

RUSSIAN CONNECTIONS TO THE FAR RIGHT IN EUROPE

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Executive summary

- Today's relations between the European far right and various Russian pro-Kremlin actors reflect a historical reality: Soviet state actors were prepared to cooperate with European right-wing extremists to entrench the international position of the Soviet Union and to inflict damage to the capitalist West, while some European right-wing extremists sought to cooperate with the Soviet Union as an ally in their struggle against Western capitalism and imperialism.
- After the Second World War, Soviet authorities provided financial support to West German and Austrian right-wing extremists as a way to influence politics and political debates in those countries; in particular, Soviet funding was used to cover publishing costs of far-right newspapers and information bulletins.
- After the collapse of the Soviet Union, European far-right activists and politicians revived their interest in cooperating with Russian actors, but they could only reach out to Russian ultranationalists who opposed the democratising Russian authorities that aspired to become part of the liberal-democratic West, not undermine it.
- The first area of institutionalised cooperation between the European far right and Russian pro-Kremlin actors was politically biased (fake) international election observation, a form of political activity performed by international actors and aimed at advancing interests of politicians and political forces by imitating credible election monitoring during electoral processes. For many European far-right activists and politicians, fake election observation in favour of the Kremlin became an entry point into a larger international network of pro-Moscow actors.
- Russian state-controlled media engaging with the European far right became the second area of institutionalised cooperation. Originally, Russian media needed the European far right to provide external legitimacy for Moscow's domestic and international actions. Later, Russian media started to use the European far right to undermine the liberal-democratic

consensus in the West by fomenting polarisation and civil strife, advancing distrust towards governments and mainstream politicians, fostering European anti-Americanism.

- Russian stakeholders are providing political, informational and other support to radical right-wing populist parties in Europe, but most actively in Austria, France, Germany and Italy. In supporting the European far right, Moscow's major aims are: (1) to secure external legitimacy of Putin's regime; (2) to strengthen subversive movements within European societies to make them more inward-looking and less willing to continue attempts to democratise non-EU countries; (3) to enhance ultranationalist attitudes in European societies in order to undermine European unity and foster anti-Americanism and undermine cultural, social and, ultimately, political transatlantic ties.

Nothing New under the Sun

Links between various Russian actors and European right-wing extremists, as well as sympathies towards each other, can be traced back to the interwar period. Those links were most evident in Germany and its extreme-right milieu where Russophile and pro-Soviet attitudes co-existed with anti-Russian and anti-Soviet stances.

The main source of Russophile attitudes among some German right-wing extremists was the considerable contribution of Russian anti-Semites from the anti-Communist White Guard émigré circles to the development of National Socialism during the interwar period. Russian White Guard officers brought the Russian notorious anti-Semitic forgery *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* to Germany where German ultranationalists translated and published it. *The Protocols* exerted a strong impact on the early mentors of Adolf Hitler such as Dietrich Eckart and Alfred Rosenberg (who himself originated from the Russian Empire) who bolstered Hitler's anti-Semitism. Moreover, the Russian White Guard émigré circles also promoted a conspiracy theory about the Jews pitting Germany and Russia against each other, as well as calling for the creation of the German-Russian alliance. The Russophile attitudes among some German right-wing extremists had an ardently anti-Semitic character and were based on the perception of the Soviet Union as a "Judeo-Bolshevik" power.¹

The pro-Soviet attitudes among German right-wing extremists in the interwar period had two partly overlapping sources. One source was the shared revolutionary and totalitarian nature of National Socialism and Communism. While this shared nature did not make them identical, their aspirations of building a new society, carrying out an anthropological revolution and inaugurating a new civilisation enabled the existence of limited space where German fascism and Soviet Communism might converge. The second source of the pro-Soviet attitudes was the shared enemy: Western liberalism. Some National Socialists and Communists felt that the spread of "decadent and degenerate" liberalism posed an existential threat to both of them, and believed that they could join forces against it.

The recognition of the Soviet Union as a revolutionary, anti-Western and anti-liberal state by German right-wing extremists was the foundation of the foreign policy ideas of the German National-Bolshevik movement.² For German National Bolsheviks, Germany and Soviet Russia were

¹ Michael Kellogg, *The Russian Roots of Nazism: White Émigrés and the Making of National Socialism, 1917-1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

² Klemens von Klemperer, "Towards a Fourth Reich? The History of National Bolshevism in Germany", *The Review of Politics*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (1951), pp. 191-210; Abraham Ascher, Guenter Lewy, "National Bolshevism in Weimar Germany

young proletarian nations standing up against Western capitalist imperialism; therefore, Germany had to enter in alliance with Soviet Russia. One of the most prominent German National Bolsheviks was Ernst Niekisch who argued for the creation of the “Germanic-Slavonic bloc” and for the adoption of everything that the liberal West hated: anti-individualism, autocracy and commitment to violence.

The source of Soviet state actors’ sympathies towards European right-wing extremists (primarily in Germany) was the willingness to use them to entrench the international position of the Soviet Union and to inflict damage to the capitalist West. The Secretary of the Comintern (Communist International) Karl Radek appealed to German ultranationalists urging them to revise their anti-Soviet views and join forces with Soviet Russia against Western capitalists. Moreover, in the beginning of the 1920s, Soviet Russia granted training facilities to the so-called Black Imperial Army, the Reichswehr’s underground section consisting primarily of extreme-right volunteers. In accordance with the Treaty of Versailles, German army was restricted in size, while the Black Imperial Army was an attempt to circumvent those restrictions, and Soviet Russia helped Germany in this endeavour. In 1923, groups of the Black Imperial Army tried, but failed, to overthrow the government of Chancellor Gustav Stresemann and replace the democratic republic with a national dictatorship.³

Anti-capitalism and anti-liberalism constituted ideological foundations of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact made by the Soviet Union and Third Reich in August 1939, just a week before the start of the Second World War. The secret protocols to the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact divided North-Eastern and Central-Eastern Europe into the spheres of influence of the Soviets and Nazis. The Third Reich invaded Poland on the 1st of September 1939, while the Soviet Union joined the Nazis in invading Poland on the 17th of September that year. Nazi Germany betrayed its ally, the Soviet Union, on the 22nd of June 1941 by starting a war against it.

After the Second World War, the defeat of Third Reich did not impede the re-appearance of pro-Russian and pro-Soviet sentiments among specific European fascist circles already at the end of the 1940s – the beginning of the 1950s. In West Germany, these sentiments were a result of the fusion of two major ideological positions: revived National Bolshevism and neutralism. Proponents of the non-aligned position of West Germany argued that neutralism would open the path to the restoration of a unified and independent Germany that would position itself not in the West or the East, but between the two geopolitical poles, American and Soviet.

Before West Germany eventually joined NATO in 1955, far-right neutralism in some cases evolved into pro-Soviet “neutralism” which was especially evident in several extreme-right organisations and parties led by former officials and military officers of the Third Reich, in particular the Brotherhood, Third Front, and Socialist Reich Party.⁴ The Brotherhood envisaged the revival of Germany and its restoration as a dominant power in a Europe that would withdraw from close political and military cooperation with the US and could take a neutral position between the US and USSR or even enter as an equal partner into alliance with the Soviet Union. The Third Front established by former officials of the Hitler Youth organisation promoted the National-Bolshevik

– Alliance of Political Extremes against Democracy”, *Social Research: An International Quarterly*, Vol. 23, No. 4 (1956), pp. 450-480.

³ William L. Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich: A History of Nazi Germany* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2011), p. 150.

⁴ Kurt P. Tauber, *Beyond Eagle and Swastika: German Nationalism since 1945*. Vol. 1 (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1967).

narratives about “proletarian nations” and ideas about the anti-colonialist and anti-imperialist struggle of the Third World against the imperialist nations. The Socialist Reich Party founded by a former Wehrmacht officer Otto Ernst Remer propagated the mystical blood union of the German people and received funding from the Soviet Union.

The East German National-Democratic Party of Germany (NDPG), which was formed in 1950 to reintegrate former members of the Nazi party and Wehrmacht into the socialist society, received 700,000 East German Marks a month from a Soviet bank to form a network of pressure groups, newspapers and study circles for former officers through its West German contacts among former Nazis and Wehrmacht officers. In the first half of the 1950s, a dedicated Nazi Rudolf Steidl obtained from a Communist official 2,363,000 Deutschmarks aimed at financing the publication of newspapers and information bulletins that would promote extreme-right and anti-Western neutralist ideas in the period 1951-1954.

In the beginning of the 1950s, Soviet authorities also interfered in the Austrian politics. The Soviets infiltrated the far-right Federation of Independents with the help of Josef Heger, who had passed through a Soviet indoctrination camp after his capture on the Russian front during the Second World War. After his expulsion from the Federation of Independents, Heger founded the far-right National Democratic Union that promoted the neutralist agenda and was composed mostly of former SS officers who mingled German nationalism with totalitarian communism. It was also reported that Heger regularly met with the Austria-based representatives of the Soviet Union.⁵

In 1950, a former Hitler Youth organiser and SS-Obersturmführer Adolf Slavik founded the National League that united former Nazis. The ideology of the National League was a mixture of pro-Soviet and neo-Nazi propaganda. The office of its newspaper *Austrian Observer* was located in the Soviet sector in Vienna and in the same building that also hosted the office of the newspaper *Diary* published by the Communist Party of Austria. The funding for Slavik's National League came from the Administration for Soviet Property in Austria.⁶

Post-Soviet period and early Putin era

After the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991, European and Russian extreme-right activists and politicians started cooperating with each other. The first Russian far-right activist who established relations with European counterparts was Russian fascist Aleksandr Dugin who made his first contacts with representatives of the European extreme right even before the collapse of the Soviet Union. During the 1990s, Dugin, whose ideology was characterised by anti-liberalism and anti-Americanism, organised, and participated in, conferences, workshops and discussions featuring prominent representatives of the European far right such as Alain de Benoist, Robert Steuckers, Claudio Mutti, Jean Thiriart, Christian Bouchet and others. In some instances, events organised on the Russian territory and hosting European and Russian right-wing extremists were attended by Russian military officials who were familiar with Dugin (he was a guest lecturer at the General Staff Academy of the Armed Forces of Russia). Dugin originally built relations with the European extreme right to satisfy his interest in the contemporary interpretations of historical right-wing intellectuals, but then he used his contacts to consolidate and strengthen his position in

⁵ “Subject: The National League – An Impotent Communist Front of Ex-Nazis”, *Central Intelligence Agency*, 2? April (1954), p. 2,

http://www.foia.cia.gov/sites/default/files/document_conversions/1705143/SLAVIK,%20ADOLF_0031.pdf.

⁶ Wolfgang Mueller, *Die sowjetische Besatzung in Österreich 1945-1955 und ihre politische Mission* (Vienna: Böhlau Verlag, 2005), p. 214.

Russian ultranationalist and mainstream circles.⁷ On the other hand, European far-right activists who cooperated with Dugin were interested in that cooperation not only because he could enlighten them on Russian phenomena from a native's point of view, but also because he helped disseminate their own ideas in Russia. Moreover, in the beginning of the 1990s, particular elements of the European far right hoped that illiberal Russian politicians (right-wing and left-wing extremists) could topple the democratic Russian authorities and build an anti-American geopolitical alliance with the European far right.

Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, the leader of the misleadingly named far-right Liberal-Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR),⁸ which won the 1993 Russian parliamentary elections, established contacts with the French National Front (renamed into the National Rally in 2018), German People's Union and smaller European extreme-right parties and individuals such as Austrian former Waffen SS member and Holocaust denier Edwin Neuwirth.⁹ The French and German counterparts of the LDPR reportedly provided logistical and financial support for the party in its early years. In the 1990s, the ideology of the LDPR was less anti-Western in comparison to what it evolved into in the 2000s: Zhirinovskiy's geopolitical thinking involved ideas about Russia restoring the empire at the expense of Southern countries such as Turkey, Afghanistan and Iran, as well as building a pragmatic alliance with the West. He also promised to return the Kaliningrad oblast to Germany an intention that was applauded by Gerhard Frey, the leader of the German People's Union. Following the example of some European far-right politicians, Zhirinovskiy became a lobbyist for Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq. Apparently with the use of Iraqi funding, Zhirinovskiy launched in the beginning of the 2000s the World Congress of Patriotic Parties that united European extreme-right politicians from France, Germany, Greece, Finland and Czech Republic. The LDPR's leader, who at that time was deputy chairman of the Russian parliament, believed that Moscow could have leverage in world politics through the workings of the Congress that was supposed to take place annually.

After a series of "colour revolutions" in the post-Soviet space, i.e. successful protests against electoral fraud in favour of pro-Russian politicians in 2003-2005 in Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan, Vladimir Putin's regime increasingly turned to anti-Western and especially anti-American rhetoric. This rhetoric became even sharper and more radical after the beginning of the anti-Putin protests in 2011 that the Kremlin believed had been orchestrated by the United States. Russia's anti-American turn, the perceived challenge it posed to the EU, the Kremlin's appeal to "traditional values", national identity and rights of the majority, as well as Putin's populist language of the divide between the elites and people, allowed Putin's right-wing authoritarian kleptocracy to claim external legitimacy from illiberal political forces in the West, especially far-right ideologues, movements and parties, who started to consider Russia as a leader of the international crusade against the decadent West with its liberalism, multiculturalism and minority protection.

European far-right politicians and pro-Kremlin fake election observation

⁷ Anton Shekhovtsov, "Alexander Dugin and the West European New Right, 1989-1994", in Marlène Laruelle (ed.), *Eurasianism and the European Far Right: Reshaping the Europe-Russia Relationship* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2015), pp. 35-53.

⁸ Andreas Umland, *Vladimir Zhirinovskii in Russian Politics: Three Approaches to the Emergence of the Liberal-Democratic Party of Russia 1990-1993*, Dissertation, Promotionsausschuß FB Geschichtswissenschaft (Berlin: Freie Universität Berlin, 1997).

⁹ "Austrian Police Seek More Nazis for Bombings", *Searchlight*, No. 224 (1994), p. 15.

As Moscow considered the “colour revolutions” in 2003-2005 as a Western, US/NATO-led conspiracy against Putin’s regime and Russia’s perceived domination in the post-Soviet space, the Kremlin became genuinely concerned with independent international election observation missions whose findings played an important role in mobilising societies against fraudulent elections. The Kremlin therefore supported mechanisms and practices that aimed at legitimising elections in the post-Soviet space which organisations such as the OSCE and its ODIHR would unlikely consider free, fair or, in some cases, even legitimate. Official Moscow and pro-Kremlin organisations created networks of politically biased (or fake) election observation that can be defined as a form of political activity performed by international actors and aimed at advancing interests of politicians and political forces by imitating credible election monitoring during electoral processes. The aims of fake election observation are: (1) whitewashing electoral fraud for domestic and international audiences; (2) legitimising electoral processes considered illegitimate or illegal by the international community; (3) delegitimising and weakening the institution of free and fair elections; (4) subverting and/or relativising findings of credible election observation; (5) weakening political rivals; and (6) building networks of influence not necessarily related to electoral processes.

Formally an NGO, a Russian organisation called CIS-EMO became one of the most important organisations that tried to legitimise practices of electoral authoritarianism and always remained loyal to the objectives of Russia’s foreign policy in the post-Soviet space. Hardly surprisingly, results of CIS-EMO’s observation missions generally contradicted those of the OSCE and ODIHR. CIS-EMO, which was established by a Russian far-right activist Aleksey Kochetkov, coordinated the participation of European right-wing (and less often left-wing) extremists in its politically biased election observation missions as monitors. While cooperating with CIS-EMO, some of those monitors founded their own organisations that were involved in recruiting and coordinating fake electoral observers: Polish far-right politician Mateusz Piskorski founded the European Centre for Geopolitical Analysis (ECGA), while Belgian far-right activist Luc Michel registered the Eurasian Observatory for Democracy and Elections (EODE).

The ECGA’s Mateusz Piskorski started his political career in the late 1990s in a Polish neo-Nazi group Niklot that was characterised by Slavic ultranationalism and opposed “the intermixture of cultures, languages, peoples and races”.¹⁰ As a member of this group, Piskorski travelled to Russia in 2000 to meet with Russian neo-Nazis and discuss prospects of cooperation between Russia and Poland. In 2002, Piskorski joined the political party “Self-Defence”, and, in the capacity of the party’s international relations officer, visited Moscow in 2005 to meet with representatives of Aleksandr Dugin’s movement. Piskorski discussed with them the creation of the Polish branch of Dugin’s movement but this project was never fully implemented. The same year, Piskorski started participating in pro-Kremlin fake election observation missions. In 2007, Piskorski created his own ECGA that would cooperate closely with the Russian CIS-EMO until 2010 and the Belgian EODE.

The EODE’s Luc Michel is a disciple of Belgian convicted Nazi collaborator and post-war National-Bolshevik Jean Thiriart who called for the creation of the Euro-Soviet Empire from Vladivostok to Dublin in the 1980s. Michel got in contact with Russian fascists Dugin and Aleksandr Prokhanov in the beginning of the 1990s, and in 1996 the three of them met in Tripoli at a congress organised by the Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi. In 2007, Michel created the EODE that would provide services of fake election observation.

¹⁰ “Jesienny zaciąg Leppera”, *Newsweek*, 6 October (2002), <http://polska.newsweek.pl/jesienny-zaciag-leppera,25460,1,3.html>.

In 2010, the ECGA and EODE started working with another Russian organisation, namely Civic Control founded by Aleksandr Brod. Civic Control is what can be called a GONGO, i.e. a government organised non-governmental organisation, as the groups that compose this association are loyal to the Kremlin, while the key figures in the management of the association are members of – or, at least, closely associated with – the Russian parliament and the Civic Chamber of the Russian Federation. Together with Civic Control, the EODE and ECGA coordinated fake election observation missions that featured politicians from far-right parties such as the League of Polish Families, Hungarian Jobbik, Belgian Flemish Interest, Bulgarian “Attack”, British National Party, Dutch Party for Freedom, Italian Social Movement – Tricolour Flame, Alliance for the Future of Austria, and some others. In March 2014, when Russia occupied Ukraine’s Republic of Crimea, the EODE, ECGA and Civic Control organised “international monitoring” of an illegitimate referendum that was followed by the Russian annexation of the peninsula. Members of that fake observation mission featured politicians from Jobbik, Flemish Interest, “Attack”, Tricolour Flame, Italian Northern League, French National Front, Spanish Platform for Catalonia, BZÖ (Ewald Stadler) and FPÖ (Johannes Hübner, Johann Gudenus).¹¹ In November that year, Stadler would also participate in fake observation of the “parliamentary elections” in Russia-occupied territories of Eastern Ukraine – like the Crimean “referendum”, those “elections” were not recognised as legitimate by any reputable international organisation.

Piskorski’s ECGA was also engaged in the so-called “Russian Laundromat”, a scheme to move \$20-80 billion out of Russia in 2010-2014 through a network of banks and letterbox companies – the scheme was named “the biggest money-laundering operation in Eastern Europe” by the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project. The journalistic investigation into the “Russian Laundromat” showed that, in May 2013, the ECGA received €21 thousand for “consulting services” from Cyprus-based Crystalord Limited that participated in the process of laundering Russian money.¹²

In 2015, Piskorski founded a political party “Change” that promoted foreign policy interests Putin’s and Assad’s authoritarian regimes. In 2016, Polish security services arrested Piskorski and later charged him with espionage for Russia and China.

Yet another Russian organisation that became involved in coordinating fake international election monitoring was the “Russian Peace Foundation”, a GONGO founded by Leonid Slutsky, a member Zhirinovskiy’s Liberal-Democratic Party of the Russian Federation. Slutsky started providing fake observation services to the Kremlin in 2014 by bringing Russian parliamentarians to “observe” the Crimean “referendum” and “parliamentary elections” in Russia-occupied Eastern Ukraine. However, in 2017, Slutsky – in the capacity of Chairman of the Committee on International Affairs of the Russian parliament – started inviting foreign politicians to participate in politically biased election observation missions, and his “Russian Peace Foundation” presumably paid for travelling and accommodation expenses of those “observers”.¹³ In September 2017, upon Slutsky’s

¹¹ “FPÖ-Politiker und Stadler als ‘Wahlbeobachter’ auf der Krim”, *OÖNachrichten*, 16 March (2014), <https://www.nachrichten.at/nachrichten/ticker/FPOE-Politiker-und-Stadler-als-Wahlbeobachter-auf-der-Krim;art449,1332891>.

¹² Wojciech Cieśla, Endy Gęsina, “Operacja Laundromat”, *Newsweek*, No. 13 (2017), <http://www.newsweek.pl/plus/spoleczenstwo/sledztwo-pralnia-brudnych-pieniedzy-z-rosji-w-polsce,artykuly,407167,1,z.html>.

¹³ “Suomalaisia kansanedustajia yritetään naruttaa vaalitarkkailijoiksi Venäjälle – hämärän kutsun taustalla puolalaisjärjestö”, *Yle*, 25 January (2018), <https://yle.fi/uutiset/3-10039429>.

invitation, members of European far-right parties National Front, Party for Freedom, Northern League, “Change” and Sweden Democrats “observed” regional elections in Russia. In March 2018, Slutsky’s “Russian Peace Foundation” sent – among other political activists – members of the far-right Alternative for Germany, Northern League and Serbian Movement “Dveri” to “monitor” the illegitimate Russian presidential in annexed Crimea.¹⁴ The same Russian organisation coordinated fake international observation of the presidential election in Russia that included members of the FPÖ (Zeljko Malešević), National Front, French Action, Alternative for Germany, Northern League and Serbian Radical Party.¹⁵

In 2018, the area of operations of these fake election observation networks coordinated and organised by various Russian organisations transcended the borders of the post-Soviet space and became truly global. In summer 2018, Cambodia held parliamentary elections that were boycotted by all Western nations because the Cambodian authorities had banned the main opposition party in the country. Nevertheless, as the Cambodian Electoral Committee established working relations with the Russian Central Electoral Commission, Russia would help the Cambodian regime in its attempt to provide international legitimacy to the elections by sending a fake international observation mission that consisted of around 30 people including, among others, members of the FPÖ (Axel Kassegger, Johannes Hübner), Tricolour Flame, Brothers of Italy, National Rally (former French National Front), “Dveri” and Serbian Radical Party.¹⁶ This mission was coordinated by Oleg Bondarenko, Director of the Russian organisation Foundation for Progressive Policy that is engaged in advancing the Kremlin’s foreign policy interests in Europe. In 2017, Bondarenko tried to boost support for Alternative for Germany and far-left Die Linke that contested elections to the Bundestag in September that year. In January 2018, Bondarenko – as he was travelling to Germany – was denied entry to the Schengen area at Poland’s request, presumably for his subversive activities in Europe.

Many European far-right activists who participated in fake observation missions, eventually went beyond their activities as election monitors and started performing other services to the Russian authorities. In particular, they were often invited to conferences, discussion tables and other events in Russia to reinforce pro-Kremlin and anti-EU narratives. For example, on 22 June 2017, Aleksey Kochetkov’s CIS-EMO organised an international far-right round-table that was called “Russia and Europe: Cooperation instead of Confrontation” and hosted, among others, Johann Gudenus and Konstantin Dobrilovic of the FPÖ, and Pierre Malinowski of the National Front.¹⁷

Russian media and the European far right

The media is yet another important area where European far-right activists and politicians have furthered Moscow’s agenda. This form of cooperation between Russian actors and the European far right started in 2008. In August that year, Russian-backed separatists in the Georgian region of South Ossetia successfully provoked Georgia’s then president, Mikheil Saakashvili, into attacking and taking control of the separatist stronghold of Tskhinvali. On the 8th of August, Russia launched

¹⁴ Anton Shekhovtsov, “Foreign Observation of the Illegitimate Presidential Election in Crimea in March 2018” (Berlin: European Platform for Democratic Elections, 2018).

¹⁵ Anton Shekhovtsov, “Politically Biased Foreign Electoral Observation at the Russian 2018 Presidential Election” (Berlin: European Platform for Democratic Elections, 2018).

¹⁶ Anton Shekhovtsov, “The Globalisation of Pro-Kremlin Networks of Politically Biased Election Observation: The Cases of Cambodia and Zimbabwe” (Berlin: European Platform for Democratic Elections, 2018).

¹⁷ “V Moskve obsudili perspektivy sotrudnichestva s Evropoy (VIDEO)”, *CIS-EMO*, 22 June (2017), <http://www.cis-emo.net/ru/news/v-moskve-obsudili-perspektivy-sotrudnichestva-s-evropoy-video>.

a war on Georgia and won in five days, concurrently occupying South Ossetia and another Georgian region, Abkhazia. The overwhelming majority of Russian citizens supported the Kremlin's actions; some would blame Saakashvili for initiating the conflict, others would accuse the US for allegedly attempting to influence Russia's neighbours. However, in the months that followed, many Russian politicians, experts and officials discussed one particular paradox: Russia easily won the Russian-Georgian war, but lost the information war, implying that it failed to convince the international community of the righteousness of Moscow's invasion of Georgia.

Gleb Pavlovsky, who at that time was one of the Kremlin's major political strategists, argued that "Russia's loss of the information war with the western media" was determined by the lack of Russian global media.¹⁸ Anatoliy Tsyganok, the director of the Moscow-based Centre of Military Forecasting, was more specific and practice-oriented. According to him, Russia lost the information war because it was not prepared for it at all. To win at information warfare in the future, he claimed, Russia needed to employ "information forces" that would engage in propaganda, disinformation and cooperation with the international media.¹⁹

The perception of losing the information war pushed Russian media to desperately look for Western commentators who would endorse Moscow's line on the Russian-Georgian war. Fortunately for the Russian media, they found these commentators among the Western far right. On 20 August 2008, the Russia Today TV channel ran an interview with Jeffrey Steinberg, director of the right-wing conspiracy theory magazine *Executive Intelligence Review* founded by American fascist Lyndon LaRouche in 1974. In the interview for Russia Today, Steinberg opined that "Russia's actions in South Ossetia [had been] a response to a brutal assault by Georgian forces against Russian citizens".²⁰ The next day, on the 21st of August, Russia Today interviewed LaRouche himself, who suggested that "the Georgian assault on South Ossetia [had been] probably a British-led operation with U.S. support".²¹

Russian state-controlled or pro-Kremlin media have increasingly changed their approach to the coverage of European far-right politics. European far-right politicians and activists who were inherently critical of the US, NATO, EU, Eurozone, liberal democracy, human rights, etc. stopped being simple newsmakers for the Russian media, but started to appear as valuable commentators and opinion makers. The initial objective of the Russian media engaging with the European far right was providing external, i.e. Western, legitimacy for Moscow's domestic and international actions. Thus, the original audience of the comments and opinions offered by European far-right actors and communicated by the Russian media was the Russian society itself. The Russian media sought to show to the domestic audience that their country was not isolated and could still find support among Western politicians. For example, in the wake of the Russian-Georgian war, the Russian-language media were happy to quote the FPÖ's leader Heinz-Christian Strache who said, in October 2008, that Russia "had not acted as an aggressor" in its war against Georgia and that

¹⁸ Natalya Lebedeva, Elena Yakovleva, "Pobeda slov", *Rossiyskaya gazeta*, 20 August (2008), <https://rg.ru/2008/08/20/zapad.html>.

¹⁹ Anatoliy Tsyganok, "Informatsionnaya voyna – realnost' geopolitiki", *Russkaya narodnaya liniya*, 1 November (2008), http://ruskline.ru/monitoring_smi/2008/11/01/informacionnaya_vojna_-_real_nost_geopolitiki/.

²⁰ "Interview with Jeffrey Steinberg", *RT*, 20 August (2008), <https://www.rt.com/news/interview-with-jeffrey-steinberg/>.

²¹ "Interview with Lyndon Larouche", *RT*, 21 August (2008), <https://www.webcitation.org/6PNltHZaV?url=http://rt.com/politics/interview-with-lyndon-larouche/>.

“the EU member states should not take their cue from the US” in response to Russia’s actions in Georgia.²²

At the same time, the Russian international media (Russia Today (renamed into RT in 2009), Voice of Russia (until 2014), Sputnik (since 2014), and some others) started to engage with Western far-right activists and politicians to undermine the liberal-democratic consensus in the West by fomenting polarisation and civil strife, advancing distrust towards governments and mainstream politicians, fostering European anti-Americanism. The Russian international media would thus provide the far right with an extensive platform to speak out their grievances about immigration, refugees, multiculturalism, same-sex marriages, Eurozone, the “bureaucratic monster” of the EU, “corruption” of Brussels, etc. The explicit message is clear: the West is in decline and failing; the implicit message is about the stability of allegedly conservative, traditionalist Russia in comparison to the disorderly liberal West.

Examples of far-right narratives promoted by the Russian state-controlled media (*my emphasis*):

“According to **Godfrey Bloom**, Member of the European Parliament for the UK Independence party, *nothing will save the euro because the single currency project was flawed from the start*. “This whole concept is absolutely absurd. You cannot have one currency for 16 or 17 different economies. It certainly cannot work, it does not work,” he said. “The whole thing was ridiculous from the start and it is ridiculous now”.” (RT: [“Europe cannot afford Euro – MEP”](#), 18 January 2011)

““In Sweden you’ve got welfare, access to the educational system – up to university level, you got access to public transport, libraries, healthcare – to everything. And still they feel that *they* [immigrants] *need to riot through stones and Molotov cocktails*. It’s ridiculous and a bad excuse,” Swedish Democrats MP **Kent Ekeröth** told RT.” (RT: [“They don’t want to integrate’: Fifth night of youth rioting rocks Stockholm”](#), 23 May 2013)

““Europe (and Finland) receives more third-world immigrants than it can integrate. On the other hand, *the policy of multiculturalism* which focuses on preserving “otherness” and cultural differences, *does not contribute to successful integration*,” **Jussi Halla-aho** said.” (Sputnik: [“Multiculturalism Unhelpful For Migrant Integration – Finnish Lawmaker”](#), 5 August 2015)

“French political movement La Manif Pour Tous, supporting traditional marriage, called on people to oppose independent candidate Emmanuel Macron in the second round of the presidential election. “*Emmanuel Macron is preparing an anti-family policy*. For the families, for the children, for the future. May 7: Macron, this is no!” the movement’s president, **Ludovine de La Roche**, said, as quoted by a statement, published late Tuesday”. (Sputnik: [“Macron Preparing Anti-Family-Policy’ - French Anti-Gay Movement”](#), 26 April 2017)

“Germany’s family reunification program has sparked harsh criticism from Bundestag members. *Berlin has proposed assisting refugees, including those with ties to hardcore Islamist groups*, with bringing their families to Germany. Sputnik spoke with a Bundestag member of the Alternative for Germany (AfD) party [**Markus Frohnmaier**] for insight into the issue”. (Sputnik: [“Security ‘Erosion’: Germany to Ease Migration for Potential Terrorists – AfD”](#), 12 May 2018)

²² Yuriy Politov, “Saakashvili – prestupnik”, *Izvestiya*, No. 198, 22 October (2008), p. 2; Darya Yur’eva, “Diktator nedostoin diplomatii”, *Rossiyskaya gazeta*, No. 220, 22 October (2008), p. 2.

“Swedish MP **Jeff Ahl** of the Alternative for Sweden (AfS) party has attacked “*destructive multiculturalist society*,” pledging to reconsider the bulk of citizenships and residence permits granted to immigrants from the 2000s onwards.” (Sputnik: [“Swedish Party Scolds ‘Destructive Multiculturalism’, Pledges Mass Deportations”](#), 2 July 2018)

Narratives and messages produced by European far-right politicians and communicated to the international audience by the Russian state-controlled media are often tailored to address specific immediate problems that Russia is allegedly facing. For example, from the end of the 2013 onward, Russian international media increasingly relied on European far-right politicians who would support Moscow’s opposition to Ukraine’s rapprochement with the EU (the signing of the Association Agreement between the EU and Ukraine), Russia’s annexation of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and invasion of Eastern Ukraine, and the consequent Western sanctions against Russia. The main ideas presented by the European far right in relation to Ukraine are the following: (1) the pro-EU protests in Ukraine were a result of the EU’s erroneous foreign policy, (2) the revolution in Ukraine was inspired by the US to undermine Russia’s sphere of influence in the post-Soviet space; (3) the Crimean “referendum” that was followed by Russia’s annexation of this Ukrainian republic was legitimate; (4) the US/NATO forced the submissive EU to impose useless sanctions on Russia; (5) the post-revolutionary government in Ukraine is illegitimate, discriminatory and illiberal.

Examples (my emphasis)

“In just a few days after the [Russian] *sanctions* came into force they *hurt out agriculture*. The EU is thinking on how to mitigate it. Instead of putting Russia on its knees, they drag our farmers to ruin with their senseless sanctions policy,” [Heinz-Christian] **Strache** said as cited by Austria Presse Agentur”. (RT: [“Sanctions bite-back: Bickering, EU infighting over Russia retaliation”](#), 11 August 2014)

“[**Marine**] **Le Pen** has been a long-standing critic of Europe’s foreign policy and does not see how Ukraine could join the bloc. ‘*The European Union’s diplomacy is a catastrophe*,’ **Le Pen** told RT’s Sophie Shevardnadze in an exclusive interview in June. ‘The EU speaks out on foreign affairs either to create problems, or to make them worse.’” (RT: [“Crisis in Ukraine is ‘all EU’s fault’ – France’s Marine Le Pen”](#), 6 September 2014)

“Along with Ukrainian migrant workers, members of Ukraine’s nationalist organizations are coming to Poland, **Mateusz Piskorski**, the head of the Polish party Zmiana, said during a conference in Lugansk. According to **Piskorski**, *those nationalists pose the same threat as militants of the Islamic State (ISIL) terrorist group*”. (Sputnik: [“Ukraine’s Right Sector as Dangerous as ISIL – Polish Politician”](#), 17 September 2015)

“*The EU’s anti-Russia sanctions are ‘absurd’ and are causing ‘immeasurable harm’ to Italy’s economy*, the leader of the Northern League party [**Matteo Salvini**] said, calling for an end to the economic restrictions”. (RT: [“Sanctions against Russia are ‘absurd’ & harm Italian industry – Northern League leader”](#), 3 April 2018)

In the course of time, the Russian state-controlled media also established structural relations with some EU-based pro-Russian media managed by far-right activists.

In July 2012, at a media summit in Moscow, French far-right activists who represented Agence2Presse, a branch of the French association Groupe EDH Communication working in the media sphere, established contacts with the Russian state-controlled media Voice of Russia and Russia's major news agency ITAR-TASS. Agence2Presse is headed by Gilles Arnaud, a former regional advisor to the National Front in Upper Normandy and contemporary member of the far-right Party of France that was founded in 2009.

Upon his return to France, Arnaud implied that Groupe EDH Communication had received funding from Russia for the development of a new TV channel in France. Russia's Ambassador to France Aleksandr Orlov helped arrange the signing of a contract between Arnaud and the Russian state media. In September 2012, Arnaud launched the web-based TV channel under the name "ProRussia.TV", for which he received €115,000 for the first year of operation and €300,000 for the next one.²³ With servers located in Russia and brandishing a logo closely resembling the logo of the ruling party "United Russia", ProRussia.TV became yet another branch of the Groupe EDH Communication and was a product of collaboration between Agence2Presse, which provided technological infrastructure, ITAR-TASS, the Russian news agency Interfax, Voice of Russia and the Iranian Mehr News Agency.

Apart from Arnaud, the editorial staff of ProRussia.TV included, in particular, Alexandre Ayroutet, an employee of Editions d'Héligoland and a former head of the youth wing of the National Front (National Front of Youth, now called Generation Nation); Joseph-Marie Joly, a spokesperson of the identitarian Normandy Wave group; and Sylvie Collet, a former member of the National Front, treasurer of the Editions d'Héligoland, and contemporary member of the Party of France.

ProRussia.TV developed a strong partnership with the French service of the Voice of Russia. They shared materials, some members of their staff worked for both services, while Sylvie Collet presented a weekly news bulletin produced in collaboration with the Voice of Russia.

The content of ProRussia.TV's programmes was unequivocally pro-Kremlin, anti-American and very critical towards the workings of democracy in the EU. The TV channel broadcast interviews with EU-based far right and Eurosceptic politicians, as well as representatives of the Russian establishment.

At the end of 2013, Putin ordered the establishment of an international information agency called "Rossiya Segodnya" (translated as "Russia Today" but not be confused with RT) "to provide information on Russian state policy and Russian life and society for audiences abroad". The same order discontinued the Voice of Russia (although its website continued to operate before moving to the portal of the Russian online news service Sputnik), which automatically implied suspension of funds for ProRussia.TV. The last programme of the TV channel was aired in spring 2014, and the website of ProRussia.TV was disabled in autumn 2014.

In Italy, before its discontinuation, the Voice of Russia became involved in cooperation with the far-right Northern League. In February 2014, Max Ferrari, a member of the Northern League and contributor to the Italian service of the Voice of Russia, initiated the creation of the Lombardy-

²³ Vincent Jauvert, "Poutine et le FN: révélations sur les réseaux russes des Le Pen", *L'OBS*, 27 November (2014), <http://tempsreel.nouvelobs.com/politique/20141024.OBS3131/poutine-et-le-fn-revelations-sur-les-reseaux-russes-des-le-pen.html>.

Russia Cultural Association (LRCA) directly associated with the Northern League. The president of the LRCA is Gianluca Savoini, a spokesman for the League's leader Matteo Salvini, while its honorary president is Aleksey Komov, the official representative of the international "pro-family", homophobic association "World Congress of Families" in Russia. In Russia, Komov is also closely associated with Russian ultranationalist businessman Konstantin Malofeyev who was sanctioned by Western nations for his logistical and material support for pro-Russian separatists in Eastern Ukraine.²⁴

The LRCA openly admitted that its views fully concurred "with the worldview of the President of the Russian Federation".²⁵ Ferrari slammed the "ongoing misinformation" about Russia in the mainstream media and stated that the LRCA would try to "re-inform" the public through its website; in doing so, it would take advantage of the collaboration with the Russian media, in particular with the Voice of Russia. The LRCA listed the Italian service of the Voice of Russia as its "official partner", while the website of the Italian Voice of Russia used to have a link to the LRCA's website on its front page. After the Voice of Russia was discontinued, the LRCA named Sputnik as its official partner.

The website of the LRCA publishes articles praising Putin as the great leader of Russia and presenting the Europeans with a choice between "Eurabia", a project that would lead to "the denial of Europe", and Eurasia from Brittany to Vladivostok that would successfully compete with the US and China.²⁶ Thus, it was not surprising that the website also published several interviews with Aleksandr Dugin, who described Matteo Salvini as "the only politician who [could] represent the real interests of the Italians".²⁷ Moreover, when the ACLR started establishing branches across northern Italy, Dugin became an honorary president of the Piedmont-Russia Cultural Association.

Political cooperation between Russian stakeholders and the European far right

Cooperation between European far-right politicians and Russian actors can be traced back to the beginning of the 1990s. However, it is only in recent years that we see the Russian side being represented by high-profile politicians. Although some early contacts became an important foundation for later relations between Russian actors and the European far right, until very recently the Russian side in the 1990s was represented by Russian ultranationalists who had no chance to come to power and shape Russian politics. While Russian right-wing extremists, for example, Aleksandr Dugin, are still maintaining contacts with their European counterparts, the latter now have access not only to them but also to Russian officials and members of the ruling Russian party, "United Russia". This section reviews several cases of the most active political cooperation between Russia and the European far right.

Austria

²⁴ "Treasury Targets Additional Ukrainian Separatists and Russian Individuals and Entities", *U.S. Department of the Treasury*, 19 December (2014), <https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/pages/jl9729.aspx>.

²⁵ "L'Associazione Lombardia Russia", *Associazione Culturale Lombardia Russia*, 5 February (2014), <http://www.lombardiarussia.org/index.php/associazione/lo-scopo>.

²⁶ Max Ferrari, "Eurasia o Eurabia: UE al bivio", *Associazione Culturale Lombardia Russia*, 4 June (2014), <http://lombardiarussia.org/index.php/component/content/article/57-categoria-home-/300-eurasia-o-urabiaue-al-bivio>.

²⁷ Antonio Rapisarda, "L'ideologo di Putin lancia la Lega: 'Ultima speranza per l'Italia'", *Il Tempo*, 23 June (2015), <http://www.iltempo.it/politica/2015/06/23/l-ideologo-di-putin-lancia-la-lega-ultima-speranza-per-l-italia-1.1429396>.

The first contacts between the FPÖ under the leadership of Heinz-Christian Strache and Russian officials dates back to October 2005, when Ewald Stadler, then president of the FPÖ's Freedom Academy, arranged a meeting of Strache and Johann Gudenus with diplomats from Hungary, Croatia, Poland, Russia, Belarus, Iran, Spain and Bulgaria.²⁸ Unfortunately, no details about that meeting are known.

As a leader of a party represented in the parliament, Strache met with Putin in May 2007 during the Russian president's visit to Vienna. Putin must have made a great impression on Strache: the next day after the meeting, the FPÖ published a press release quoting Strache as saying that Europe was "unthinkable without Russia" and that it was essential "to further expand and deepen our friendship and cooperation with Russia in order to secure peace in Europe and strengthen democracy, economic and social security together with Russia".²⁹

The FPÖ became engaged in various pro-Russian efforts in 2008, when the company Austrian Technologies GmbH founded by the FPÖ's member Barbara Kappel started a series of political conferences that aimed to advance Russian foreign policy interests and involved Russian stakeholders:

- Europe-Russia-Georgia: Peace Building I (October 2008)
- Europe-Russia-Georgia: Peace Building II (May 2009)
- Conflict versus Dialogue: Are There Any Solutions to the Crises of the Modern World? (November 2009)
- 55 Years of the Austrian State Treaty – Reflections from the Austrian-Russian Perspective (January 2010)
- Coloured revolutions in the CIS countries and their current impact (June 2010)

These conferences were attended by the leadership of the FPÖ and, among others, several members of the "United Russia" party: Grigoriy Ivliev, Viktor Zvageľ'sky, Irina Rodnina and Sergey Markov. One of the co-organisers of the conference in January 2010 was Rossotrudnichestvo, Russia's major instrument of soft power in foreign countries.

The involvement of the FPÖ in the political conferences of Austrian Technologies GmbH helped its leadership build close links to Russian officials. In December 2008, the FPÖ delegation consisting of Strache, Kappel, Johann Gudenus, Johannes Hübner, Harald Vilimsky and Hilmar Kabas travelled to Moscow and met with then Moscow Mayor Yuriy Luzhkov and several MPs from the "United Russia" party.³⁰ In the beginning of 2009, Aleksandr Dugin visited Vienna and was introduced to Strache and Kappel, as well as becoming a guest at the Ball des Wiener Korporationsrings, an annual ball organised by the Viennese Burschenschaften.³¹

²⁸ "HC Strache knüpft Diplomaten-Kontakte", *Neue Freie Zeitung*, 20 October (2005), p. 13.

²⁹ "Strache: Europa ist ohne Russland nicht denkbar", *APA-OTS*, 24 May (2007), http://www.ots.at/presseaussendung/OTS_20070524_OT0059/strache-europa-ist-ohne-russland-nicht-denkbar.

³⁰ "Überaus herzlicher Gedankenaustausch von HC Strache und Moskauer Oberbürgermeister Luschkow", *APA-OTS*, 16 December (2008), http://www.ots.at/presseaussendung/OTS_20081216_OT0054/ueberaus-herzlicher-gedankenaustausch-von-hc-strache-und-moskauer-oberbuergemeister-luschkow.

³¹ "Eurasischer Rechtsextremismus in Wien", *Dokumentationsarchiv des österreichischen Widerstandes*, June (2014), <http://www.doew.at/erkennen/rechtsextremismus/neues-von-ganz-rechts/archiv/juni-2014/eurasischer-rechtsextremismus-in-wien>.

The 2009 edition of the manual for FPÖ politicians published by the FPÖ Educational Institute (FPÖ-Bildungsinstitut) recognised Russia as “an important geostrategic partner of the EU” and called to respect the “Russian sphere of influence”.³²

In June 2009, a large delegation of top FPÖ members and Austrian entrepreneurs visited Moscow and, in particular, the Russian parliament.³³ In April 2010, the FPÖ’s Johann Gudenus and Andreas Karlsböck travelled to Moscow to meet with Russian officials and representatives of the “United Russia” party.³⁴ In May 2011, the FPÖ’s leadership travelled to Moscow for a meeting with Boris Gromov, then the Governor of the Moscow region, and other Russian officials.³⁵ In February 2012, Gudenus and Johannes Hübner paid a visit to Ramzan Kadyrov, the head of Russia’s Chechen Republic.³⁶ The Austrian media criticised the FPÖ’s meeting with Kadyrov, pointing out numerous human rights violations in Chechnya.³⁷

Among the FPÖ’s leadership, Johann Gudenus has been the most energetic advocate of the pro-Russian position of the party, and has long-standing relations with Russia. Gudenus learned Russian language at school, and travelled regularly to take part in summer schools at the Moscow State University from 1995 until 2003.³⁸ In 2005, while studying at the Diplomatic Academy in Vienna for the degree of Master of Advanced International Studies, Gudenus lived in Russia for about a year studying at the Diplomatic Academy of Russia’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs.³⁹ Between October 2006 and March 2010, Gudenus was managing director of Donovan Invest Trading GmbH, an Austrian company engaged in wholesale trade of raw cotton and yarn. The company had a subsidiary in Moscow, Donovan Invest Trading Rus, while the Austrian company itself was owned, from 2007, by a Russian citizen. The balance sheet, which Donovan Invest Trading GmbH submitted to the Austrian relevant authorities to cover the period until the end of 2007, indicated that the company had a debt of approximately €300,000 – Gudenus never explained the nature of this debt. The company submitted no balance sheets afterwards. Gudenus left the position of managing director of Donovan Invest Trading GmbH in 2010, and it was liquidated a year later.⁴⁰

In the beginning of the 2010s, Gudenus forged relations with Russian-born Nathalie Holzmüller who had lived in Austria since 1991 and launched, in 2007, the Viennese “Russian Ball”, an annual social event aiming at promoting Russian culture and Russian political interests in Austria. Gudenus became a co-sponsor of “Russian Balls” in Vienna. In May 2014, Holzmüller helped organise a secret international meeting of European and Russian far-right activists and politicians

³² *Handbuch freiheitlicher Politik: Ein Leitfaden für Führungsfunktionäre und Mandatsträger der Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs* (Vienna: Freiheitliches Bildungsinstitut, 2009), p. 248.

³³ “2009 in Kürze”, *Neue Freie Zeitung*, 17 December (2009), p. 16.

³⁴ “FPÖ-Delegation zu Besuch bei ‘Einiges Rußland’ in Moskau”, *Neue Freie Zeitung*, 6 May (2010), p. 14.

³⁵ “Soobshchenie press-sluzhby gubernatora Moskovskoy oblasti”, *Moskovskaya oblast*, 11 May (2011), http://old.mosreg.ru/oficial_chronicle/60539.html.

³⁶ “‘Frieden und Ruhe’ in Grosny”, *ORF*, 9 February (2012), <http://news.orf.at/stories/2103993/2103995/>.

³⁷ Eduard Steiner, “Gudenus: Geheime FPÖ-Mission nach Tschetschenien”, *Die Presse*, 7 February (2012), http://diepresse.com/home/politik/innenpolitik/730447/Gudenus_Geheime-FPOMission-nach-Tschetschenien; “FPÖ-Delegation besucht tschetschenischen Präsidenten Kadyrow”, *Der Standard*, 7 February (2012), <http://derstandard.at/1328507166001/Geheime-Mission-am-Kaukasus-FPOe-Delegation-besucht-tschetschenischen-Praesidenten-Kadyrow>.

³⁸ “Über mich”, *Johann Gudenus*, <http://www.jgudenus.at/zur-person/>.

³⁹ Natalya Barabash, “My s Kadyrovym nashli obshchiy yazyk”, *Vzglyad*, 10 May (2012), <http://vz.ru/politics/2012/5/10/578121.html>.

⁴⁰ Herwig G. Höller, “Moskaus blaue Freunde”, *Die Zeit*, 29 September (2014), <http://www.zeit.de/2014/40/russland-oesterreich-kreml-fpoe/komplettansicht>; Sofia Khomenko, “FPÖ: Aus Liebe zu Russland”, *Mokant*, 30 June (2015), <http://mokant.at/1506-fpoe-russland-ukraine-geld/>.

in Vienna. The event was attended by the FPÖ's Strache, Gudenus and Johann Herzog, a Russian sanctioned Russian businessman Konstantin Malofeyev, Aleksandr Dugin, the National Front's Marion Maréchal-Le Pen and Aymeric Chauprade, the leader of the Bulgarian "Attack" party Volen Siderov, and some other people.⁴¹ The participants of this far-right meeting discussed how to save Europe from liberalism and the "satanic gay lobby".

As was already mentioned, Gudenus and Hübner travelled to Crimea in March 2014, as the Russian authorities needed some external legitimisation for their illegal occupation of the Ukrainian peninsula and illegitimate "referendum".⁴² For their activities, Gudenus and Hübner – as well as other participants of the fake observation mission in Crimea – were barred by the Ukrainian authorities from entering Ukraine for three years. This, however, did not stop either Hübner or some other members of the FPÖ from participating in Russian efforts to legitimise the annexation of Crimea by visiting the peninsula in violation of the Ukrainian law.

In April 2016, two FPÖ's MPs, namely Axel Kassegger and Barbara Rosenkranz, took part in a big conference titled "Second Yalta International Economic Forum" that took place in annexed Crimea.⁴³ The organising committee was headed by the EU-sanctioned "Prime Minister" of Crimea Sergey Aksyonov. The two major aims of the conference were: (1) to provide Western legitimisation of the annexation of Crimea with the help of Western politicians who attended the forum, and (2) to find ways to circumvent the sanctions imposed on investments in Crimea by Western nations. Other far-right politicians who participated in the forum that year included Hristo Marinov (Bulgarian "Attack"), Stefano Valdegamberi (Italian Northern League), Marcus Pretzell and Markus Frohnmaier (Alternative for Germany), Mitsuhiro Kimura (far-right Japanese Issuikai group), Mateusz Piskorski (Polish "Change"), and some others. Piskorski was arrested by the Polish security services shortly afterwards. In his turn, Hübner took part in the Third Yalta International Economic Forum in April 2017,⁴⁴ while the FPÖ's Detlef Wimmer participated in the fourth instalment of the same forum in April 2018. He was joined by European far-right politicians such as Nicolas Bay (National Front), Bill Etheridge (UKIP) and Markus Frohnmaier.⁴⁵

At the end of 2016, the "United Russia" party decided to formalise its friendly relations with the FPÖ and to sign a coordination and cooperation agreement with the Austrian far-right party. This became possible because of the presidential elections in Austria. In April 2016, the FPÖ's Norbert Hofer won the first round of the presidential election and would face Alexander Van der Bellen, who was supported by the Greens, in the re-run. For technical reasons, the second round would be held only in December 2016, and at the end of November that year "United Russia" arrived at a decision to conclude the agreement with the FPÖ after the second round as it hoped that Hofer

⁴¹ Bernhard Odehnal, "Gipfeltreffen mit Putins fünfter Kolonne", *Tages-Anzeiger*, 3 June (2014), <http://www.tagesanzeiger.ch/ausland/europa/Gipfeltreffen-mit-Putins-fuenfter-Kolonne/story/30542701>.

⁴² "FPÖ-Politiker und Stadler als 'Wahlbeobachter' auf der Krim", *OÖNachrichten*, 16 March (2014), <https://www.nachrichten.at/nachrichten/ticker/FPOE-Politiker-und-Stadler-als-Wahlbeobachter-auf-der-Krim;art449,1332891>.

⁴³ "FPÖ-Politiker als Promigäste auf annektierter Krim", *Der Standard*, 15 April (2016), <https://derstandard.at/2000034942183/FPOe-Politiker-als-Promigaeste-auf-annektierter-Krim>.

⁴⁴ "FPÖ-Besuch auf Krim regt auf, ÖVP distanziert", *Kurier*, 7 November (2017), <https://kurier.at/politik/ausland/waehrend-regierungsgespraechen-neuerlicher-fpoe-besuch-auf-der-krim/296.760.628>.

⁴⁵ "Bezahlte Russland für Krim-Reise von Linzer Vizebürgermeister?", *Die Presse*, 24 April (2018), <https://diepresse.com/home/ausland/aussenpolitik/5411889/Bezahlte-Russland-fuer-KrimReise-von-Linzer-Vizebuergemeister>.

would win the election and go to Moscow as the elected president of Austria to sign the agreement.

Although Hofer lost, the FPÖ delegation went to Moscow two weeks after the re-run. Featuring top leaders of the party such as Strache, Hofer, Hübner, Gudenus and Vilimsky, the delegation met, on 19 December, with Deputy Chairman of the Russian parliament Pyotr Tolstoy and then Deputy Secretary of the General Council of “United Russia” Sergey Zheleznyak. Strache and Zheleznyak officially signed the agreement that, in particular, envisaged exchanging information on different topics, strengthening friendship and education of young people, and supporting the development of economic, trade and investment cooperation between the two countries.⁴⁶

This agreement, however, seemed to have more of a symbolic value than a tactical one. When Austria held parliamentary elections in 2017, Russian stakeholders did not try to boost support for the FPÖ, because that would damage Moscow’s relations with the ÖVP and SPÖ, the parties that were historically in good relations with the Kremlin. However, Putin’s Russia indirectly benefitted from the formation of the coalition government between the ÖVP and FPÖ. The FPÖ’s control over Ministry of the Interior (Herbert Kickl) and Ministry of Defence (Mario Kunasek) undermined trust in Austria among Western partners who fear that these ministries may now be compromised and be passing sensitive information to Russia. British and Dutch intelligence services are said to have suspended sharing sensitive information with the Austrian agencies. One result of the distrust towards Austria is the fact that the Austrian services seemed to have been unaware that Australian right-wing terrorist Brenton Tarrant, who killed 50 people in Christchurch in March 2019, previously visited Austria.⁴⁷

France

Like in Italy, several small organisations founded by French far-right activists, for example, France-Russia Collective, Equality and Reconciliation or Association France-Europe-Russia Alliance, had been engaged in various efforts to advance Russian interests in France, but high-ranking Russian officials were reluctant to build contacts with those organisations they as played a very insignificant role in the French society.

Even when Marine Le Pen, the newly elected president of the National Front declared, in 2011, that she, to a certain degree, admired Putin and would favour partnership with Russia for “obvious civilisational and geostrategic reasons”,⁴⁸ Moscow was still not interested in providing any support to the National Front. France would hold a presidential election in 2012 and no public opinion poll predicted that Le Pen would make it to the second round, and Moscow hoped to have good relations with either François Hollande or Nicolas Sarkozy, who were the frontrunners of the elections, and did not want to damage relations with any of them by supporting a competitor, i.e. Le Pen, of both of them.

The situation changed after Putin met with President Hollande turned out to be very critical of Russia’s support for Assad’s regime in Syria. The Kremlin realised that Hollande would not appease

⁴⁶ “FPÖ schließt Fünf-Jahres-Vertrag mit Kreml-Partei”, *Die Presse*, 19 December (2016),

<http://diepresse.com/home/politik/innenpolitik/5136136/FPOe-schliesst-FuenfJahresVertrag-mit-KremlPartei>

⁴⁷ Fabian Schmid, “Russland-Nähe der FPÖ sorgt für Isolation des BVT”, *Der Standard*, 8 April (2019),

<https://derstandard.at/2000101031061/Russland-Naehe-der-FPOe-sorgt-fuer-Isolation-des-BVT-von>.

⁴⁸ Quoted in “Marine Le Pen veut aller en Russie”, *Le Figaro*, 2 May (2011), <http://www.lefigaro.fr/flash-actu/2011/05/02/97001-20110502FILWWW00503-marine-le-pen-veut-allen-russie.php>.

Putin and started looking for political allies outside the French mainstream. Russian Ambassador to France Aleksandr Orlov and his adviser on French political parties Leonid Kadyshev suggested building closer ties with the National Front and the French far right in general.⁴⁹ One immediate outcome of the new approach towards to French far right was Gilles Arnaud's success in securing Russian funding for the Internet-based ProRussia.TV.

At the same time, Orlov and Kadyshev started meeting regularly and discreetly with the leadership of the National Front at the Russian Embassy in Paris and the Russian diplomatic residence. In December 2012 Marine Le Pen's niece Marion Maréchal-Le Pen went to Moscow and took part in the First International Parliamentary Forum held at the initiative of the Russian parliament. Upon her return to France, Maréchal-Le Pen said in an interview that Russia was seeking partners in France and that she hoped that the National Front might become such a partner.⁵⁰

In June 2013, Marine Le Pen – accompanied by Ludovic de Danne and her partner and the National Front's vice president Louis Aliot – went to Moscow. During their visit, the delegation met with several high-ranking Russian officials and politicians from the “United Russia” parliamentary group. Considering Le Pen's talks with various Russian stakeholders, her visit to Russia looked like one long job interview: she sought support from the Kremlin, while the Russian officials tried to figure out whether the National Front was worthy of support.

Le Pen's meetings in Moscow in June 2013 laid the foundations of closer relations between the National Front and Russian actors. In October 2013, Aymeric Chauprade, who was then Le Pen's adviser on international relations, was invited to participate in the meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club, and, from the second half of 2013, he became a regular commentator for the Russian media.

In the beginning of 2014, Chauprade introduced the founder of the National Front Jean-Marie Le Pen to Malofeyev in order to help the veteran of the French far right get money for a political funding association Cotelec that was used to lend funds for electoral campaigns of National Front members. In April 2014, Cotelec received €2 million from Vernonsia Holdings Ltd, a Cyprus-registered offshoot of the Investment Company of Vnesheconombank (or VEB Capital) that, in its turn, is a 100% subsidiary company of the Russian state corporation “Bank of Development and Foreign Economic Affairs” (or Vnesheconombank).⁵¹ According to Jean-Marie Le Pen, Chauprade himself borrowed €400,000 from Cotelec to fund his electoral campaign for the 2014 elections to the European Parliament, and French investigative journalists from *Mediapart* suggested that he received this loan for the promise of Russian money to help fund Jean-Marie Le Pen's micro-party, i.e. Cotelec.⁵²

According to *Mediapart*, in February 2014, Marine Le Pen made a secret trip to Moscow and met with Putin and Aleksandr Babakov, then MP from “United Russia” and Special presidential

⁴⁹ Vincent Jauvert, “Poutine et le FN: révélations sur les réseaux russes des Le Pen”, *L'OBS*, 27 November (2014), <http://tempsreel.nouvelobs.com/politique/20141024.OBS3131/poutine-et-le-fn-revelations-sur-les-reseaux-russes-des-le-pen.html>.

⁵⁰ Quoted in Marine Turchi, “Au Front national, le lobbying pro-russe s'accélère”, *Mediapart*, 18 December (2014), <https://www.mediapart.fr/journal/france/181214/au-front-national-le-lobbying-pro-russe-saccelere>.

⁵¹ Fabrice Arfi, Karl Laske, Marine Turchi, “La Russie au secours du FN: deux millions d'euros”, *Mediapart*, 29 November (2014), <https://www.mediapart.fr/journal/france/291114/la-russie-au-secours-du-fn-deux-millions-d-euros-aussi-pour-jean-marie-le-pen>.

⁵² *Ibid.*

representative for cooperation with organisations representing Russians living abroad. Babakov was essential in Le Pen's negotiations with the Russian officials about a €9.4 million loan to the National Front that the party obtained from the First Czech-Russian Bank in September 2014.⁵³ More than 90% of the charter capital of that bank belonged to Stroytransgaz, a Russian engineering construction company in the field of oil and gas, while the majority of the shares of Stroytransgaz is owned by companies and holdings that belong to Gennadiy Timchenko, a major Russian businessman from Putin's inner circle.⁵⁴ It seems that Putin was directly involved in making the final decision to provide a loan to the National Front.

Another person identified by *Mediapart* as one who had contributed to the negotiations about the Russian loan is Jean-Luc Schaffhauser, a French far-right politician affiliated with the National Front and the president of the European Academy, a Paris-based organisation that aims at fostering relations between European states and Russia. According to *Mediapart*, in 2014-2015, the European Academy received €250 thousand from two companies managed by Babakov's business partners.⁵⁵ In June 2014, the European Academy co-opted Aleksandr Vorobyov and Mikhail Plisyuk, directors of the Moscow-based Institute of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation, who started sending Schaffhauser recommendations for Russia- and Ukraine-related statements. It was also Plisyuk who arranged Schaffhauser's trip to the Russia-occupied territories in Eastern Ukraine to observe illegitimate "parliamentary elections" there in November 2014. The National Front's economic strategist Bernard Monot said that Schaffhauser was essential in securing the deal about the loan with the Russian actors, and Schaffhauser himself confirmed that he had been paid €140,000 for his mediation.⁵⁶

Despite the seemingly good relations between the National Front and Putin's regime, their "love affair" seemed to stumble in 2016. In February 2016, the National Front's treasurer Wallerand de Saint-Just claimed that the party experienced problems with applying for loans from French banks to run the 2017 parliamentary and presidential campaigns, and that the party had applied for a €27 million loan from an unnamed Russian bank.⁵⁷ There was no evidence that Moscow provided any new loan to the National Front. As the French presidential elections approached, Moscow seemed to have placed its stake on a different French politician, namely the centre-right candidate François Fillon who was also friendly towards Russia. Moreover, public opinion polls conducted at the end of 2016 suggested that Fillon and Le Pen would make it to the second round of the election, so that was a win-win prospect for the Kremlin that felt no need to support Le Pen, who – according to the same opinion polls – would lose to Fillon in a re-run.

The situation changed in the beginning of 2017, when public support for Fillon dramatically decreased and Moscow-sceptic Emmanuel Macron "pushed" Fillon out from the polls on the second round: they predicted that Macron would win presidency against Le Pen. Therefore, the

⁵³ Marine Turchi, "Le Front national décroche les millions russes", *Mediapart*, 22 November (2014), <https://www.mediapart.fr/journal/france/221114/le-front-national-decroche-les-millions-russes>.

⁵⁴ Christopher M. Matthews, Andrew Grossman, "U.S. Money-Laundering Probe Touches Putin's Inner Circle", *The Wall Street Journal*, 5 November (2014), <http://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-money-laundering-probe-touches-putins-inner-circle-1415234261>.

⁵⁵ Agathe Duparc, "Le Front national a traité avec des banques mafieuses russes", *Mediapart*, 2 May (2017), <https://www.mediapart.fr/journal/international/020517/le-front-national-traite-avec-des-banques-mafieuses-russes>.

⁵⁶ Agathe Duparc, Karl Laske, Marine Turchi, "Argent du FN: les hommes de la filière russe", *Mediapart*, 8 December (2014), <https://www.mediapart.fr/journal/france/081214/argent-du-fn-les-hommes-de-la-filiere-russe>.

⁵⁷ Charles Bremner, "Le Pen's Party Asks Russia for €27m Loan", *The Times*, 19 February (2016), <http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/news/world/europe/article4693936.ece>.

Kremlin needed to damage Macron in order to either “return” Fillon to the prospective re-run in which he would contest presidency against Le Pen or secure Le Pen’s victory over Macron.

Russia state-controlled media hit the stage. RT played the anti-globalist and anti-Semitic card as it reported on Macron’s highly paid position at Rothschild & Cie Banque controlled by the Rothschild family.⁵⁸ Sputnik combined left-wing populism and homophobia as it communicated the allegations of Nicolas Dhuicq, a French centre-right MP and a member of the board of the French-Russian Dialogue Association, that Macron was “an agent of the big American banking system” and was backed by a “very wealthy gay lobby”.⁵⁹ The French editions of RT and Sputnik also spread the claims that Julian Assange of the notorious WikiLeaks allegedly had some compromising materials that would supposedly discredit Macron.⁶⁰ (These “materials” were never published and perhaps never existed.) It is difficult to assess the efficiency of the Russian media attacks against Macron, but his ratings did drop by a few percent in mid-February 2017, although he quickly restored and strengthened them by the end of the same month.

In March 2017, a month before the first round of the presidential election, Marine Le Pen went to Moscow and met with Vladimir Putin. Although it was not directly articulated – and despite Putin’s assurances that Moscow “in no case” wanted to influence the presidential elections in France⁶¹ – the meeting implied that, in the situation where it was clear that Macron and Le Pen would contend the second round, Le Pen was Moscow candidate. At the end of the same month, the Russian state made yet another effort to influence the French public opinion: the French edition of Sputnik published results of a misleading opinion poll that suggested that Fillon was the front runner of the elections.⁶² Those results contradicted results of reputable polling organisations, which correctly placed Fillon third in the polls, and even evoked a warning from the French polling watchdog that suggested treating Sputnik’s publication with caution because of its “non-representative nature”.⁶³

Apart from the Russian media attacks, Macron’s campaign was a target of cyber-attacks. Already in February 2017, Macron’s team complained that their campaign website and their databases were subject to hundreds or even thousands of cyber-attacks emanating from various locations in Russia.⁶⁴ And two days before the second round, which saw Macron facing Le Pen, 9 Gb trove of e-

⁵⁸ “‘Il n’y a pas une culture française’: Macron s’attire les foudres de la droite”, *RT*, 6 February (2017), <https://francais.rt.com/france/33569-il-n-a-pasculture-francaise-macron-attire-foudres-droite>; “Dupont-Aignan soupçonne Macron de conflits d’intérêts et veut qu’il clarifie ‘ses financements’”, *RT*, 11 February (2017), <https://francais.rt.com/france/33829-dupont-aignan-soupconne-macron-conflitinterets-clarifie-financements>.

⁵⁹ “Ex-French Economy Minister Macron Could Be ‘US Agent’ Lobbying Banks’ Interests”, *Sputnik*, 4 February (2017), <https://sputniknews.com/analysis/201702041050340451-macron-us-agent-dhuicq/>.

⁶⁰ “Assange: des révélations sur Macron dans les mails de Clinton”, *Sputnik*, 3 February (2017), <https://fr.sputniknews.com/international/201702031029930563-wikileaks-revelations-macron/>; “Assange: WikiLeaks a trouvé des informations sur Macron dans des emails de Clinton”, *RT*, 3 February (2017), <https://francais.rt.com/france/33403-wikileaks-macron-clinton-email-assange>.

⁶¹ “Meeting with Marine Le Pen”, *President of Russia*, 24 March (2017), <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/54102>.

⁶² “Présidentielle 2017: Fillon donné favori selon une étude des réseaux sociaux”, *Sputnik*, 29 March (2017), <https://fr.sputniknews.com/france/201703291030674491-france-presidentielle-etude-des-reseaux-sociaux-fillon/>.

⁶³ David Chazan, “French Polling Watchdog Issues Warning after Russian News Report Claims Francois Fillon Regains Lead”, *The Telegraph*, 2 April (2017), <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/04/02/french-polling-watchdog-issues-warning-russian-news-report-claims/>.

⁶⁴ “France Condemns Alleged Russian Cyber Attacks Targeting Presidential Candidate Macron”, *France24*, 19 February (2017), <https://www.france24.com/en/20170219-france-condemns-cyberattacks-targeting-presidential-candidate-macron-points-russia>.

mail messages and files related to the Macron campaign appeared on the anonymous document sharing website Pastebin.⁶⁵ Investigative journalists who analysed those files discovered that some of the leaked Excel documents had been modified using the Russian version of Excel and Russian-language computers. Furthermore, at least one document had been modified by a user named Georgiy Petrovich Roshka who was later identified as an officer of the main centre of the special service of Russia's Main Intelligence Directorate that specialises in cryptography.⁶⁶

Germany

Pro-Kremlin sentiments among the German far right are usually associated with the radical right-wing populist Alternative for Germany (AfD), but it is important to stress that almost all contemporary German far-right movements and organisations, including the neo-Nazi National Democratic Party of Germany, are generally friendly towards Russia which is a legacy of the pro-Soviet sentiments of German far-right neutralism.

The AfD was founded in 2013 by Alexander Gauland, Bernd Lucke and Konrad Adam as a non-radical, soft Eurosceptic party that could be described as a single-issue party as its main political message was an idea of Germany leaving the Eurozone. In 2015, however, the AfD underwent an internal conflict between its neo-liberal wing led by Lucke and a national-conservative wing led by Alexander Gauland and Frauke Petry – a conflict that eventually resulted in the latter taking control over the party in July 2015. The victory of the national-conservative wing of the AfD paved the way for further radicalisation of the party and embrace of the pro-Kremlin foreign policy ideas that were disavowed by Lucke but promoted by Gauland. For example, already in November 2014, Gauland took part in a meeting called “Freedom with Russia – for a sovereign Europe”⁶⁷ organised by the German far-right magazine *Compact* and attended, among others, by Russian oligarch Vladimir Yakunin, Natalya Narochnitskaya and John Laughland of the Paris-based Russian soft-power think-tank Institute of Democracy and Cooperation, German conspiracy theorist Andreas von Bülow, and the leader of the National-Democratic Party of Germany Frank Franz. As a result of the new developments in the AfD, Lucke left the party with his allies referring to rising xenophobic, anti-Western and pro-Russian leanings in the party as the reason for his departure.⁶⁸

As a clear sign of the obvious pro-Kremlin turn of the AfD, its members started travelling to Russia-annexed Crimea. Thus, in April 2016, an AfD's MEP Marcus Pretzell took part in the Second Yalta International Economic Forum, together with Markus Frohnmaier, a co-founder of the AfD's youth wing Young Alternative for Germany. Their trip to Crimea – the Russian organisers paid for their flights, accommodation and provided subsistence allowance⁶⁹ – raised suspicions that Moscow was supporting the AfD financially. The party's treasurer Klaus Fohrmann denied any support from

⁶⁵ Eric Auchard, Bate Felix, “French Candidate Macron Claims Massive Hack as Emails Leaked”, *Reuters*, 6 May (2017), <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-france-election-macron-leaks/french-candidate-macron-claims-massive-hack-as-emails-leaked-idUSKBN1812AZ>.

⁶⁶ Roman Dobrokhotov, “Roshka the Bear: How French President's Mailbox Was Hacked by Russian Intelligence”, *The Insider*, 28 October (2017), <https://theins.ru/uncategorized/76960?lang=en>.

⁶⁷ Alexej Hock, “Russlands rechtes Netzwerk: Die Einflussnahme Russlands auf rechte Strukturen in der EU” (2015), <http://www.politik-in-gesellschaft.de/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/PiG20150708-Russlands-rechtes-Netzwerk-Die-Einflussnahme-Russlands-auf-rechte-Strukturen-in-der-EU.pdf>.

⁶⁸ Noah Barkin, “German AfD Founder Leaves Party Decrying Xenophobic Shift”, *Reuters*, 8 July (2015), <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-germany-politics-eurosceptics-idUSKCN0PI25720150708>.

⁶⁹ Sven Becker, Melanie Amann, Russische Stiftung bezahlte Krimreise von AfD-Politiker Pretzell, *Spiegel*, 21 January (2017), <https://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/marcus-pretzell-russische-stiftung-bezahlte-krimreise-des-afd-politikers-a-1130921.html>.

Russia but could not rule out that Russian money might have been involved in the anonymous donations to the party in the form of thousands of election posters and millions of copies of a free campaign newspaper promoting the AfD.⁷⁰

In February 2017, Petry, Pretzell and yet another AfD's member Julian Flak visited Moscow on the invitation of the Moscow City Government and met with the Chairman of the Russian parliament Vyacheslav Volodin, his deputy Pyotr Tolstoy, Leonid Slutsky and Vladimir Zhirinovskiy. During the meeting with Volodin, they discussed cooperation between regional parliaments, cross-party cooperation, and developing contacts between youth organisations. (Already by that time, Frohnmaier's Young Alternative had established contacts with the "Young Guard", a youth organisation of the "United Russia" party.) It would later turn out that the AfD delegation travelled to and from Moscow on a private jet and unnamed Russian individuals paid €25,000 for this trip.⁷¹

In April 2017, the AfD organised two conferences in Freiberg and Dresden that explicitly aimed at advancing Russian foreign policy interests in Germany. Apart from members of the AfD, the conferences hosted members of the FPÖ (Hans-Jörg Jenewein, Wolfgang Jung, Detlef Wimmer, Mia Akerblom), Northern League, Flemish Interest and Communist Party of the Russian Federation.⁷²

As Germany would hold parliamentary elections in September 2017, Russian stakeholders decided to covertly help the AfD with their election campaign as Moscow was dissatisfied with Angela Merkel, whose resolve to maintain the sanctions against Putin's Russia was one of the key reasons why the sanctions regime was still in place. The strategy that pro-Kremlin Russian actors adopted in the months leading to the elections was as follows: attack Merkel and her government, and advance the AfD.⁷³

Attacking Merkel was an uncomplicated task: after Merkel's controversial decision to open Germany's borders to more than one million refugees during the 2015-2016 refugee crisis, she became an easy target for conservatives and the far right. Thus, German editions of RT and, especially, Sputnik, published vast numbers of anti-immigrant and anti-refugee stories that attacked Merkel and simultaneously promoted the AfD. Pro-Kremlin bots amplified these stories on social networks. Apart from the nativist narratives, the Russian state media and pro-Kremlin bots pushed the message that the AfD would become a victim of electoral fraud. The first wave of these allegations came in May 2017, and the second in September that year.⁷⁴ In relation to the second wave, Russian and Western far-right users produced a Twitter storm using a hashtag #wahlbetrug (electoral fraud), thus insinuating that the forthcoming elections would be rigged by the establishment parties. Some Russian stakeholders also attempted to secure funding and media

⁷⁰ Melanie Amann, Pavel Lokshin, "German Populists Forge Ties with Russia", *Spiegel*, 27 April (2016), <https://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/german-populists-forge-deeper-ties-with-russia-a-1089562.html>.

⁷¹ "Report: AfD Members' Flight Sponsored with Russian Money", *Deutsche Welle*, 22 May (2018), <https://www.dw.com/en/report-afd-members-flight-sponsored-with-russian-money/a-43872774>.

⁷² "FPÖ-Delegation bei internationaler Konferenz gegen Russland-Sanktionen", *Unzensuriert*, 2 April (2017), <https://www.unzensuriert.at/content/0023601-FPOe-Delegation-bei-internationaler-Konferenz-gegen-Russland-Sanktionen>.

⁷³ Anne Applebaum, Peter Pomerantsev, Melanie Smith, Chloe Colliver, "Make Germany Great Again": *Kremlin, Alt-Right and International Influences in the 2017 German Elections* (London: ISD, 2017), <https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Make-Germany-Great-Again-ENG-061217.pdf>.

⁷⁴ "Russisches 'Bot'-Netzwerk verbreitet Beiträge von AfD-Unterstützern", *Focus*, 24 September (2017), https://www.focus.de/politik/deutschland/bundestagswahl_2017/bundestagswahl-analyse-hunderte-fake-twitter-profile-verbreiten-beitraege-von-afd-unterstuetzern_id_7631486.html.

support for individual AfD members who ran for parliament: a joint journalistic investigation by BBC, *Der Spiegel*, ZDF and *La Repubblica* revealed that a plan to support a pro-Kremlin AfD candidate, Markus Frohnmaier, was submitted to the Russian Presidential Administration a few months before the elections. The author of the plan argued that Russia could have its “own absolutely controlled MP in the Bundestag”.⁷⁵

Furthermore, Russian language media such as First Channel, RTR-Planeta TV, and RIA Novosti helped the AfD to mobilise the so-called *Russlanddeutsche*, i.e. ethnic Germans who were born and resided in the Soviet Union but eventually moved to Germany, and non-German Russian-speaking immigrants who managed to acquire German citizenship. The AfD was essentially the only German party that strove to lure in the *Russlanddeutsche*, who, according to various estimates, account for 2.5-3 million people.⁷⁶

In February 2018, around 10 members of German regional parliaments of North Rhine-Westphalia, Berlin and Baden-Württemberg representing the AfD illegally visited Russia-annexed Crimea to discuss the lifting of the sanctions imposed by Western nations. The next month, an AfD member Ulrich Oehme, accompanied by German far-right journalist Manuel Ochsenreiter, observed the illegitimate presidential election in Crimea as part of the fake election observation mission organised by Leonid Slutsky.⁷⁷ At the same time, at least six members of the AfD monitored the presidential election in Russia – their visit was organised by the same Slutsky.⁷⁸ In May 2018, Frohnmaier again travelled to Crimea to take part in the Yalta International Economic Forum.⁷⁹

In the beginning of June 2018, AfD’s MP Robby Schlund, who observed presidential elections in Russia in March 2018, met in Moscow with Pavel Zavalny, an MP from “United Russia” and Chairman of the Energy Committee of the Russian parliament.⁸⁰ Upon his return to Germany, Schlund founded, and became chairman of, the German-Russian Parliamentary Group consisting of around 140 German and Russian members. As a result, Robby Schlund, whose wife – like that of Frohnmaier’s – is of Russian origin, became an important coordinator of contacts between the AfD and Russian stakeholders.

Italy

Up until 2013, a range of Italian far-right organisations, for example, Eurasia Coordination Project, Millennium, State and Power (renamed into Patriotic Socialism) and National Front had been engaged in various efforts aimed at advancing Russian foreign policy interests in Italy trying to reach out to Russian stakeholders. However, high-ranking Russian officials were not interested in cooperating with those small groups and established no significant contacts with them.

⁷⁵ Melanie Amann *et al.*, “Wie Putin die AfD für seine Zwecke benutzt”, *Spiegel*, 5 April (2019), <https://www.spiegel.de/plus/wie-putin-die-afd-fuer-seine-zwecke-missbraucht-a-00000000-0002-0001-0000-000163279501>.

⁷⁶ Jürgen Streihammer, “Deutschland: AfD, die Alternatiwa für Russlanddeutsche”, *Die Presse*, 19 September (2017), https://diepresse.com/home/ausland/aussenpolitik/5288575/Deutschland_AfD-die-Alternatiwa-fuer-Russlanddeutsche.

⁷⁷ Alexej Hock, “AfD-Abgeordnete reisen auf die Krim”, *Welt*, 13 April (2018), <https://www.welt.de/politik/deutschland/article175423073/AfD-Erst-zu-Assad-nun-auf-die-Krim.html>.

⁷⁸ Shekhovtsov, “Politically Biased Foreign Electoral Observation”.

⁷⁹ Claudia von Salzen, “Die Krim ist jetzt die russische Krim”, *Der Tagesspiegel*, 18 April (2019), <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/politik/die-russland-reisen-der-afd-die-krim-ist-jetzt-die-russische-krim/24232604.html>.

⁸⁰ “Vorsitz der Deutsch-Russischen Parlamentariergruppe”, *Robby Schlund*, 15 June (2018), <http://robby-schlund.de/2018/06/15/vorsitz-der-deutsch-russischen-parlamentariergruppe/>.

The situation started to change at the end of 2013, when the major Italian far-right party Northern League (Lega Nord, LN) was in the process of electing a new leader. Aleksey Komov, an associate of Russian ultranationalist businessman Konstantin Malofeyev, travelled to Turin in December 2013 and took part, together with a Russian MP from “United Russia” Viktor Zubarev, in the LN’s congress that elected Matteo Salvini as a new leader of the party.

The participation of Komov in the congress was a deliberate attempt to establish contacts between the LN and Russian actors. Apart from being linked to the homophobic World Congress of Families, Komov is the head of the international department of the Patriarch’s Commission on the Family Issues created by the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church in 2011. Shortly after the congress, in winter 2014, the LN created – as was discussed above – the Lombardy-Russia Cultural Association (LRCA) that officially cooperated with the Russian state-controlled media and promoted Moscow’s interests in Italy.

In spring 2014, the LRCA built important relations with the “Russian Italian Youth”, an organisation founded in 2011 to represent young Russians in Rome. It was founded by Irina Osipova, a Russian student and a daughter of Oleg Osipov, the head of the Rossotrudnichestvo office in Italy. Irina Osipova had friendly relations with a number of Italian far-right individuals and organisations such as convicted fascist bomb-thrower Maurizio Murelli and Italian fascist Andrea Palmeri who volunteered to fight against the Ukrainian government forces in Eastern Ukraine, as well as the leadership of the LN and the fascist movement CasaPound. Owing to her family connection to Rossotrudnichestvo, Osipova has significantly contributed to the pro-Russian efforts of the LRCA and LN, as well as having helped them advance their relations with the representatives of the Russian state.⁸¹ In September 2014, Osipova arranged a trip to Moscow for several members of the LRCA and other far-right movements, including the fascist New Force and CasaPound. Osipova would later obtain an Italian citizenship and join the Italian fascist party Brothers of Italy; in June 2016, she would even run for the Rome city council on the ticket of her party.⁸² Oleg Osipov said that he hoped that his daughter’s fascist party would win.⁸³

Like their Austrian counterparts, members of the LN started visiting Russia-annexed Crimea. After a trip to Crimea in October 2014,⁸⁴ the leadership of the LN/LRCA went to Moscow where they met with a number of high-ranking Russian officials and politicians such as Chairman of the Russian parliament Sergey Naryshkin, his deputy and the head of the “United Russia” parliamentary group Vladimir Vasilyev, the head of the parliamentary foreign affairs committee Aleksey Pushkov, and deputy Foreign Minister Aleksey Meshkov. The same month, Salvini had a chance to meet and talk to Putin during a break at the Asia-Europe summit in Milan.⁸⁵

⁸¹ Giovanni Savino, “From Evola to Dugin: The Neo-Eurasianist Connection in Italy”, in Laruelle (ed.), *Eurasianism and the European Far Right*, pp. 97-124.

⁸² Philip Willan, “Italian Right’s Kremlin Link Revealed”, *The Times*, 12 February (2018), <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/italian-rights-kremlin-link-revealed-wlr9lcw68>.

⁸³ Anna Fedorova, Anastasia Smirnova, Sergey Sharomygin, “V Italii Rossotrudnichestvo ‘vlyapalos’ v gromkiy politicheskii skandal”, *Novy den’*, 26 May (2016), <https://ndnews.it/ru/567987.html>.

⁸⁴ “Lega: non solo Mosca, a ottobre Salvini anche in Crimea”, *AGI*, 29 September (2014), http://archivio.agi.it/articolo/0bfa7ef9c5edcfe859c15a32acd39633_20140929_lega-non-solo-mosca-a-ottobre-salvini-anche-in-crimea/.

⁸⁵ Matteo Salvini, “20 minuti di incontro...”, *Facebook*, 17 October (2014), <https://www.facebook.com/salviniofficial/photos/a.10151670912208155.1073741827.252306033154/10152465922593155/>.

The same day Salvini met with Putin in Milan, an LN's MP Paolo Grimoldi, who visited Moscow as part of the LN/LRCA delegation, declared the launch of the cross-party group "Friends of Putin" in the Italian parliament. The LN hoped that the "Friends of Putin" group would attract several hundreds of supporters among the MPs and senators. When asked why the group had to be called "Friends of Putin" rather than "Friends of Russia", Salvini replied that Putin represented Russia and defended the prosperity of the Russians, and that his party admired Putin and hoped that he would "become an example for all the European nations".⁸⁶

The LN/ LRCA trip to Moscow in October 2014 marked the beginning of a series of frequent visits of the LN leadership to Russia and their meetings with high-ranking officials and politicians from the "United Russia" party. In October 2014, the LN's Claudio D'Amico met with Andrey Klimov, a member of the supervisory board of Malofeyev's Katehon think-tank and a senior member of "United Russia" who was responsible for the party's foreign relations in 2012-2016. During this meeting, D'Amico voiced the LN's opposition to the sanctions against Russia, and suggested that the LN and "United Russia" signed an agreement on cross-party cooperation.⁸⁷ Klimov and Salvini discussed this idea further during the latter's visit to Moscow in February 2015. The two of them continued discussing tentative official cooperation between the parties in December 2015 when Salvini, Gianluca Savoini and D'Amico arrived in Moscow for a 2-day visit.⁸⁸ It was not, however, until 6 March 2017, that Salvini and Zheleznyak signed a coordination and cooperation agreement between the LN and "United Russia".⁸⁹ The agreement was largely identical to that signed between the FPÖ and "United Russia" which means that the text of the agreement was provided by "United Russia", rather than negotiated by the FPÖ or LN.

Like in the Austrian case, the agreement between the LN and "United Russia" had a symbolic, rather than tactical, value. When Austria held parliamentary elections in March 2018, Russian state-controlled media, for example, the Italian edition of Sputnik, seemed to have greatly contributed to the Italian debate on migration and refugees – thus helping various right-wing and populist parties such as "Forward Italy", LN, Brothers of Italy and Five Star Movement to oppose the centre-left Democratic Party, but there was no increase in these stories in the Italian edition of Sputnik in the period close to election day. Moscow seemed to be comfortable with the falling support for the Democratic Party and the rise of the right-wingers and populists. However, Russian stakeholders did not want to give preference to any particular force challenging the rule of the centre left, because that would be a tactical mistake: hence, it did not venture to support the anti-establishment forces (LN, Brothers of Italy or Five Star Movement) against the mainstream "Forward Italy" party headed by Putin's friend Silvio Berlusconi.

After the elections which led to the formation of the coalition government of the Five Star Movement and LN, Salvini's party ran into a serious financial trouble. In September 2018, an Italian appeals court backed an April decision by Italy's highest court that called for confiscation of party funds and other assets. As a result, the LN had €49 million seized as a result of a fraud

⁸⁶ Irina Shcherbinina, Polina Solov'yova, "My voskhischaemsya tem, chto delaet Putin", *Vzglyad*, 17 October (2014), <http://www.vz.ru/world/2014/10/17/711106.html>.

⁸⁷ "Andrey Klimov vstretilsya s predstavitelem 'Ligi Severa'", *Yedinaya Rossiya*, 22 October (2014), <http://er.ru/news/123924/>.

⁸⁸ "Yedinaya Rossiya' i ital'yanskaya partiya 'Liga Severa' proveli konsul'tatsii v Moskve", *Yedinaya Rossiya*, 21 December (2015), <http://er.ru/news/138115/>.

⁸⁹ "Esclusiva: il testo integrale dell'accordo tra Russia Unita e Lega Nord", *Oltre la Linea*, 16 September (2017), <http://www.oltrelinea.news/2017/09/16/esclusiva-il-testo-integrale-dellaccordo-tra-russia-unita-e-lega-nord/>.

investigation that involved the LN's previous leader Umberto Bossi, who had been convicted in July 2017 of embezzling hundreds of thousands of Euros in public funds in 2008-2010.⁹⁰

The seizure of the LN's funds and assets almost drove the party to bankruptcy. It is perhaps considering this perspective and the fact that the party needed money to prepare for the European elections in May 2019 that the LN – according to the investigation by the Italian *L'Espresso* – reached out to Russian stakeholders and asked for help. As the investigation assumes, Salvini met with deputy Prime Minister of Russia Dmitry Kozak responsible for the energy issues on the 17th of October 2018, and the next day, Gianluca Savoini secretly discussed a deal that would allow the LN receive €3 million for a year: the Russian energy company Rosneft would sell diesel fuel to the Italian energy company Eni with a 4% discount, and the LN would be able to keep the money derived from this discount for its own needs.⁹¹ However, the investigation does not confirm whether the deal was eventually implemented or not.

Moscow's objectives of engaging with the European far right

The entire history of engagement between Russian actors and the European far right, shows that by cooperating with European ultranationalists directly or indirectly Russian actors pursue the following six domestic and international goals:

1. To secure external legitimacy of the regime by communicating far-right narratives that vindicate domestic or international policies or behaviour of the Russian Federation and/or are critical of Moscow's perceived critics or enemies;
2. To strengthen subversive movements within European societies to build up pressure on liberal-democratic European governments to make them more inward-looking and, therefore, less willing to embark on or continue attempts to democratise the Russian society – attempts that are seen by the Kremlin as Western efforts to force a regime change in Russia;
3. To influence public debates in European society that are perceived by Moscow as biased against Putin's Russia and create an information environment that is more susceptible to the pro-Kremlin narratives;
4. To enhance ultranationalist attitudes in European societies in order to foster anti-Americanism and undermine cultural, social and, ultimately, political transatlantic ties, or undermine European unity;
5. To discredit European societies as plagued by extreme-right tendencies by covertly providing support to – and thus bolstering – extreme-right movements and groups;
6. To bring pro-Kremlin far-right forces to power in European countries in the hope of returning to business as usual.

⁹⁰ Giada Zampano, "Italy's League in Financial Trouble after Court Ruling", *Politico*, 6 September (2018), <https://www.politico.eu/article/italy-league-party-financial-trouble-after-court-ruling-umberto-bossi/>.

⁹¹ Giovanni Tizian, Stefano Vergine, "Esclusivo – La trattativa segreta per finanziare con soldi russi la Lega di Matteo Salvini", *L'Espresso*, 21 February (2019), <http://espresso.repubblica.it/inchieste/2019/02/20/news/esclusivo-lega-milioni-russia-1.331835>.

Policy recommendations

- Political forces that want to resist Russian malign influence should try to challenge, rather than fuel, Euroscepticism and anti-American sentiments that provide a fertile ground for pro-Kremlin disinformation.
- European national security services should pay more attention to Russian influence on the far right, and when/if discovered, it needs to be expounded in publicly available annual reports of security agencies, as it is done in some EU countries.
- The networks of pro-Russian government-organised NGOs (GONGOs) and quasi-think tanks need to be mapped and their transparency increased in European states.
- EU and national institutions need to support cross-border research networks that analyse the far right. Supporting researchers in this field can provide policymakers with a network of experts to consult on potential policy measures or regulations.
- Invest in sustainable digital literacy programmes to help develop resilience among young people in Europe to both far-right disinformation and foreign influence campaigns. Critical thinking skills also need to be delivered via public awareness campaigns for adults.
- National mainstream political parties should explore joint initiatives with other European mainstream parties to challenge Russian interference and meddling.
- The European External Action Service (EEAS) should expand the scope, capabilities and capacities of the East StratCom Task Force by allocating additional human resources and funding to it.
- Transparency of political donations and funding should be enhanced. Parties should be required to record who is giving them money. There should be no anonymous donations above €50.00, and parties should have to disclose the identities and donations of any person or organisation who gives more than €500.00 in a year. Donating money via another person or a trust should be made illegal. Parties should have to disclose their donations leading up to the election, so voters know who is giving money when they vote. Foreign donations should be banned as they explicitly or implicitly allow for foreign interference in national electoral processes. The framework for political finance disclosure needs to be reviewed regularly to identify how new technologies can contribute to the strengthening of democratic accountability.
- In European countries with sizable Russian-speaking population, mainstream political parties need to engage with these diaspora populations and ensure that political campaigns and documents are accessible to these communities. In these countries, governments should also support quality Russian-language media.
- State institutions and all responsible businesses should not advertise on channels which use hate speech and incite violence.

- Civic actors should challenge far-right movements through directly engaging vulnerable groups prone to radicalisation by starting de-radicalisation and radicalisation prevention programs.
- The EU should consider new legislation to establish an independent advisory council to serve as a bridge between policy makers and social media firms. The advisory council would provide guidance to establishing a voluntary code of conduct for social media firms in the EU.
- The EU needs to cooperate with the social media to avoid mass-manipulation campaigns targeting European nations.
- Mainstream politicians need to raise awareness among parliaments and political parties of the EU member states that participation of parliamentarians in election observation missions with unknown methodology, goals and financial sources, harms the credibility and reputation of their institution and of international election observation.
- European institutions and politicians should acknowledge and target the feelings of “insecurity” in Europe as an important driver behind far-right and pro-Kremlin sentiments.