists in an eclectic perpetuation of identity

Table 4. The results in the V. electoral unit (parliamentary elections of 17 April 2024) – largest coalitions.

Parties and coalitions	Number of votes	Percentage
HDZ-led coalition	75,807	42.78
SDP-led coalition	34,679	19.57
DP-led coalition	30,816	17.39
MOST-led coalition	15,035	8.48
Možemo-led coalition	6388	3.60

Source: <https://www.izbori.hr/arhiva-izbora/index.html#/app/parlament-2024> (accessed 13 January 2025).

and memory politics revolving around the 'Homeland War' and proposals for special benefits to veterans and their families (DP, 2024a, pp. 24–26).

DP's emphasis on socially conservative values, coupled with the party's soft Euroscepticism, resonates with the outlooks of its electorate on the EU. Micro-level research has demonstrated that DP's voters endorse the party's preference for a sovereigntist drive within the EU and the development of closer cooperation between Croatia and the 'Visegrad Four' (Petrović et al., 2022, pp. 54–55, 61). Moreover, they approve of statesmen, such as Viktor Orbán and Jarosław Kaczyński, who advocate a sovereigntist foreign policy within the EU and a leader-based governance entrenched in 'European and Christian values' (Petrović et al., 2022, pp. 59 and 61).

In response to these grassroots tendencies, and simultaneously aligning with other European right-wing actors, DP has been, emphatically and elaborately, underlining their preference for a socially conservative and sovereigntist drive in European and global politics. As early as 2020, the party joined FIDESZ, PiS, and the Slovenian Democratic Party/SDP in their endorsement of Donald J. Trump as a 'conservative option'.⁹ More recently, in 2022, DP switched from its erstwhile unequivocal solidarity with Ukraine¹⁰ to a more 'neutral'/'sovereigntist' stance and, in Penava's words, a desire 'not to bring war to our people and our land'¹¹ – thus echoing the 'pro-peace' stance endorsed by Viktor Orbán and FIDESZ.¹²

Conclusion

DP draws much inspiration from the identity and memory politics of the 'Homeland War'. It capitalizes on the mobilizing potential of this historical landmark in those parts of the country that were scarred by warfare. The perpetuation of ethno-nationalist prerogatives combines with the elaboration of measures for 'demographic and family benefits', financial solidarity with veterans and their families, and the regeneration of rural communities. These 'pro-welfare' proposals are subordinated to an ethno-nationalist matrix with an emphasis on national survival (the increase of ethnically Croatian birth-rates and the revitalization of the countryside as the *Heimat* of national culture).

DP's soft (revisionist and reformist) Euroscepticism comprises a political (sovereigntism and opposition to Euro-federalism) and a sociocultural (a conviction that Europe must return to its 'Christian cultural foundations') component. This resonates with the preference of the party's electorate for a sovereigntist drive within the EU and a return to 'European and Christian values'. Nevertheless, DP's Euroscepticism does not combine with a simultaneous quest for 'alternative (non-Western) partners' in global politics. These emphatically sovereigntist stances are a unique characteristic of DP and the entire spectrum of the Croatian far right. This is a feature that sets DP apart from other right-wing political actors across Europe (e.g. AfD, France's RN, and FIDESZ) and their varied leanings towards 'alternative' global partners (e.g. frequently Russia) throughout the last decade.

DP displays features of a situationally adaptive party which is flexible to negotiate, if not compromise, its anti-elitist principles. On decision-making and political values, DP fits more closely the prototype of a *national conservative* party, comprising ethno-nationalism, nativism, social conservatism, soft Euroscepticism, and malleable anti-establishment tones.

DP shares numerous standpoints with HDZ's 'right-wing faction'. Moreover, DP has comprised several formerly HDZ-affiliates among its leading ranks; most notably the founder, Miroslav Škoro, and the chairman, Ivan Penava. The party positions itself between HDZ's 'right-wing' faction and the more radical/extreme forces of the far right. Whereas HDZ's 'right-wing faction' remains subject to the central leadership of the party, DP, as a sovereign actor, can voice more critical standpoints. Moreover, DP: (a) projected to its target groups a realistic brand of Euroscepticism that steered clear from 'Euro-rejectionist' inclinations; (b) maintained a balance between its attachment to the longer trajectory of Croatian ethno-nationalism and potential accusations of historical revisionism (e.g. on the Second World War).

Nevertheless, the shrinkage of the party's parliamentary weight, following the establishment of DOMiNO, complicates potential endeavours by DP to trigger a 'right-wing shift' of the government through a 'gradualist' strategy from within the halls of power. One might argue that the ideological affinities with HDZ's 'right-wing faction', combined with the longer lineage of leading DP-affiliates from HDZ, render DP a 'not particularly novel' actor in Croatian politics. This may even generate fertile circumstances for a longer-term 'co-optation' of DP, as the junior partner inside the governing coalition, by HDZ.

This enquiry contributes empirical evidence that additionally hints at a state of fluidity inside the European far right as a, multifaceted, 'umbrella-concept'. This suggests that the boundaries and patterns of interaction inside this 'umbrella-concept' are not fixed, but rather 'porous' and malleable. This, in turn, makes it possible for political actors to reform and either 'de-radicalize' or 'radicalize', depending on the combined impact of domestic and international politics. Hence, the necessity for: (a) interpretative models for far-right politics that pay a greater attention to origins, evolutionary trajectories, and patterns of active engagement alongside ideology; (b) a closer cooperation between academic experts in the far right and academic experts in ethnopoltics.

Notes

1. Škoro was a HDZ-member between October 2007 and November 2008.
2. <https://dnevnik.hr/vijesti/parlamentarni-izbori-2020/vukovarski-gradonacelnik-ivan-penava-izlazi-iz-hdz-a-na-izbore-ide-s-miroslavom-skorom---606060.html>.
3. <https://www.otvoreno.hr/vijesti/hasanbegovic-o-mozemo-skoro-se-jedini-moze-suprotstaviti-preuzimanju-vlasti-od-parapoliticke-sljedbe-dotirane-iz-stranih-sredista-moci/376187>.
4. <https://www.index.hr/vijesti/clanak/hasanbegovic-u-zagrebu-imamo-lijevu-hegemoniju/2276518.aspx>.
5. <https://strankadomino.hr/o-nama/>.
6. <https://strankadomino.hr/o-nama/>.
7. <https://n1info.hr/vijesti/kako-je-poceo-rat-u-domovinskom-pokretu/>.
8. <https://www.tportal.hr/vijesti/clanak/penava-sdp-nam-je-prihvatljiv-ali-mozemo-i-sdss-apsolutno-nisu-foto-20240316>.
9. <https://www.facebook.com/domovinskipokret/posts/bartulica-u-bujici-domovinski-pokret-je-za-trumpa-a-plenkov%C4%87-za-komunisti%C4%8Dku-ki/188583839400610/>
10. https://www.dp.hr/blog/Mlinaric_Za_razliku_od_Ukrajine_mi_se_jos_nismo_obracunali_sa_svojom_petom_kolonom/553
11. <https://www.novolist.hr/novosti/hrvatska/domovinski-pokret-glasat-ce-protiv-obuke-ukrajinskih-vojnika-uvazava-mo-vlastitu-savjest/>
12. <https://abouthungary.hu/blog/pm-orban-we-dont-want-the-war-to-become-our-war>

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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