Political Synergy: How the European Far-Right and Russia Have Joined Forces Against Brussels[1]

Beatrix Futàk-Campbell

In 2007 Mudde[2] made the argument that Europe did not have a united populist front. He based his case on the meager evidence for close policy convergence and strategy coordination among the far-right parties in Europe. Even so, there have been some attempts at cooperation between populist right-wing parties in Europe. After the impressive performance of the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR), headed by far-right politician Vladimir Zhirinovsky, in the 1993 parliamentary elections, the leader of the German far-right Deutsche Volksunion (DVU) and Jean-Marie Le Pen of Front National sought to establish close ties with the LDPR. However, the relationship soon soured after Zhirinovsky publicly belittled Germany. The previously deemed mutually beneficial partnership was undermined by clashing nativist sentiments.

In 1997 Jean-Marie Le Pen made another attempt to create a section for like-minded politicians by establishing "Euronat." Their slogan was "Nationalists of all countries, unite!". This union, however, was also unsuccessful. The few, mostly Eastern European, participants lacked the organizational skills, political power, and ideological cohesion to establish a viable pan-European movement. A further initiative to consolidate populist right-wing parties was launched in 2005 by the Austrian Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs or FPÖ. After a "Contact Forum" between right-wing parties in Europe, the "Vienna Declaration of Patriotic and National Movements and Parties in Europe" was adopted.[3] This document laid out the guiding principles of right-wing populist collaboration in Europe. While this project has offered the foundations for later attempts at collaboration, its success was curbed by the fact that the parties involved focused only on their respective national levels and did not have a transnational political agenda.

"EuroNat" failed to get a foothold in Europe, and the political alliance between the Russian LDPR and far right turned out to be short-lived. Nevertheless, the Dutch Partij voor de Vrijheid (PVV), Marine Le Pen's Front National (FN), Strache's Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (FPÖ), and the German Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) have sought a variety of means to put aside pre-existing ideological differences and strengthen connections with Russia. A common agenda that has united European populists has emerged over time; these parties have all come to view Brussels as a common foe and Russia as a common ally. Beyond certain ideological commonalities, however, the alliance between Moscow and the Western European right-wing populists is primarily functional: the two sides provide each other with legitimacy on the political stage. This bond has also allowed the populist right in Europe and Russia to engage in realizing a common domain.

RUSSIA AS A FRIEND, NOT FOE

As part of their anti-Brussels and anti-establishment agenda, Russia provides a crucial platform for a variety of populist right-wing politicians. One way to create such platforms is through networking events, which

Pictured here in 2019 is Russian far-right politician Vladimir Zhirinovsky. After the impressive performance of his Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR) in the 1993 parliamentary elections, the leader of the German far-right Deutsche Volksunion (DVU) and the French Front National (FN) sought to establish close ties with him (photo: Free Wind 2-14/Shutterstock.com)

both European populists and Russian ultra-conservatives have been actively organizing. One such event was the conference on "The Multi-Child Family and the Future of Humanity" that took place in September 2014 at the Kremlin state palace and was attended by leading figures of the FPÖ, including, deputy Johann Gudenus, and the then FN member Aymeric Chauprade, both of whom spoke out against the homosexual lobby. The theme of the gathering was the promotion of the sanctity of the "Christian family," and the advancement of anti-gay and anti-liberal values, actions in direct opposition to the LGBTQ-friendly legislation promoted by Brussels. The conference was only one of at least three other secretive, informal events held in Vienna, Moscow, and Donetsk between May 2014 and May 2017. These events brought key figures of Western European right-wing populists into close contact with Russian, Georgian, and Bulgarian nationalists.

The private event in Vienna took place in May 2014 at the Liechtenstein City Palace.[4] Based on the Congress of Vienna, the conference was aptly titled "Holy Alliance." The themes covered closely followed those of the Kremlin summit, such as discussions on saving Europe from liberal ideas and homosexuality, and promoting patriotism and Christian family values. The conference was timed to take place on the same day as the annual Life Ball, a charity event set up to support HIV sufferers in the gay community. The Russian oligarch and Orthodox philanthropist, Konstantin Malofeev, led and financed the event through his charity, St Basil the Great, which is closely linked to the Russian Orthodox Church. Key Russian participants included the right-wing political analyst, Aleksandr Dugin, and the late painter, Ilya Glazunov. The conference was also attended by the niece of Marine Le Pen, Marion Maréchal-Le Pen, Aymeric Chauprade (NF), the leader of the Carlists Catholic-monarchist movement, Spain's Prince Sixtus Henry of Bourbon-Parma, the director of a Geneva-based financial firm and husband of Fiat heir,

Serge de Pahlen, FPÖ politicians Heinz-Christian Strache, Johann Gudenus, and Johann Herzog, Bulgarian right-wing politician and chairman of Attack Volen Siderov, right-wing extremists from Croatia, members of the Georgian and Russian nobility, and a Catholic priest. Although most delegates were familiar with each other, noticeably Gudenus and Chauprade addressed both events.

In March 2015, a similar event took place in Donetsk. Although this event too was held in private, Tass the Russian government agency covered it.[5] The organizers' aim was again to create an informal platform for like-minded individuals to discuss patriotism as well the future of Donetsk. While no Ukrainian representatives were invited, the delegation was led by leaders of the DPR Alexander Zakharchenko and LPR Igor Plotnitsky. Their intention was to foster support for a Russian-backed Donetsk in Europe. The ENF MEP Jean-Luc Schaffhauser served as one of the moderators, while other participants included various local and national Russian politicians.

A more publicized gathering was held in January 2017 in Koblenz, Germany. This event was organized by Frauke Petry's husband and ENF-member, Marcus Pretzell, for 800 guests, the majority of whom were white and at least three-quarters of the attendants were male. Participants included many of the same figures mentioned above, but also others such as Frauke Petry (AfD), Marine le Pen and Ludovic De Danne (FN), Matteo Salvini (Lega), Geert Wilders (PVV), Hans-Christian Strache and Harald Vilimsky (FPÖ), Janice Atkinson (UKIP), Tom van Grieken (Vlaams Belang), and Gerolf Annemans (ENF/Vlaams Belang). The fuelling narrative of the event was "a new Europe," with the subjects of patriotism, anti-Islam, anti-migration, anti-globalization, and above all, anti-EU sentiments driving discussions. As Frauke Petry claimed: "We all want to revive the idea that existed for decades of a Europe of fatherlands, where we practice politics together but are not subject to the dictates of Brussels and Strasburg."[6] Leaders of the far-right were not only putting up a 'united front' for the first time, but were also referring to each other *as* leaders of their respective countries, predicting the outcomes of the then forthcoming elections. It is also no coincidence that this summit was held a day after the inauguration of President Donald Trump. According to Schick, they wanted "to show themselves as being part of this global anti-establishment backlash and that they are somehow the true democratic voices and representatives of the people."[7] In challenging the EU, and searching for allies, they also discussed Russian leadership as an alternative to US hegemony. Just before the conference, Strache (on behalf of the FPÖ) signed a cooperation agreement with Russia's ruling party. Gianluca Savoini, who works with Italy's Lega (formerly Lega Nord) as a liaison with Moscow, stated in an interview at the event that the Lega aimed to sign an agreement similar to the one Strache had struck with United Russia.[8] His further attempt to secure funding from Russia has been exposed through a recording of a meeting at the Metropol hotel.[9]

MEETINGS WITH KREMLIN ASSOCIATES

Beyond these networking events what is even more common for far-right populist party members and leaders is to have individual meetings with Russian government officials or Kremlin associates. Marine Le Pen and her niece have been particularly frequent guests of Putin's high-ranking entourage. Johann Gudenus (FPÖ) was received in 2012 by Putin's governor Ramzan Kadyrov in Grozny.[10] The current party leader of the AfD, Alexander Gauland, along with other AfD members has held meetings with oligarchs closely linked to Putin's close circle since October 2015. Markus Pretzell had similarly private meetings in April 2016 in Yalta and in February 2017 along with Frauke Petry in Moscow where they were flown for a long weekend in a private jet paid for by Russian supporters.[11] During this weekend, Petry also met with the speaker of the lower house of the Russian parliament, Vyacheslav Volodin. All of these meetings are exemplary of Russia's strategy, as stated by Kremlin associate Sergey Markov, to "further develop this cooperation" with European right-wing populists.[12] A deputy of Volodin even suggested that there has been an intensification of cooperation between the European populist right and the Russian government "as these parties look set to become part of the political mainstream in Europe."[13]

Another important element of the right-wing European populists' and Russian cooperation is the International Russian Conservative Forum (IRCF). Despite IRCF's aim to establish a "Russian - European conservative elite group" (Russian National Forum, 2015), FN, FPÖ, and AfD have not attended the forum since its establishment in 2015. A possible explanation for the absence of party officials is that sharing the stage with the likes of extreme-right politicians of the British BNP, the fascist Greek Golden Dawn, and the German NPD[14] is perceived by FN, FPÖ, and AfD as harmful to their attempts to build political competence. These self-declared "avant-garde conservative political forces"[15] involved in the IRCF are likely to remain on the political fringe of Western Europe, given their staunchly nationalist rhetoric and xenophobic worldview that resonate with only a very particular section of their domestic electorate.

Right-wing populists and Russian ultra-conservatives regularly hold networking events. In May 2014 they held a private event in the Liechtenstein City Palace in Vienna. Based on the Congress of Vienna, the conference was aptly titled "Holy Alliance" (photo: Mistervlad/Shutterstock.com)

It is, however, clear that many right-wing populists have built on their historic ties to Russian nationalists. For them, the Kremlin offers an alternative to international relations beyond, and in contradiction to, Brussels. In turn, they have become more relevant to the Kremlin.

Confirming their support for Russia, right-wing populists used the Ukraine crisis and subsequent Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 to their own advantage. These events have produced a key opportunity for them to differentiate themselves from the domestic political mainstream which was anti-Russian. Le Pen has even publicly declared Russia's 2014 invasion and seizure of Crimea to be legitimate.[16] During the March 2014 referendum on Crimea's reunification with Russia, high-ranking politicians of the FN and the FPÖ functioned as independent election monitors while OSCE and UN delegations abstained.[17] [18] Notably FPÖ deputy Johann Gudenus and Aymeric Chauprade (FN) were part of the monitoring team and worked together building on their previous meetings at the various summits as noted above.[19] The Eurasian Observatory of Elections and Democracy, which had previously helped to legitimate elections in Transnistria, South Ossetia, and Abkhazia, also invited the PVV to join; however, Wilders declined to participate.[20] Nonetheless, the international observers concluded that the referendum procedure was "fair and free" and "conformed to international standards."[21] This was in complete contradiction to the international community's verdict. The UN General Assembly, by adopting resolution 68/262 in March 2014, concluded that the referendum was invalid.[22] Similarly, the European Commission (2014), together with the European Council, declared that the EU "does neither recognise the illegal and illegitimate referendum in Crimea nor its outcome."

It is within this context that the multiple loans, totalling €40 million, granted by the now-defunct First Czech-Russian Bank to the FN must be viewed. In November 2014, it became public that the FN had received a 9-million loan from the Kremlin-backed institute, something which Marine Le Pen later confirmed. While Le Pen has denied financial dependency on Russia, the

As part of their anti-Brussels and anti-establishment agenda, Russia provides a crucial platform for a variety of populist right-wing politicians. Pictured is the headquarters of the European Commission in Brussels (photo: S-F/Shutterstock.com)

publication of a series of internal Kremlin documents by the hacker group Anonymous International substantiates the suspicion that the loan was granted as a direct consequence of the party's public support for the Russian annexation of Crimea.

ALTERNATIVE REALITY

Right-wing populists support Russia by helping to create, as Rohac et al. put it, "an alternative reality in which Moscow appears as a responsible global stakeholder,"[23] or competent political actor. The case of the PVV in this regard deserves closer scrutiny. As opposed to the pro-Russian stance of its French, Austrian, and German counterparts, the Dutch populist party is much more strongly aligned with the Atlantic sphere. This is most evident in its liberal stance on LGBTQ issues, which is in direct contrast to the conservatism of the FN, AfD, and the Kremlin on homosexuality and 'non-traditional' family structures. Nevertheless, the PVV benefits from the transnational collaboration of its partners with Russia. The transnational community itself must not be understood as a homogenous movement, but rather an informal network of practitioners. As Wilders himself put it: "[I]f I, in parts, have more in common with Strache and Le Pen than with the parties in the Dutch Parliament, it would be stupid of me not to fraternise with them."[24] The social capital gained by other populists in their engagement with Russia can be utilized by the PVV without it necessarily being directly involved with Russia. This is evidenced by their cooperation in the European Parliament and, more specifically, by the Dutch referendum on the EU-Ukrainian Association Agreement in 2016, which the PVV staunchly opposed. Although Wilders publicly spoke out against the annexation of Crimea, he has frequently criticized The Hague's Russophobia, claiming that Russia is an ally.[25]

In short, these right-wing populists have gained a political issue that they could all agree on which goes beyond promoting patriotism and anti-EU sentiments: Russia. This, however, also begs the question, what motivates Russia in supporting far-right-wing parties? First of all,

Russia and Russian politicians seek to legitimize their practices as well as gain acceptance through establishing ties with likeminded European politicians. Second, by providing financial assistance to these parties Russia helps to keep them close to mainstream politics both domestically and on the EU level. In turn, these parties have been challenging and at times even driving politics (e.g. FPÖ) in their respective countries. Far-right populists have also been dividing European societies. Russia perceives these divisions to be advantageous for its strategic position for two reasons. Firstly, lack of unity on the domestic or EU level is disruptive as well as distracting. Putting EU member states at loggerheads is, however, a strategy that is not new to Russia. The EU's energy-security approach and the lack of unity in formulating a joint policy attest to this. While this article focuses on Western European far-right parties, Eastern European countries (EU as well as non-EU) are affected by Russia's meddling in their domestic political spheres.[26] Secondly, lack of unity also deflects member states' attention from other matters, such as general foreign policy concerns, the EU's and/or member states' role in the region that they share with Russia as well as their role in the new global order. This plays into Russia's hands, allowing it to punch well above its weight in driving the current international agenda, which in turn helps to sideline Europe.

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26. It is beyond the scope of this paper to demonstrate this link.