



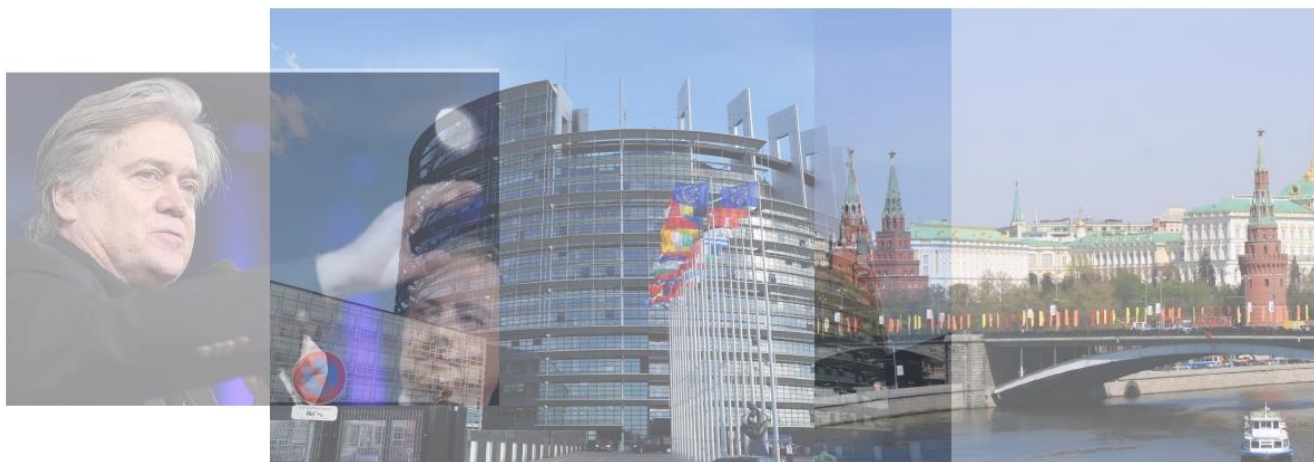
THE INTERNATIONAL CENTER FOR ADVANCED AND COMPARATIVE EU-RUSSIA/NIS RESEARCH
МЕЖДУНАРОДНЫЙ ЦЕНТР ПЕРЕДОВЫХ ИССЛЕДОВАНИЙ И СРАВНИТЕЛЬНОГО АНАЛИЗА ЕС-РОССИЯ/СНГ



THE REMOTELY CONTROLLED RIGHT-WING AND EUROSCEPTIC PARTIES IN THE RUN-UP TO EU PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS: MYTHS AND REALITY

EU-Elections

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ICEUR analytics by experts and insiders

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Introduction and Summary

This compilation of articles features the contributions of participants of a policy consulting seminar on 3 April, 2019 in Vienna. All materials presented are of an analytical nature and deliberately refrain from bashing any of the external actors under scrutiny or their partners within the EU. Most of the articles deal with entities sponsored by the RF, which in comparison to the U.S. has a much deeper political and economic involvement in EU affairs.

When we speak of “influence” we do not necessarily imply specific effects. Attempts at influencing such processes as the EU parliamentary elections may produce widely different results, including unplanned effects or no visible effects at all. Also, we are not talking about illegal activities. Election campaigns are conducted in order to provide opportunities to the running parties and personalities to influence their potential voters. Legislation in the EU countries, however, makes it a criminal offense to disseminate fake news.

Because of its sensible nature and upon request by the authors, some information has been classified and cannot be made available to the public. It is, however, at the disposal of political decision-makers in Brussels and individual EU countries.

Our authors are renowned political analysts from various countries who approach the general topic from various vantage points. Some contributions deal with the channels, tools and the set-up deployed by external actors. This is complemented by country studies on France, Italy, Germany, Austria, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Poland, Romania, Estonia and the Balkan area.

There is a number of myths about stratagems and attempts at meddling into EU politics and particularly, EU elections. The first powerful myth which has the flavor of a conspiracy theory has it that both the U.S. and the Russian Federation want to destroy the EU. For the U.S. economy, European industrial exports present a strong competitive challenge and both countries have claimed the use of illegal subsidies by the other side. Traditionally, the U.S. has pursued this line as a bipartisan policy. Nevertheless, there is no evidence for direct interference in EU politics by government entities. What is well documented are attempts by Trump’s ex-campaign manager Steve Bannon to forge a pan-European right-wing alliance. In contrast to other external players, Russia uses a plethora of institutions and organizations in its attempts at influencing political processes inside the EU. Major agencies pursuing this objective – often in a disguised form – are the “Dialogue of Civilizations”, and possibly ROSSOTRUDNICHESTVO, ROSATOM or some Orthodox Church structures. The finance for relevant activities comes either from the federal budget or from Russian companies who are operating in European markets. This arrangement disproves another myth, namely that there is a center which meticulously plans and executes all relevant activities. Nevertheless, one can identify a certain division of labor among the plethora of organizations that pursue the objective of interference (e.g. by countries).

While Steve Bannon addresses right-wing parties exclusively, Russia is less picky. Her main partners are certainly parties, organizations and personalities representing the right wing and Euro-sceptical attitudes, but the RF is ready to co-operate with anybody whose plans dovetail with the Kremlin’s objectives. In the first line, Russia is interested in getting rid of the sanctions; there is no strategy to destroy the Union for the simple reason that the Russian leadership is convinced that the EU will disintegrate by itself. Russian official media treat the EU, at best, as a global payer (or “global gayer”, for that matter), but recognize only the U.S. as a worthy partner in world politics. Like their right-wing partners, they view the liberal rule of law as a phase-out model. Ironically enough, the bogeyman of the right, namely immigrants from Islamic areas import exactly those autocratic, religious and patriarchic values which are to replace liberal attitudes in the blueprint of the right.

At the end of the day, European leaders are well-advised to face these problems calmly and with a sense of proportion. The Eurosceptics and populists as well as the extreme right is here to stay, whatever the impact of “Ibzigate” or similar scandals. European and national institutions can strengthen as a result of responding to the challenges. In the first line, this should be the major commitment of the center-liberal forces, which is facilitated by the fact that the majority of voters come out for stability. On top of that, a nationalist international is a political oxymoron and is bound to fail.

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Russian Cooperation with the European Far Right

Introduction

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.

European far-right activists and politicians revived their interest in cooperating with Russian actors after the collapse of the Soviet Union, 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.

Fake electoral observation

It was not until the beginning of Vladimir Putin's second presidential term that Russian pro-Kremlin actors started engaging with the European far right, and these developments were a response to a series of “colour revolutions” in the post-Soviet space, i.e. successful protests against electoral fraud in 2003-2005 in Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan, that came to be considered by the Kremlin as Western preparations to subvert Putin's regime in Russia. Because of these perceptions of the “colour revolutions”, the Kremlin increasingly turned to anti-Western and especially anti-American rhetoric.

Moreover, Moscow 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;
6. building networks of influence not necessarily related to electoral processes.

Russian pro-Kremlin organisations such as CIS-EMO and Civic Control started inviting European far-right activists and politicians to “monitor” elections to legitimise practices of electoral authoritarianism and further objectives of Russian foreign policy in the post-Soviet space. The above-mentioned Russian organisations have also cooperated with the European Centre for Geopolitical Analysis (ECGA) founded by Polish far-right politician Mateusz Piskorski

and the Eurasian Observatory for Democracy and Elections (EODE) founded Belgian far-right activist Luc Michel.

Together with CIS-EMO and 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. The same organisations coordinated 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.¹ 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 Vladimir Zhirinovskiy's far-right, misleadingly named Liberal-Democratic Party of the Russian Federation. In September 2017, upon Slutsky's 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.² The same Russian organisation coordinated fake international observation of the presidential election in Russia that included members of the Austrian Freedom Party, National Front, French Action, Alternative for Germany, Northern League and Serbian Radical Party.³

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.

¹ 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>.

² Anton Shekhovtsov, “Foreign Observation of the Illegitimate Presidential Election in Crimea in March 2018” (Berlin: European Platform for Democratic Elections, 2018).

³ Anton Shekhovtsov, “Politically Biased Foreign Electoral Observation at the Russian 2018 Presidential Election” (Berlin: European Platform for Democratic Elections, 2018).

Cooperation in the media sphere

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 as a response to the Kremlin's perceived failure to win the information war with the West over the Russian aggression against Georgia in August that year: the Kremlin believed that it failed to convince the international community of the righteousness of Moscow's invasion of Georgia.

This perception 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. Gradually, 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. 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.

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.⁴ 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 ProRussia.TV's host 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

⁴ 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>.

with EU-based far right and Eurosceptic politicians, as well as representatives of the Russian establishment. ProRussia.TV stopped operating in 2014 as the discontinuation of the Voice of Russia automatically implied suspension of funds for ProRussia.TV.

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-Russia Cultural Association 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”, 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.⁵

The website of the Association 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 Association named Sputnik as its official partner.

Political cooperation between Russian actors and the far right in Austria, Germany, France and Italy

Austria

The Austria Freedom Party (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. These conferences were attended by the leadership of the FPÖ and, among others, several members of the “United Russia” party: Grigoriy Ivliev, Viktor Zvangel'sky, Irina Rodnina and Sergey Markov.

The involvement of the FPÖ in the political conferences of Austrian Technologies GmbH helped its leadership build close links to Russian officials. Furthermore, 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”.⁶

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. 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. In May 2014, Holzmüller helped organise a secret international meeting of European and Russian far-right activists and politicians in Vienna.⁷

⁵ “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>.

⁶ Handbuch freiheitlicher Politik: Ein Leitfaden für Führungsfunktionäre und Mandatsträger der Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (Vienna: Freiheitliches Bildungsinstitut, 2009), p. 248.

⁷ Bernhard Odehnal, “Gipfeltreffen mit Putins fünfter Kolonne”, Tages-Anzeiger, 3 June (2014), <http://www.tagesanzeiger.ch/ausland/europa/Gipfeltreffen-mit-Putins-fuenfter-Kolonnen/story/30542701>.

At the end of 2016, the ruling “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. On 19 December that year, the FPÖ delegation met 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.⁸

France

In 2011, the newly elected president of the National Front Marine Le Pen declared that she admired Putin and would favour partnership with Russia for “obvious civilisational and geostrategic reasons”.⁹ However, Moscow was still not interested in providing any support to the National Front, as the Kremlin wanted to have good relations with either François Hollande or Nicolas Sarkozy who were the frontrunners of the presidential elections scheduled for 2012.

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 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.¹⁰ At the same time, Orlov and Kadyshev started meeting regularly with the leadership of the National Front at the Russian Embassy in Paris and the Russian diplomatic residence.

In June 2013, Marine Le Pen went to Moscow and met with several high-ranking Russian officials and politicians from the “United Russia” parliamentary group. Le Pen's meetings laid the foundations of closer relations between the National Front and Russian actors. In the beginning of 2014, Le Pen's adviser Aymeric Chauprade introduced the founder of the National Front Jean-Marie Le Pen to Malofeyev in order to help him 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).¹¹

According to French investigative journalists from 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 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 2014.¹²

⁸ “FPÖ schließt Fünf-Jahres-Vertrag mit Kreml-Partei”, Die Presse, 19 December (2016), <http://diepresse.com/home/politik/innenpolitik/5136136/FPÖe-schliesst-FuenfJahresVertrag-mit-KremlPartei>

⁹ 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-aller-en-russie.php>.

¹⁰ 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>.

¹¹ 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>.

¹² 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>.

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.¹³

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.¹⁴ 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 the centre-right candidate François Fillon who was also friendly towards Russia. 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. 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, 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's candidate.

Germany

Pro-Kremlin sentiments among the German far right are usually associated with the radical right-wing populist Alternative for Germany (AfD). 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.

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 allowance¹⁵ – raised suspicions that Moscow was supporting the AfD financially.

¹³ 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>.

¹⁴ 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>.

¹⁵ 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>.

The party's treasurer Klaus Fohrmann denied any support from 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.¹⁶

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.¹⁷ 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.

Some Russian stakeholders also attempted to secure funding and media 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”.¹⁸

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.¹⁹

In the beginning of June 2018, AfD's MP Robby Schlund met in Moscow with Pavel Zavalny, an MP from “United Russia” and Chairman of the Energy Committee of the Russian parliament.²⁰ 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 became an important coordinator of contacts between the AfD and Russian stakeholders.

¹⁶ 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>.

¹⁷ 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>.

¹⁸ 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>.

¹⁹ 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.

²⁰ “Vorsitz der Deutsch-Russischen Parlamentariergruppe”, Robby Schlund, 15 June (2018), <http://robbyschlund.de/2018/06/15/vorsitz-der-deutsch-russischen-parlamentariergruppe/>.

Italy

The largest pro-Kremlin far-right party in Italy is the Northern League (LN) headed by Matteo Salvini. He was elected the leader of the party at the end of 2013 at a party conference that was attended by Aleksey Komov and a Russian MP from “United Russia” Viktor Zubarev. The participation of Komov in the congress was a deliberate attempt to establish contacts between the LN and Russian actors. Shortly after the congress, in winter 2014, the LN created – as was discussed above – the Lombardy-Russia Cultural Association (ACLR) that officially cooperated with the Russian state-controlled media and promoted Moscow's interests in Italy. In October 2014, the leadership of the LN/ACLR 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.²¹

The LN/ACLR 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 March 2017, Salvini and Sergey Zheleznyak signed a coordination and cooperation agreement between the LN and “United Russia”.²² 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.

After the 2018 parliamentary elections in Italy, the LN and the populist Five Star Movement formed a coalition government. However, the same year Salvini's party ran into a serious financial trouble: the LN had €49 million seized as a result of a fraud 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 2008-2010.²³

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.²⁴ However, the investigation does not confirm whether the deal was eventually implemented or not.

²¹ Matteo Salvini, “20 minuti di incontro...”, Facebook, 17 October (2014), <https://www.facebook.com/salviniofficial/photos/a.10151670912208155.1073741827.252306033154/10152465922593155/>.

²² “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/>.

²³ 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/>.

²⁴ 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>.

The Far Right in Europe: Basic Trends

The recent polling results as well as the outcome of elections show that Europe is experiencing a sustained shift to the right of its political class. Right-wing forces are supported by more and more voters in many countries. This swing goes with a growth of populist and euro-skeptical attitudes. Thus, contemporary Europe experiences a tendency which characterized the 20s and 40s of the 20th century (an alliance of right-wingers with populists, which laid the foundation for the emergence of various fascisms).

There are several reasons for the emergence of these tendencies. Among those, we can name the following:

1. The general leadership crisis in Europe, the lack of charismatic personalities, who can accomplish the breakthrough and can come to grips with the contemporary challenges. Compared to such glitzy personalities as Donald Trump, Recep Erdogan or Vladimir Putin, European politicians appear as weak and passive. The calls to heed the traditional European values are taken as a sign of weakness. The „strong arm“ is in demand.
2. Global transformations, in the course of which Europe has stopped to play the role it had around the turn of the millenium (it has become the hostage of the big global confrontation between the US and Russia as well as between the US and China). On the one hand, there is a moral and civilizational dependence of the EU on the US, and the issue of economic benefits from the cooperation with Russia and China on the other.
3. The internal discussions within the EU and the discontent with both development concepts for the EU (Brussels-centered or Berlin-centered). This generates a demand for the „third way“ which in turn leads to raising the question about the necessity of resurrecting national projects and turning the EU into a „Europe of Nations“).
4. Mass migration from the Near East and Northern Africa; the incapacity of present European governments to cope with this process and, as a consequence, the growth of dissatisfaction with the place value accorded to migrants.
5. Economic problems which force, as a consequence, the authorities to resort to unpopular measures (raising taxes, slashing of entitlements etc.) which go with lowering social standards. In this arena, the interests of right and left wingers coincide. This provides fertile ground for the emergence of populist tendencies.
6. A strong drive towards new moral signposts, new moralist leaders, the renaissance of religion and churches (e.g. in Eastern Europe. According to the Osservatore Romano, the number of Catholic believers has grown by 15 p.p. during the past 5 years. Organizations such as Neo Catechumenat experienced a strong boost and became themselves a stimulus for the development of new religious attitudes, particularly among youth).
7. The crisis of “open society” and the diminishing influence of the agencies run by Soros.

Until 2014, the shift to the right in Europe had the character of a marginal phenomenon. Over a long period, the success of right-wing parties had been regarded as an anomaly (e.g. the electoral success of the Austrian Freedom Party in 2000, which was experienced as a sensation). Traditionally, Europe was “left” or “center-right”, Social Democrats and Conservatives called the shots in a majority of EU member states and their actions dovetailed with the concept of the „open society“

supported by George Soros. The concept of the EU and of “European values” had a centrist basis and kept extremist groups out of politics.

The real renaissance of the right wing in Europe begins 2014. Experts noted a strong right shift in the course of elections to the European parliament. In Germany and Poland, right extremist groups appeared (In 2014, the AfD and the followers of Janusz Korwin-Mikke garnered 7% each of the votes, Geert Wilder’s Freedom Party in the Netherlands 13,2 %, Marine Le Pen’s National Front 24,86%). In the European Parliament, the fraction “Europe of Nations and Freedoms” consisting of 35 (later 39) members from France, Poland, Belgium, The Netherlands, Italy, Austria and the associated Independence Party from Great Britain was formed.

In 2015, Jaroslaw Kaczynski’s party PiS obtained the majority of votes. The party professes openly right-wing and conservative positions and has locked horns with Brussels, which tried to mediate in the conflict between the PiS and the opposition. The ruling party rapidly took control of all levers of power and the entire political life of the country.

In 2016 the Hungarian premier officially re-orientated the ruling Fidesz party from a liberal to a right conservative party. Before that, in 2011, the new Hungarian constitution had been adopted which was based on a conservative state concept (God and Christendom as unifying factor, factual ban on abortion and same-sex marriages etc.). Orbán began to criticize the Euro-Atlantic system openly.

Orbán’s activities were in many ways dictated by his specific relationship to Brussels (the case of his son-in-law István Tiborcz who is accused of misappropriated EU funding, cases involving business tycoons in Orbán’s environment). Yet, the Hungarian premier captured a tendency present in Hungarian society: a majority of Hungarians were ready to accept the right-wing model and to follow the premier. Electoral victories with impressive results (more than 50%) show that the Hungarians support the rightist course.

On top of that, Orbán became something like the fashion guru in Central Europe. He got new followers, particularly in the Balkans. In 2017 one spoke about an alliance between Orbán and his Polish colleague Mateusz Morawiecki and even about the establishment of an anti-Brussels alliance. Simultaneously, the head of the Dutch Freedom Party Geert Wilders waxed his anti-Islamic positions and equaled the Quran to Hitler’s Mein Kampf. His position was accepted in other countries as well. In Western Europe, the strengthening of the right wing led to a series of effects: the Brexit, the success of the AfD in Germany in the Bundestag election, the coalition of the ÖVP and the FPÖ in Austria, the threat of a takeover by Marine Le Pen in France, the Italian elections and the creation of a right-populist coalition.

Recently, the European right wing has been influenced by two basic centers abroad: one the one hand, by Russian political centers and the milieu linked to Trump’s former top advisor Steve Bannon. At this point, their interests match completely.

Reports about the presumption that Steve Bannon and his affiliate, multi-millionaire Robert Mercer financed the Brexit and later sponsored Marine Le Pen surged already during 2016/2017. These rumors were especially intense when Bannon was still in the close environment of Donald Trump. Bannon never made any bones about his admiration for Lenin and that he claimed to be a Dugin sympathizer. He came out for transforming Europe and reconstructing the EU as a “Europe of nations”.

When, in 2018, Steve Bannon began his tour around Europe, many did not give this fact the attention it deserved. Bannon attended the Congress of the National Front /Rassemblement National/ in France, met Le Pen, and advised her on the transformation of the party (which was important in the wake of electoral defeat in 2017). Later, Bannon visited Switzerland, Italy and some other countries.

In July, 2018, he announced the establishment of a movement (“The Movement”) in Europe, which blended right-wing, Eurosceptic and nationalist parties. It is assumed, the Bannon’s Movement is aiming at becoming a simile to the agencies of multi-billionaire George Soros. Bannon, to whom Trumps owns his victory at the presidentials, plans to establish a mighty political bloc consisting of European right-wing parties: The French National Rally /Rassemblement National/, The Lega Nord (Italy, the Alternative for Germany /AfD/, The Freedom Party (Austria), Fidesz (Hungary), Swedish Democrats (Sweden), Real Fins (Finland) aso. The immediate political objective is the formation of a coalition for the participation in elections to the European Parliament in 2019.

At the end of 2018 the establishment of a strategic political electoral alliance between Le Pen’s National Rally and Matteo Salvini’s Lega was announced. At the beginning of 2019 this alliance was joined by Poland’s Jaroslaw Kaczynski and his PiS.

On top of that, this triangle (which is expected to take in new members and become the basis for „The Movement“) will be active also after the elections to the European Parliament. For example, all participants of this alliance have one common objective, namely to prevent the construction and commissioning of the North Stream - 2 pipeline, because it would permit Germany and Russia to dictate the gas price for all other EU members.

In this context it is interesting that the participants of the “Bannon Alliance” team up with Nathaniel Rothschild, who lobbies for gas deliveries through the Ukrainian pipeline, which would prevent an undue strengthening of Germany in the energy market.

It is striking, that French and Austrian leaders prefer to ally with Germany (irrespective of their rightist rhetoric and positions). France is linked to Germany through the new Aachen agreement, which goes with dividends from North Stream and Austria hopes to occupy the place of a distributing hub of gas for Central and Southern Europe.

Bannon’s role in the unfolding processes in Europe is quite impressive. In Russia, many people are enthusiastic about him, as they went crazy for Trump earlier. Only few experts share the view that the U.S. is stoking right-wing sentiments in Europe through Bannon and have only changed their styles and methods.

Despite the fact that Steve Bannon has left the Trump White House and even accused him of treason in his book, it was Bannon who stood at the origin of „Trumpism“, the conservative response of the U.S. society and of the white middle classes to decades of the political and media hegemony of the liberal establishment. Bannon had to retreat from the national political arena during his struggle and opted for international politics. Yet, he will apply the same program abroad, which has made Trump and his team victorious in the U.S. elections.

The slogan “Let’s Make America Great Again” implies that all resources must be harnessed to promote the internal development of the U.S., in the first line technological and economic resources. America was threatened by the loss of its planetary hegemony. Trump’s strategy is one of maximal focus on America, evading a fragmentation of forces and resources in trade and financial initiatives.

In the framework of these objectives, the U.S. is confronted with the problem of hedging in China, the EU and Russia, which are viewed as potentially dangerous factors for sustainable U.S. power in the future.

The close-range objective is to create a bridgehead of U.S. influence in Europe, but no longer under the heading of common liberal values, which have been sidelined during the last time. Right-wing populism and nationalism is to be used in order to weaken or destroy the EU. The EU on the world map of Trump and Bannon is no longer a stout Euro-Atlantic ally and partner, but rather a competitor and even an “enemy”.

The American strategists and spin doctors studied the Russian experience in working with right-wingers, Eurosceptic parties and movements attentively. We assume that this experience was judged worthy for adoption. Although the hopes that Russia-loyal Marine Le Pen and her National Front would take over in France, one of the key countries of the Union, did not materialize, a coalition of right populists came to power in Italy. One of its leaders, Minister of the Interior Matteo Salvini, speaks about the necessity to lift the European sanctions against Russia. It is, however, unclear, to what extent this is feasible and whether Italy alone can overcome the resistance of the Eurobureaucrats.

Anyway, such American heavyweights as Bannon see Russian activities in Europe as both a model and a challenge. According to them, America has the same right to influence European policies and to lobby for favorable positions and decisions with the European authorities. Beyond any doubt, this calculation may pan out. For one thing, the Americans can simply buy the European right wing, as this has happened with the European Left during the Cold War. Secondly, the comprehensive economic, financial and personal relations between European and American elites should not be underestimated despite the cracks that have appeared in the edifice of European unity. These relations are incomparable to those between Europe and Russia when it comes to quantity and status.

In this way, the U.S. personified by Bannon and his “Movement” have opened the struggle for Europe, a Europe that is divided into national fiefdoms, that is excluded from the continental alliance with Russia and China, but in the final analysis subordinated to an America which is strengthened by a new technological breakthrough and its new focus on domestic issues.

Is this realized in Brussels and the most important European capitals? To all appearance, yes. The Junker plan of the re-industrialization of Europe, the intention to create a European army and intelligence service, the Macron plan concerning a stronger concentration of the EU are to be viewed as response to the new situation in the relationship with the U.S. and Russia. The EU strives to defend its integrity and sovereignty against external forces, but also against national governments. The choice between Eurasia and Euro-Atlanticism and the maintenance of the balance between them will determine the politics of the EU for the coming years.

Steve Bannon speaks about the Russian power holders in an eloquent fashion: “I think that Putin and his cronies are kleptocrats and Russia is an imperialist and expansionist power.” Bannon appeals to the notion of “Judeo-Christian West” and in his mind, Russia has a Eurasian and no Western essence. It may be only a tactical ally in the confrontation with the Islamic world, and most importantly with China.

In this stance Bannon comes close to the patriarch of American strategy Henry Kissinger, who today comes out for the inversion of the move he played when he put his eggs into the Chinese basket during the confrontation with the USSR. Today, Kissinger, Bannon and like-minded representatives of the American elites view Russia as such a counterweight against a rapidly strengthening China, which can and should be won over in order to use it in their game.

Also Russia primes the pump for its revenge on Europe. Its position vis a vis Europe was formulated at the end of 2017 by Sergey Karaganov, who said: “Russia’s task is to strengthen relations with China and create a powerful alliance of our two states. Once this alliance stands, Europe will have no other choice than to join it”.

In some projects Russia and Bannon co-operate on an equal footing (e.g. Matteo Salvini: In Italy, training seminars for “activists”). In some cases, they are competitors (Bannon puts his chips on Marine Le Pen, while Russia co-operates increasingly with her niece Marion Le Pen).

In some other projects, though, there are clear divergences: This is true of Viktor Orbán and the AfD, who are not inclined to oscillate between Russia and the “Right-Wing International”.

Against this backdrop, the assumption about the involvement and the joint sponsorship in the Yellow Vest movement in France looks rather controversial: the Russian trace is hardly noticeable in this case.

One may conclude that as a result of the 2019 elections the position of the right-wing, Eurosceptic and populist parties will be greatly boosted. The maximum payoff Russia can obtain from that is a partial lifting of sanctions. The main beneficiary of a right-wing electoral victory is the U.S. They hope to weaken Germany and its European satellites severely by initiating the process of creating a „Europe of Nations“ and by creating havoc in the European architecture. In this respect, Steve Bannon and the right-wing parties under his aegis are suitable tools for the achievement of this objective.

One may also conclude that the tendency toward the strengthening of right-wing parties and ideological concepts in Europe is here to stay during the coming decades. It is the only response to the challenge of migration, social problems and the economic downturn predicted for the years 2022-2023.

The Influence Factory: Vladimir Yakunin's Agencies and his Men

Vladimir Yakunin was one of the key figures during the establishment of the Putin Regime. It should be remembered that in 2007 Yakunin figured, together with Sergey Ivanov, as one of the probable Putin successors. In 2003, he obtained control over a big and resource-rich branch, namely rail transport.

The nomination of some Putin intimates to CEOs of state corporations in 2001-2003 was a long-term factor in the formation of the "corporate state" of post-Soviet Russia.

The Russian Railway employs over 700 thousand people. Thanks to its character as a monopoly it became one of the largest transport companies in the world. It accounts for 25% of all passenger and 45% of goods traffic in Russia.

Vladimir Yakunin obtained the possibility to manage huge financial flows. His position of the CEO of such a state corporation made him one of the most influential personalities in Russia. Yakunin was in charge of the Russian Railroads for more than ten years (2003-2015).

According to the permanently updated report of the Minchenko Consulting firm, he left the so-called "Putin Politbureau" in 2017. He retired while simultaneously retaining his enormous potential, as well as Putin's personal support. He also had a plan of action which aimed at the construction of his own "influence factory".

In contrast to other stakeholders of Putinism (Alexey Miller, Sergey Chemezov, Sergey Ivanov and others), Vladimir Yakunin had not only managerial, but also ideological ambitions. He is beyond any doubt one of those who contributed to the conservative turn of Putin during the period of the "Munich talk" and after.

Yakunin's Basic Infrastructural Arrangements

Yakunin's „Influence Factory“ is a large holding which consists of formal and informal institutions as well as tools of influence.

To understand the recently established think tank „Dialogue of Civilizations“ it is imperative to look at its infrastructural tangle which is under Yakunin's control.

The Rhodos Forum: At face value, the Rhodos Forum is no different from the many similar fora, which deal with global problems. It assembles up to 400 participants in different years. Among the participants are many politicians, pundits and media leaders. Despite the fact that Yakunin himself is a conservative ideologist, who insists on such traditional values as family, state and Church, the Forum has been visited by left and right wing intellectuals. The Rhodos Forum has enabled Yakunin to make personal contacts with representatives of the establishment of various countries. In 2010, a special Youth Forum took place in the framework of the Rhodos Forum for the first time. Vladimir Yakunin publicly congratulated Alexander Filippov and Yulia Kinash for the success of the event. Alexander Filippov is a Graduate of Moscow State University and at this point works in the Moscow office of the "Dialogue of Civilizations" in charge of developing contacts to China. Yulia Kinash graduated from the Media Department of Moscow University and went to Prague to establish a youth movement dedicated to questions of education. The Movement issues a journal and holds an annual conference under Yakunin's patronage. The Russian press suggests that Yulia Kinash owns shares in a Russian company together with the daughter of another well-known Russian personality, namely Alexander Babakov. In 2018 Yulia Kinash defended her dissertation at the political science department which is controlled by Yakunin. Her special field is information wars.

Center “Dialogue of Civilizations”; Head office in Berlin

There is a subsidiary in Moscow which employs two collaborators: Yakunin’s former press secretary Grigoriy Levchenko and China expert Alexander Filippov. Levchenko is a young journalist and PR manager. He joined the Russian Railways as press secretary at a time when Mikhailov, one of the top PR managers in Russia, headed the PR department of the Railways. Mikhailov also was the owner of the company Mikhailov and Partners. Today, he is the CEO of the TASS agency.

After Yakunin withdrew from the Russian Railways, Levchenko remained his personal representative in Moscow. Today, he conducts meetings in Moscow with the representatives of various foreign think tanks and educational foundations, in the first line from Asian and Latin American countries.

In July 2018 Jean-Christophe Bas, a seasoned European official and former collaborator of the Council of Europe and the UN, became executive director of the Dialogue of Civilizations. Alexey Malashenko is in charge of research. He is a well-known Russian specialist of Islamic studies and former collaborator of the Moscow Office of the Carnegie Endowment.

Andrey Pervozvanny Endowment

This is a large Russian organization, which promotes orthodox projects of international character. The international projects of the endowment, among which the most well-known is the annual delivery of the “blessing fire” from Jerusalem to Russian cities, generated the possibility to become active in business and political circles in Israel, Greece, Armenia and Syria.

Outside of Russia the endowment employs the same Christian activists as the Endowment of Vasiliy the Great, which is controlled by Konstantin Malofeev, an ultra-rightist businessman, who also finances anti-Ukrainian separatism in Donbas.

Alongside with hard-core orthodox and Church programs the endowment awards an annual prize to representatives of culture, it runs its own schools to train volunteers, conducts annual philosophical conferences which are organized by senator Sergey Shcheblygin, who owes his mandate in the Federation council to Yakunin.

Sergey Shcheblygin is one of the key managers of Yakunin’s ideological hub. He is the co-founder and president of the Andrey Pervozvannyi foundation, the head of the foundation “Spread Your Wings” and the director of the Istoki Capital Fund, which provides targeted finance for all projects of the hub. In Soviet times, he lectured on Scientific Communism.

The director of the Foundation is Vladimir Bushuev, a colonel of the border troops, who worked in the Fund between 2000 and 2009, transferred to Yakunin into the Russian Railways and returned to the Andrey Pervozvannyi Foundation as its CEO.

The other key figure in the management is Alexander Gatilin, the head of the Section for public relations of the Andrey Pervozvannyi Foundation. He is also engaged in other Yakunin agencies.

The «Center of National Glory» is a separate project aiming at military-patriotic education of youth. It is a part of numerous other youth projects run or supervised by the Kremlin, which are to boost an atmosphere of patriotic militarism in the Russian Federation.

«Holiness of Motherhood» is a special project run by Yakunin's wife Natalia Yakunina. She pushes the propaganda of family values which enables Yakunin to enter in a dialogue with pro-family conservative organizations and alliances in Europe. In 2014 the organization held its annual forum in the Kremlin Congress Hall. Besides Yakunin and his wife Konstantin Malofeev, the French politician Emeric Chopard, as well as Greek and Italian conservative politicians were among the participants.

Official Endowments

In order to fund all these projects, Yakunin established a group of endowments. One is located in Russia (Istoki), two others in Switzerland. One of the richest Russian-Armenian business tycoons, Ruben Vardanyan, who disposes of a broad network of connections and interests, joined the Swiss "Dialogue of Civilizations" endowment. After he left the company "Troika-Dialogue", he set up his own investment fund and participates as member of the supervisory councils in dozens of well-known companies and educational institutions. At this point, Vardanyan is the president of the council of the Swiss "Dialogue of Civilizations" Endowment.

The management board of this endowment includes Yakunin and his wife as well as Vladimir Kulikov, Diana Orlova, Armen Sarkisyan and Rene Frischknecht (secretary). The management board of the other Swiss endowment, (the Andrey Pervozvannyi Endowment) includes Yakunin's wife (president), Yakunin (vice president) and Rene Frischknecht as secretary. Additional board members are Simeon Donskov, Alexey Grigor'ev and Mikhail Yakushev.

Yakunin complements his long years of work in Greece via the Rhodos Forum by systemic work in France, where he heads the Association "Franco-Russian Dialogue", which has held an annual French-Russian Economic forum since 2013.

Yakunin set up a consulting company of his own under the label „Bridges“ after he left the Russian Railways. He announced in public, that this company would act as consultant for the Chinese strategic project „One Belt One Road“ in the framework of which the People's Republic establishes bridgeheads in Europe (Silkroad).

Yakunin's Resources in the Humanities

In 2008, the Faculty of Political Science was set up under the patronage of Yakunin at one of Russia's oldest Universities, the MGU (Moscow State University named after Lomonossov). At this faculty, Yakunin holds a chair and runs numerous research and educational projects in the fields of geopolitics, theory of power and Eurasian studies, where people like V.E. Bagdasaryan, M.V. Vilisov, S.G. Kara-Murza, N.Y. Konopal'tsev, A.V. Sidorovitch, K.O. Telin, A.E. Shcheglovitov, and Y.N. Yudenkov participate.

The faculty realizes internship programs for young political scientists in European and US institutions of higher learning. Its international department is headed by a young historian, a specialist for the history of WWII, Anton Kompleev and develops partnerships with more than 30 universities in Asia and Europe.

At the same time, these political scientists participate in projects of the „Dialogue of Civilizations“. Bagdasaryan is Yakunin's permanent intellectual partner. Konopal'tsev is one of the managers of the Rhodos Forum.

The All-Russian Association of Political Scientists. It was initiated by Yakunin to form a counterweight against the already existing Russian Association of Political Science and to assemble

the patriotic and anti-Western political scientists of the capital as well as to control the numerous departments and chairs of political science at regional universities. The new association is headed by the Dean of the Faculty of Political Science Andrey Shutov. In this way, Yakunin realizes a far-reaching program of transforming academic political science in the RF and of educating a new generation of specialists.

According to media reports, Sergey Kirienko decided to make the Association a major partner for analytical work after he had joined the Presidential Administration.

Vladimir Yakunin is member of the boards of trustees in many ideological organizations. The most important among them are the Military-Historical Association and the Foundation "Russian World". The Military-Historical Association was set up in 2012 at the behest of Minister of Culture Vladimir Medinskiy and was directly supported by Putin. It is a tool to execute a broad-gauged program promoting historical revisionism.

The Foundation „Russian World“ is broadly known as one of two (the other one is ROSSOTRUDNICHESTVO) instruments for mobilizing diaspora members to accept the ideological contours of modern Kremlin politics.

The Panama Papers: Transfer of Russian Railway actives to offshore accounts

The institutional projects, which give Yakunin access to various contacts are complemented by a broad spectrum of informal tools.

Yakunin has retained his relations with the Railways and is able to use its informal resources. His former colleague Alexander Bobreshov, who heads the security service of the company, figured in anti-corruption publications. He had the possibility to allocate contracts to private security companies in the regions for guarding infrastructural objects of rail traffic. The Panama Papers and documents made public by the media tycoon German Gorbuntsov (who was later killed in London) evidence that the Russian Railways under the management of Yakunin transferred large sums to offshore firms using fake contracts and employing companies under the control of Andrey Krapivin, one of Yakunin's closest collaborators. According to documents revealed by Mossack Fonseca, USD 200 Million were channeled thru Krapivin's firms.

<https://www.occrp.org/ru/panamapapers/wringing-profits-from-the-russian-railways/>

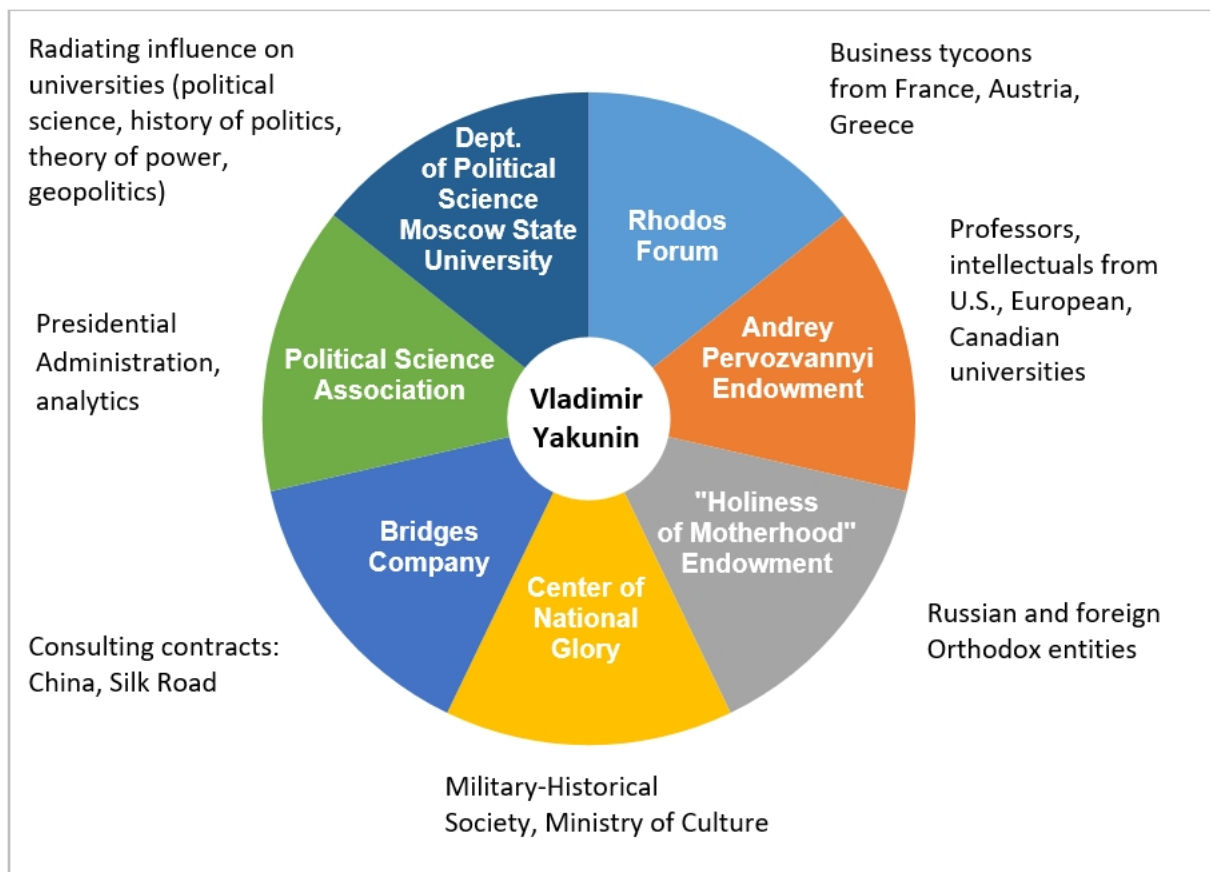
The company of Yakunin's son Andrey invests in three big hotels in Europe: in Vienna, Davos and in the Italian region of Umbria. Andrey Yakunin became the president of the Alumni Association of St. Petersburg State University. This is not simply a honorary position, but a possibility to build a group of clients from among high-flying young people from St. Petersburg.

Conclusions

This is the context, in which the think tank „Dialogue of Civilizations“ has operated since it was opened in Berlin. Its program of activities ties in with that of similar European public brain trusts. Yakunin manages a well-structured ideological holding with systemic operation: it disposes of communication channels with foreign politicians and intellectuals, agencies to train cadres, institutions for the military-patriotic education for youth, structures to influence humanity studies in two large universities, channels to link him up to large-scale government projects in the fields of culture and education.

Yakunin's ambition is to become the Anti-Soros, the organizer of anti-liberal politics on a global scale. He creates a communicative environment linking various directions of anti-globalism, Christian conservatism, anti-liberalism and anti-Americanism. Between 2003-2019, Vladimir Yakunin has belonged to small group of people who have selected European politicians, businessmen, experts, and journalists, considered to be eligible for co-operation with the Kremlin. This work was begun by Zhirinovskiy and Dugin in the 1990s and during the following decade

people like Leonid Slutskiy, Alexander Babakov, Kostantin Kosachev, Alexey Pushkov, Konstantin Malofeev and Vladimir Yakunin became important. They are in touch with one specific milieu of European politicians, who have various convictions (European separatists, French right-wingers, Greek Leftists, German Social Democrats and AfD activists), but from which tactical alliances for the support of concrete Kremlin actions are formed. To all appearance, Steve Bannon, who strives to create a new right-wing alliance in Europe during the parliamentary campaign in May 2019, works with the same parties and deputies as the Russian group and approaches the latter on the same corridor.



Russia Takes it all?

How much leverage can Russia have on the EP elections?

Introduction

In the last few months, there have been many warnings from high levels about the upcoming Russian interference in the European elections. Anders Fogh Rasmussen, the ex-secretary general of NATO, told for example this February at the Munich Security conference that Russia has a major strategy to change the electoral outcome and do its best to meddle into the EP elections, using “unprecedented means”. The leader of the Estonian Intelligence agency also told that it is “very likely” to meddle into the European Parliamentary elections. Microsoft also warned about the high possibility of electoral interference and cyberthreats on the European Parliamentary elections. And, for the first time, the European Commission prepared an Action Plan against disinformation last - naming Russia as a main source of possible interference, especially when it comes to disinformation.

While this increasing alarmism, is to a certain extent definitely welcome – especially when it comes to EU institutions that have been long in denial and ignorance of the threats Russia is posing on political tendencies in Europe – we should realistically assess the willingness and capacity of Russia to alter election results on the Upcoming EP vote. This paper tries to give a short assessment of what we can expect in this regard.

Past experiences

In order to be able to assess the possible threat of Russia on future elections, we first have to assess the impact that Russia had on democratic elections in the West so far. In the last few years, there have been a few cases where Russian attempts to change the outcome of the elections were proven, and the results were in line with that Russia wanted to achieve. The two most important examples were the US presidential election, where the Mueller Report obviously proved that Russia interfered into the presidential election via cyber-attacks, disinformation, and other tools, and that they did it with the help of the official institutions of the Russian Federation – mainly the military intelligence service GRU. The second important case was the Brexit referendum, where the Russian state and its proxies, again, obviously tries to change the outcome of the vote, and the results finally turned out to be beneficial towards Russia. Russian disinformation also played an important role in the 2016 Dutch referendum on the Association Agreement with Ukraine – but in this case, there are not much evidence that the Russian state itself played an important role.

The common feature in the two important cases (US Presidential election and Brexit vote) is that they were both important, and had direct outcomes on policy decisions relevant for Russia. It is obviously important for the Kremlin who the leader of the United States is - and in 2016, it seemed to be even more important that who not becomes the president of the United States: Hillary Clinton. In the case of the Brexit vote, it was obviously in the interest of Russia to weaken the transatlantic ties and the European Union via helping the way out the most important ally of the United States from the EU.

In neither of the two cases, though, we can clearly argue that the result of the election can be attributed to Russian meddling, and without this meddling, the results were different. First of all, these election results did not come from nowhere. Euroskepticism was not brought to UK by Russia, neither receptivity to right-wing populism and anti-intellectualism was a Russian invention in the US. But, second, we simply never really be able to quantify the impact in terms of votes- which would be needed to clearly say an outcome is because of the meddling of Russia or not. But it also mean we cannot real exclude the opportunity of Russian meddling had a decisive role on the results. The best thing to do is to leave with this agnostic position, but not to accept the favorite

logical conclusion of conspiracy theorists that because of the outcome was in line with Russia's interests we can draw a clear causality and attribute the results to Russia.

At the same time, we tend to forget about cases where Russia clearly had an intention to change electoral outcomes- but they clearly failed. In France for example, the “everyone but Macron” strategy of the Kremlin has clearly shipwrecked. And, as Anton Shekhovtsov argues, Russia did not interfere deeply into EU member states' elections in the last few years because a) they did not have to, as they were happy with the developments anyway (e.g. in Italy, Austria, or Hungary) or b) they couldn't, because they knew they cannot have too much leverage on the public opinion there (e.g. in Sweden). Still, the intense discussion over Russian interference led to a situation where we have the illusion that Russia is willing and capable of interfering into every elections. *“The more information Facebook and Twitter revealed about the misuse of their services by Russian actors and the more details Robert Mueller's investigation uncovered, the more axiomatic and mythological the concept of Russian interference became.”* (Shekhovtsov, p4.)

Russian attitudes towards the European Union

The two most important questions we should raise when trying to predict Russia's possible interference at the EP election: First: does Russia has the intention to change the outcome o the elections? Second: does it has the capacity to do so?

When it comes to the intention, it seems to be rather evident that Russia is interested in weakening the European Union, and also, to weaken the transatlantic ties of the European Union. The two goals are partially interconnected: the European Union is often perceived – especially since the annexation of Crimea and the sanctions introduced by the European Council – as a puppet of the United States that is following more the US interests than the interests of the Member States.

But there are other reasons for the antipathy of Russia towards the EU as well. One is ideological. Attempts to openly influence European political affairs and attempts to divide of the EU are ideologically justified as economic, geopolitical and moral self-defense. As Sergei Lavrov once stated, “Russia refused to follow European, Western values in their new light neo-liberal version”.²⁵ One of the key ideas in Russia's contemporary intellectual discourse is that Russia has to become a great independent power, a “stronghold of conservative forces” fighting against the liberal hegemony that the US and Europe would like to establish in the World. According to this narrative, Russia with its Eurasianist stance represents the traditional values (family, nation, Christianity), while the EU is representing Betrayed Europe,(or “gayropa” spreading a value-less, nihilist, cosmopolitan, decadent and aberrant, consumer “neoliberal” worldview. in this worldview, Russia is not only different from Europe, but Russia is morally superior to Europe.

As for the economic and pragmatic considerations, Russia always preferred to be engaged directly with individual member states rather than with EU-institutions, and tried to reduce the Russia-EU relations to the world of bilateral relations that they understand well and can influence better. This principle was openly articulated when Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov claimed a few years ago: “I would appreciate and prefer a situation where each EU member country would be guided by its national interests.” Russia is not interested in a coherent, united and strong EU that is based on the cooperation of the member states - just the opposite. Divide and rule was always an important goal for Russia when it comes to dealing with the European Union.

But it still does not necessarily means that Russia has a very strong interest in changing the composition of the European Parliament. The EP is still far not the most important institution of the European Union: the most important decisions are still made in the European Council and the European Commission.

²⁵http://archive.mid.ru//bdomp/brp_4.nsf/e78a4807of128a7b43256999005bcbb3/518c6d961e81554d44257d630034534f!OpenDocument.

While Russia has its allies within the European Parliament, both on the radical left and right, an overwhelming majority of the MEPs (around 70 percent of them) is rather critical, and there have been more than a dozen resolutions and decisions that went against Russia's vested interest since the Crimean annexation. In most cases though, the strong calls of the European Parliament to other EU institutions to change the policy course were met with modest or no response. If a quite hawkish European Parliament could make only a limited impact in shaping EU policy towards Russia, why would a lot of efforts to change the composition of the European Parliament be worthwhile? Having the majority in the European Parliament as euroskeptic supporters of Russia would create institutional chaos and instability that Russia could benefit from - but it is not a possible scenario.

Furthermore, it seems that this is not necessarily the ratio of the pro-Russian MEPs that matter most. We found that pro-Kremlin votes of these MEPs are consistent; the members often show active support at the plenary sessions and in the committees as well, taking stances in line with the Kremlin's political and policy interests. Changing important policy decisions might not necessarily need a parliamentary majority. A good example for this is Béla Kovács (nicknamed "KGBéla"), a Hungarian MEP, who was a founder and treasurer of a far-right political party (AEMN) at a time, and also, he was a rapporteur of two (energy-related) regulations within the European Parliament in the 2009-2014 cycle – which is quite a luxury in terms of policy influence for an MEP that has no affiliation to any groups within the European Parliament. It could point to the possibility that he was helped by other MEPS as well.

When it comes to the capacity of Russia to interfere, the question is simple: does Russia have the capacity to change the electoral outcome of the EP elections- a highly decentralized election of half billion people in 28 member states? The realistic response is no – to make a substantial change, Russia should interfere into the elections of at least 4-5 bigger member states. It would require huge financial and political investments (disinformation, hackings and cyberattacks) for a questionable return.

Leaving fingerprints everywhere

To sum up: it seems that Russia most probably has neither the capacity nor the willingness to substantially interfere into the process of the EP elections. But it does not mean that they want to remain invisible at the elections.

The main, and realistic goal of the Kremlin is going to be to leave fingerprints everywhere (spreading suspicion on on support of euroskeptic parties, attempts of hacking, etc.) in order that everybody thinks that Russia was an important player behind the results. As, on the surface, the outcome of this EP election will be better for the Kremlin with the previous one (with the ratio of all kind of euroskeptics raising to around 40 percent from the previous 30 percent), and the Kremlin does not make a secret out of its support of these parties, many will draw (false) causal link between the rise of populists and Russian meddling. While, in fact, as we discussed above, the drivers of the rise of populists in Europe are dominantly homegrown. Giving the Kremlin too much credit for influencing EP elections could just help the Kremlin to add into the already existing picture of their omnipotence. Mystification of Russia just helps the Kremlin via a self-fulfilling prophecy to increase its sharp power influence in Europe.

But the most important task for the future would be to reveal the real institutional influence within the European Parliament -after the new European Parliament, when the allies of Putin will be stronger than ever. "Instead of openly confronting the West as did its predecessors, the new Russia manipulates the system inside Brussels" – as Peter Pomerantsev argues.²⁶ We would rather say: beside openly confronting the West, Russia tries to manipulate the system inside Brussels.

²⁶Peter Pomerantsev: Yes, Russia Matters: Putin's Guerrilla Strategy, World Affairs Journal, September/October 2014 - <http://www.worldaffairsjournal.org/article/yes-russia-matters-putin%E2%80%99s-guerrilla-strategy-2014:18-19>

So far, the success of these attempts seem to be rather limited, but a more systemic investigation is needed in the future. The most important problem in Europe, though, is possibly not on the level of EU institutions. They seem to be to a certain extent immune to Russian influence. The biggest problems are with some Member States that are opening their door wide to malign Russian influence, as they hope political benefits from it, such as Austria, and even more, Italy and Hungary. These players will pose the biggest challenge on a coherent EU strategy on Russia in the future.

Russian Lobbyists in European Elections: Channels of Influence

Contrary to the wrong assumptions of European experts for the struggle against Russian political influence the social networks and other modern media are by far not the key channels of influence on the political situation in EU countries.

From the strategic point of view one has to distinguish the influence on public opinion moods and on voting behavior from the establishment of strategic channels for reaching European politicians in individual countries. This is also not about, as some intelligence services in East and Central European countries maintain, the unabashed recruitment of European politicians. The key for making an impact is the interaction in the common interest. This includes support in election campaigns. The Czech Republic (CR) is a glaring example for this view.

The Nikulin hacking case

The setup for direct intervention into elections in the CR is very simple. It resembles the scheme reported in the press, through which Russian agents of influence tried to influence the decision of Minister of Justice Robert Pelikan concerning the extradition of the Russian hacker Nikulin. Extradition requests had come from the U.S. and Russia. Temporal priority and the seriousness of the incriminations were a strong argument for extradition to the U.S, where he was additionally suspected to have participated in the hacking attack on the server of the Democratic Party in the course of the presidential campaign in 2016. On top of that the U.S. has pressed for Nikulin's extradition through unofficial and official channels. For example, House speaker Paul Ryan has conducted consultations on this issue during his visit to Prague.

Russian representatives have also promoted their interests. At this point, we have identified two channels they have used. The first is direct access into Milos Zeman's presidential chancellery. Pelikan himself reports that there were attempts originating in the chancellery to exert pressure on him. This was done by Chancellor Mlynar and Zeman himself. They tried to nudge the Minister to take the decision to extradite Nikulin to Russia.

The second channel is the former General Attorney of Prague Stanislav Mecla who today works as an attorney at law and is a former advisor of Robert Pelikan. This channel was established thru the owner of the Georgian restaurant Pirosmeni, Asmat Shanawa in Karlovy Vary. (Presumably, she came from the Russian ally Abkhazia, which Russia has recognized as an independent state). Asmat Shanawa has co-operated with the Russian embassy since a long time and has organized, together with the Russian Cultural Center in the CR guest performances of Russian theater groups, and banquets for Russian officials. Russian diplomats may use her restaurant for unofficial events.

Asmat Shanawa provided the contact to Stanislav Mecla and proposed (according to her own version as go-between for three anonymous Russian representatives) his participation as a lobbyist for Russian interests in the Nikulin case. Mecla was paid 300,000 Crowns (approximately € 12,000) for linking up to Pelikan and collected some analytical documents which evidenced the necessity to extradite Nikulin to Russia. They were, however, ignored by Pelikan. Evgeniy Nikulin was extradited to the U.S. and MoJ Robert Pelikan announced that he would not be a member of the new cabinet and would resign from his parliamentary mandate. He also pointed out that he had a different view of premier Babis than the majority of the ANO Party. The Nikulin case was one of the reasons for his resignation, which confirms the rumor about the existence of a 3rd channel for pressuring the MoJ, namely the acting Minister of the Interior Lubomir Menar, who had been the head of the security service of the Vitkovice a.s. company in the past. This company was tightly linked to Vitkovice Steel a.s., which belonged to the Russian holding EVRAZ until 2013 and runs a rep office and production sites in Russia. Needless to say, the participation of other political figures from the ANO or the decommissioned Babis cabinet is also possible.

Allies of Russian lobbyists in the Zeman team

The team of Milos Zeman, who ran for his re-election 2018 for a further 5-years term, had begun early on to prepare for the elections. Even earlier a chain of interactions with Russian advisors and sponsors was established, whose interests are promoted by Milos Zeman, his political allies in the CR and the entire EU. The key members in Zeman's team are his press secretary Jiri Ovacek and the Foreign Office collaborator Petr Piruncik, who has been seconded to the Presidential Administration. (The latter is presently waiting for his nomination as deputy ambassador to Moscow, where he had worked in a subordinate position already earlier), Chancellor Zdenek Mlynar and presidential advisor Martin Nejedly (a former top manager of one of the two disbanded Czech daughters of the Russian company Lukoil). After the annexation of the Crimea Lukoil sold a filling station network in the CZ to its managers and Hungarian partners, but its key subsidiary Lukoil Accounting&Finance s.r.o. which is in charge of international business.

A similarly important role in the set-up of Russian influence structures in the CZ is played by Milos Zeman's relationship with the leader of the anti-immigrant and nationalist Party "Freedom and Direct Democracy", Tomio Okamura. The president supports this party which in its turn transfers the payments for the debts accrued during the election campaign over its accounts.

Last not least, the party „belonging“ to Zeman (Party of Citizen Rights) must be mentioned, whose leadership (in the first line, his personal physician Lubomir Necas) has played an essential functional and organizational role in past campaigns.

Elections 2017/2018

The electoral campaign in the CZ was foot-dragging for a long period, since first the parliament and then the president was elected, who since 2013 is chosen no longer by the Parliament, but by popular vote.

The Russian scheme of interaction with and the support for Milos Zeman and his ally Andrej Babis as well as his party ANO includes two key platforms in the CR and a special support channel in Moscow.

The key support centers in the CR were

- 1) The organization of Russian compatriots and ROSSOTRUDNICHSTVO, whose operation was, however, hobbled by personnel reshuffles in Moscow (During the summer of 2016 the process of the deposition of the head was initiated, which was concluded only in 2017)
- 2) Russian spin doctors

Rossotrudnichestvo

This agency supervises the organization of compatriots and its leaders and is also in charge of funding. For a long time, the Russian Center for Science and Culture was headed by Leonid Gamza, until he was followed by Andrej Konchakov. Konchakov was born in 1986 and owes this placement to ROSATOM. Among Russian embassy workers a rumor has it that he is an intelligence agent. In accordance with an order issued directly by Kharichev of the presidential administration compiled a list of opinion leaders in the Russian diaspora. This list was used later for the organization and the voting at presidential elections in the CR. After the list of loyal opinion leaders had been compiled, the individuals on the list were asked to indicate, which personalities from Czech public life they knew and influenced. In accordance with the list and the level of loyalty some opinion leaders in 2016/17 received cash payments thru the Russian Center for Science and Culture as a reward for agitation for the ruling president and general pro-Russian agitation. The director of the „Russian House“ in Karlovy Vary Sergey Komkov, who also calls himself vice president of the International Academy for Spiritual Unity and Cooperation among the Peoples of the World, a doctor and professor of philosophy, received only in June 2016 the amount of € 100,000 in cash. To be sure, Komkov disposes of funding for similar purposes by the Chechen Republic independently of Rossotrudnichestvo and has been a long-standing advisor for Ramzan Kadyrov for Central Europe and the CZ.

Spin doctors /"polittechnologists"/

This part is based on the information from 2 independent Moscow sources among well-known spin doctors working for the Presidential Administration.

One of the key consultants in Zeman's team is a star spin doctor from among those who work, live or have their business in the CR.

Another affiliated personality in Zeman's environment is the nationalist Tomio Okamura. He speaks fluent Russian and has been supported for a long time by the Russian Embassy and Rossotrudnichestvo. His main patron in Moscow is the president of the Duma Committee for International Relations and his main interlocutor Slutsky's former aide Timofey Shevyakov. His Russian consultants brokered a co-operation agreement with Milos Zeman. Consequently, the campaign of his party was harmonized according to the plans of the Russian spin doctors with that of Zeman's.

The campaign strategy was drafted on the basis of an analysis of the problem field and the authentic mood of the Czech voters. Okamura's campaign by the principle of "door to door", namely direct contacts with voters in the villages as well as use of social networks became the starting point for the Zeman campaign. Finance came almost exclusively from Russian sources, in the first line, from companies linked to Rosatom and means contributed by lobbyists in Zeman's environment. The formula that was applied later was already elaborated during the parliamentary campaign: The financial means are divided into dozens of sources and allocated to a campaign fund. On top of that, a „gray fund“ is established, from which the campaign costs are covered. It draws the attention, because the competitors will not suspect the existence of a black fund from which illegal activities are funded. Such items are, for example, the placement of requested articles marked as ads in the press, actions in social networks, or conducting of qualitative opinion research (focus groups by Russian experts who visit the country as tourists).

The last step was that after the conclusion of the 2nd round of presidential elections Okamura's party transferred all funds from their accounts to unknown recipients (which constituted a breach of the law, which lead to the publicity of the payments). Only the objective was indicated, namely consulting services. There is unconfirmed information, according to which the second round was partly doctored in small villages. In these locations, voter turnout was by 150% higher during the first day than the country-wide average. This, however, is confirmed only unofficially by a Russian spin doctor, who worked earlier with the Russian company Niccolo M.

France

Russian intervention in French elections followed the same pattern. The system of unofficial campaign finance used Rossotrudnichestvo channels as well as joint agencies located in Brussels and Strasbourg in which Russia is represented, for example the administrative apparatus of the European Court for Human Rights. Money trails lead to deputies to the European Parliament und members of the national delegations of the PASE.

When it comes down to the co-operation of Russian spin doctors, it was first offered to Sarkozy's team. As soon as he quit the presidential campaign, Marine Le Pen and the Front National was targeted, although one cannot exclude that some members of the Republican Party participated, and in the first line such lobbyists of Russian interests as Thierry Mariani, a close friend of Sergey Glaz'ev und Sergey Prikhodko as well as of other influential personalities who formally are not involved in foreign policy decisions but participate in their elaboration.

For France the Leonid Slutsky's group was of decisive importance for the co-ordination and contact management with French politicians and public personalities. Concerning the work of spin doctors, the man in charge was Dmitriy Badovskiy, a sociologist, spin doctor, former co-ordinator

of contacts of the Presidential Administration with the expert community and now Volodin's advisor. Badovskiy is fluent in French and had close contacts with many experts in the Sarkozys staff which he has maintained until this date.

The second and even more essential source of campaign finance than direct payments from Russia were funds contributed by joint companies, more precisely French companies and business people cooperating with Russians as well as well-known business tycoons of Russian origin.

As in the case of the CR, the consultant staff was located in Russia. Formally, studies and campaign events were ordered and funded by the French side. As in other countries, activities in the social media were most conspicuous. The offline-actions in favor of Marine Le Pen went almost unnoticed. The defeat of Le Pen prevented the realization of the campaign strategy which, in contrast to the CR consisted of two intertwined campaigns, the parliamentary and the presidential competitions.

Elections to the EU Parliament and Russian Interference Into the Politics of Czechia, Slovakia and Poland

Expectable Threats

The EU as a whole and individual member countries are set to counter possible Russian interference into the electoral campaign in the run-up to parliamentary elections. The votes will be cast between 23 and 26 May; the public discussion, however, around a possible Russian meddling into the campaign began already during 2018 together with the preparations for the poll, before the list of candidates fielded by the national and supra-national parties participating in the race was completed.

Nevertheless, there is one important detail, namely the definition of objectives. Let us assume the head of the U.S. company FireEye, Ben Read, which is in cyber-security, alerts the British Financial Times that he thinks Russia as a uniform organization may exert pressure on elections to the European Parliament under a uniform plan, in order to brace for interference into elections in the U.S. and other countries. In other words he and his American colleagues assume that there is a single decision-making center for this issue in Russia. Secondly, that this center adopts long-term strategies concerning democratic elections around the globe, which are executed by all participants in the process of yielding pressure on foreign elections from the Russian side.

Obviously, this is an erroneous idea about the set-up of Russian infrastructure charged with influencing elections abroad, which leads to the elaboration of a virtual list of threats. This, in turn is an obstacle to countering the realities of pressure or interference by Russian political actors on and into the European electoral process.

As a result, EU representatives distinguish several directions, along which Russia can exert pressure on the elections and even influence their outcome. Traditionally, after the data theft in the National Committee of the Democratic Party in the U.S., Cyber attacks are mentioned in the first place. Information on attempts by hacker groups that very probably are linked to the Russian government, to obtain sensitive data on the implementation of the elections, has already emerged. The most credible source for this information is, at this point, Microsoft. This is about two strategies: the first, which is accorded the highest attention concerns the plain theft of sensitive data. The second, which is discussed much less in public, concerns the falsification of data, including the distortion of elections results in places where votes are counted electronically.

The second topic under active discussion is indirectly linked to hacker attacks, is the impact on public opinion or on concrete individuals in the social media. In this regard, several effective myths have formed against the backdrop of available information on Russian interference into the U.S. presidential elections in 2016. For example, the claim that Russian internet trolls are capable of

creating „sleeping“ virtual communities consisting of millions of accounts, a considerable part of which are bots discussing marginal topics. Whenever it becomes necessary, however, they come to life like the sleeper intelligence agents and start to deal with political topics.

The third influence tool is the media. Impact on media is effected by launching various informations ranging from open fake news to compromising material („kompromat“), which had been retrieved and stolen by Russian hackers in the course of earlier cyber attacks. In defense against such actions some EU member states, in the first line France, have adopted legislation, which however, is considered insufficient, because this concerns the EU as a whole and Russian propagandists are considered to be the top experts in the production of fake news at this point. The declaration of the EU Ministerial Council mentions possible media companies run by Russian citizens in this respect.

On top of that, there are the risks of direct influence on candidates in the electoral campaign. This can take the form of direct – including financial – support of individual parties, movements or politicians, or hectoring, threats, assaults or other provocations. Most frequently, however, the financial component is mentioned. Traditionally, this has been a sensible issue since the loans for Marine LePen and her party became public knowledge. Accusations, now concerning the receipt of openly illegal finance from the Russian side, and not from private sources, but from state agencies were leveled against the Italian politician Matteo Salvini during his electoral campaign. Salvini is the most active right populist within the EU, who became the motor for and, as it looks, the financial sponsor of a joint platform for most of the big Euroskeptical parties and who also visited those countries in the EU, where right populists are in power.

The last strategy of possible Russian interference is, in the first line because of the Northstream-2 project, the use of various lobbyists and personal relationships with European politicians. This is about achieving effects within the political establishment through representatives of business with interests in the Russian markets, through corrupted politicians or politicians and public personalities sympathizing with Russia. This is certainly a wholly real threat and the EU has, at this point, no antidote.

Real Threats

To what extent are public discussion in the EU clearly insufficient? If we talk about strategies of possible impact, we face various issues linked to elections, that can be collapsed into one direction, namely advisory activities during the election campaign.

Of course, this is a complex issue, since consultation comprises several components depending on which Russian individuals establishes contacts with which EU personalities and which personal interests unrelated to presumed government interests this actor is pursuing. This may concern funding on the ground by Russian spin doctors during the campaign. This may be consulting services concerning the removal of obstacles for campaign finance including changing relevant legislation in countries where Russian partners are represented in parliament or the cabinet. This may imply funding for individual campaign actions or „co-ordinated impact“ like in France, where French-language communities in Belgium and Switzerland were involved.

When it comes down to impact on information, the key role is not assigned to media campaigns, which are organized by Russian mass media outside of EU member states. The decisive role is played by information sources using the national languages. This is most requested by national readers, who invariably consume information in their mother tongues and not in English, which is the target of many campaigns inside the EU in the fight against disinformation.

Another issue which commands minimal attention is the use of soft power by Russia. In the first line, this concerns the implementation of various exchange programs between schools, universities, scientific institutions, it comprises scientific conferences in the humanities on EU

territory but, most importantly, joint events with European NGOs, analytical and media centers as well as governmental institutions.

There is not discussion about the infrastructure of Russian meddling, of how key decisions are taken, whether Russia has strategic objectives and co-ordinated actions of interference into elections. These are principal questions for discussing Russian interference into elections abroad and particularly EU elections. It makes no sense at all just to repeat, as this is done by many European politicians, that Russia wants to weaken the EU and therefore pursues coordinated political stratagems.

These statements are baseless. In reality, the Russian ruling class is convinced that the weakening and even the demise of the EU is inevitable. After they had buried their hopes for a strong alliance with the EU at the end of the 2000s the Russian leadership concluded that it would be more advantageous and simpler to interact with individual states, as this had been the case prior to the establishment of the Union. Russia starts from this vantage point to implement its foreign policy as a state. In other words it does not attempt at destroying the EU, it simply behaves as if the Union will crack by itself. This is seen by many observers as a conscious strategy of annihilation.

Contrary to widely held views in the West claiming that Russia is almost as centralized as The Soviet Union and that there is always some unitary center of decision making, there is no such a thing.. There is no single department or division within the key Russian ruling institution, the Presidential Administration. Alexey Gromov, the first deputy head of the PA is closest to fulfill such a function. He is in charge of Russian TV, and not only. He is also responsible for Russian broadcasts abroad, the ill-famed „Sputnik“, RT and other similar media. Gromov can take strategic decisions concerning them and their operation. He is a contact point for a part of international partners who are interested in supporting Russia. Nevertheless, his major administrative competitor, presidential press secretary Dmitriy Peskov is dealing with the same issues with the same measure of success. For example, he can take the decision to allot money for a campaign in the German blogosphere, the recruitment and the remuneration for the services rendered by German commentators in the social media. When it comes to dealing with the Russian expert community, to contracting the services of spin doctors, these issues had been handled by the other first deputy head of the PA, Vyacheslav Volodin before. Under him, the division for domestic politics und the division for public projects actively promoted the creation of new media platforms, allocated funding for these activities and for research by Russian policy experts who studied and sometimes participated in electoral campaigns within the EU.

After the transfer of Vyacheslav Volodin to the position of the speaker of the State Duma, however, these functions were divided. Volodin snatched a package, together with personnel and wound up with something like a “parliamentary co-operation” operated from his Duma base. Other issues remained with organizations like the Laboratory of National Politics, Minchenko Consulting, KROS, “Night Wolves” etc. as well as other organizations handling political techniques, formal NGOs, issue-specific professional entities depending on long-term “gray” grants handed out by the PA. That is to say, funding does not come from various presidential grants or contracts, but from „adhesive“ finance supplied by business covering concrete topics. For example, Gazprom and its numerous daughter firms are frequently harnessed for project finance including political programs relating to countries where the interests of this Russian state company are represented. Earlier, the Russian Railways had taken this position, today, however, ROSATOM has moved to second rank. Consequently, a part of the functions of co-ordinating and implementing projects of interference into foreign elections migrated from Volodin to his successor, the erstwhile CEO of Rosatom Sergey Kirienko. Within his team, the head of the division for public presidential projects Sergey Novikov ist most actively engaged in such pursuits. A part of opinion research and the contacts with the expert community have been transferred, together with the necessary personnel to the new head of the division for supporting the activities of the State Council, Alexander Kharichev. Earlier, he had been charged with the implementation of Russian presidential elections for voters registered abroad in addition to election campaigns in Russia proper.

The Foreign Ministry is a center in its own right. It strives to co-ordinate its relevant activities with the PA division of foreign policy, in order to avoid bureaucratic liabilities. This does not concern the embassies, since these appear only in the role of liaising points between European politicians and Russian actors who are interested in making an impact on elections. Rather, we are talking about organizations outside the RF linked to the FM and about ROSSOTRUDNICHESTVO as an actor of soft power, and – strangely enough- about the presidential management bureau, which controls all Russian property abroad and can, for example, can lease out real estate at reduced rates to foreign politicians and organizations or put at their disposition other objects such as printing shops.

The PA has already administered a number of „white“ grants in the framework of the study of outside experience in the organization and running of elections. In the first line, however, this concerns future influence; at this point events occurring in the framework of European elections are merely registered.

This approach is called the project method used by the modern Russian governmental machine which corresponds to an informal demand from the part of the electorate. In such countries as Czechia or Bulgaria, where, for example, Rosatom unfolds activities, this organization has a record of influencing elections on all levels in a non-formal way, the same way as Gazprom in Germany. Yet, in the majority of EU states, interference or participation in elections is not linked to activities of state companies. There are industrial-financial holdings who do this job because it promotes their own interests. Therefore, we are talking about support for concrete parties or candidates. In the framework of the upcoming elections, spin doctors working with Evgeniy Prigozhin, who uses the „project“ approach as well as Konstantin Malofeev, are deployed.

Analysis of individual countries; Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland

Czechia

The Czechs will elect their Eurodeputies on 24 and 25 May. According to valid legislation voters may opt for one list and mark no more than 2 candidates as their preference. More than 40 political organizations and alliances have applied for participation. The final list of participating organizations will be reduced by 25 pp. The majority of remaining organization have no chance to field a winning candidate. One can also state that the majority of small political forces striving to participate in these elections represent various euro-skeptical attitudes. No less than 10 parties demand the exit from the EU or the annulment of the Lisboa Treaty in their program. The idea of withdrawal from NATO is also vented.

According to all surveys published in the media and conducted by different Czech institutions as of end-2018, the first place in elections will go to the “Yes” /ANO/ party of prime minister Andrei Babis, in that it will receive between 7 and 10 mandates. In Czechia, 21 Eurodeputies are elected. The second place is taken by the „Pirates“ who will garner up to 5 mandates. The third place goes to the Civil Democrats who can hope for 2-3 mandates. Earlier, the Communist Party of Czechia and Moravia was able to present winning candidates. At the 2014 elections the right-liberal party TOP-09 and the union STAN (Senior Leaders and Independents) came out third. This time, the self-styled liberal parties, which are definitely anti-Russian succeeded in cutting a deal, although negotiations were about a much broader coalition. Two other parties are in deep crisis. The Christian Democrats (KDU-CSL) just exchanged its leader and the anti-immigrant Party for Freedom/Svoboda/ and Direct Democracy (SPD) led by nationalist Tomimo Okamura which has Russian connections, is falling apart. Okamura himself decided not to lead the list of candidates for the EU elections. Nevertheless, against the backdrop of active agitation, the SPD will be able to bring some deputies into the Europarlament.

Earlier on, already at the beginning of the campaign, the list fielded by the well-known anchorman Jaromir Soukup, the general director of the pro-president TV channel Barrandov TV which supports Milos Zeman, threw in the towel. Those two unions demonstrated openly pro-Russian

positions and were financed from sources close to Milos Zeman; more precisely by the former top manager of the Russian company Lukoil, Martin Nejedly.

This said, the Russian strategy in Czechia consists, as we can also observe with other parties of putting its bets on individual candidates. A key figure, which, however is not entirely pro-Russian, could be Eurodeputy Jan Zagrädil, the leader of ACRE (Alliance of Conservatives and Reformists on Europe). The list of Civil Democrats headed by him may garner 2-3 mandates. Nevertheless, Eurodeputy and authoritative politician Nejedly, will run for the position of the Commission Chairperson. Although his chances to be nominated are small, he might become a compromise figure for many Euroskeptics, in the first line right populists. In the past he would be close to Czech ex.president Vaclav Klaus, who after his retirement becomes more pro-Russian every year. He attended many events organized by the Russian Sberbank and lobbied its interests in Czechia. Zagrädil did not participate and distanced himself from in the recent intra-party campaign against Klaus' son, who had engaged in xenophobic talk. Russian participation in the party's electoral campaign was using Vaclav Klaus and ODS people close to him. Now Vaclav Klaus establishes his own party which, according to liberal commentators will be the counterpart to the German AfD, when it comes to programmatic stances.

Electoral chances for the Communists are small, yet they can obtain 1.2 mandates in the Europarlament. Their list can be read as pro-Russian, and consists mainly of young and little known individuals. It is headed by Eurodeputy Katerina Konecna, who voted against the resolution of the Euroarliament to support Oleg Sentsov, comes out against NATO and for partnership relations with Russia. She is leasing an apartment from the Russian embassy.

The Communist list also carries Jaromir Koglicka, who had visited the Crimea after the annexation already being a Euro-deputy. His chances for re-election are high. This time, the list of the Communist Party features also Zdenek Ondrasek, a former member of the Czech Communist Militia, whom the Communist tried to install as head of the parliamentary Control Commission (his nomination was cancelled at the end of the day). This commission controls the special services and police. In contrast to the young members on the Party list, both have chances to be re-elected in view of the Czech system for elections to the Europarlament.

The Alliance for Czech Sovereignty can be called fully pro-Russian. They come out for leaving the EU. Their list comprises the ex-minister and the former head of the Central Czech Region-David Rat- Rat, a former social democrat has been sentenced for corruption. A further similar alliance, Security, Responsibility and Solidarity is headed by the former ambassador to Russia Jaromir Basta. By the way, their electoral chances are minimal. In view of the active involvement of Russian spin doctors, which had become apparent during the last nationwide parliamentary and presidential elections (won by Milos Zeman and the Party of Freedom and Direct Democracy, respectively), these party lists are, in the first line, spoilers charged with forming an informational agenda and to promote the idea of exiting from the EU and NATO.

Even the list of the ruling party ANO includes a considerable number of Euro-skeptics. It is true that it is not directly supported by pro-Russian circles. ANO's most well known former representatives in the Europarlament, Telicka and Jozek have formed their own list "Voice"/Golos and come out with moderate pro-European stances. The major competitor for ANO in these elections, the Pirate Party does not advance pro-Russian positions either.

Slovakia

In Slovakia, the active campaign for elections to the European Parliament has begun only now, after the conclusion of presidential elections. Zuzana Caputova's victory in these elections can upend the power architecture.

Russian influence can be observed on the level of the media and partly of financial support through Russian companies operating in Slovakia or companies belonging to individuals from Russia, Moldova and Ukraine. Support goes to Slovak conservatives, who oppose Caputova.

There are also lists that openly lobby for Russian interests, their chances for success are, in most cases, non-existent.

Slovakia sends 13 deputies to the European Parliament. Judging from the polling results, most parties will have 1 representative. Eight parties may succeed.

As this frequently happens, there may be a backswing from the last, presidential elections, in that chances are highest for the extreme right-wing and anti-European and particularly nationalist forces to make it to the European Parliament. In the polls, they close follow the ruling party SMER. This is also explained by the fact that voter turnout in the Visegrad countries at elections to the European Parliament has been low in the past and has not reached 20% in Slovakia. It was lower than 15% in 2014. Russian and local policy consultants have this in mind and target the electorate which is expected at the urns. They also attempt at reducing turnout, since the more voters turn out, the fewer the chances for the pro-Russian entities.

Poland

Poland is the only country among the three where there is factually no Russian influence. There are pro-Russian political forces, like Euro-deputy Korwin-Mikesz or the father of the present premier Mazowiecki, who comes out for partnership relations with Russia in the framework of the ruling party. This said, pro-Russian politicians are completely sidelined. Poland has set aside one day, the 26 of May for the elections. It elects one of the largest delegations, namely 51 mandates from around 700. Poland is the only case, where influence uses indirect sources in a format which has dominated the discussions about Russian influence in the EU as such. We are talking about numerous web sites, which are written by people whose mother tongue obviously is not Polish. They unfold activities in the social media and propose such cultural projects as the movie about the "Volynsk massacre", the funding of which has remained a mystery, but has triggered a broad public discussion as well as a rapid deterioration of relations with Ukraine.

In conclusion, one may say that Russia pursues its interests in each country, although the general objective is destabilization and not obtaining control over European institutions. It employs the tools in keeping with its capacities and objectives in each country. In most cases, these are local influence groups and agents of influence, but no mythical co-ordination centers in the Kremlin or in the intelligence services. Many activities are not co-ordinated at all, for example the special FSB operation uncovered by Czech intelligence in the course of which hacker centers were established on Czech territory employing companies for computer servicing. Judging from the official and unofficial reaction of Russian representatives in Czechia, neither Russian diplomats nor the involved agents of the counterintelligence service were informed about this operation.

The Western Balkans and the EU

More than a decade after the EU-Western Balkans summit in Thessaloniki²⁷ the promise of EU membership remains unfulfilled in the Balkans. And the longer the process is protracted, the greater the risks that elites and citizens in these countries consider the process either as hopeless or of little effect for their lives. The Balkan states have the demanding task of reconstructing post war institutions and societies, building and consolidating democracy and eventually becoming “good” member states of the EU. The Union's enlargement strategy has managed to keep the process rolling; however, the drawbacks of the current EU strategy are more and more obvious. The momentum generated immediately following the democratic changes in the region in 2000 has now been halted, and the current situation can be best described as the consolidation of unconsolidated democracies.

Serious backsliding in terms of democracy and freedom of media can be observed throughout the region over the past decade. Yet the EU has remained rather silent on these developments, even when confronted with concrete evidence.²⁸ This leaves the impression that the EU is willing to provide external support to regimes that include considerable shortcomings in terms of democratic governance for the sake of the promise of stability. This practice has led to the establishment of a new type of illiberal political system that formally commits to EU integration and internalizes the reform discourse, but in practice continues to govern through informal rules and clientelism. These semi-authoritarian regimes are willing to both cause and manage instability with their neighbours as well as with their internal opposition for the sake of securing continued rule.

Despite the apparent development in the approximation to the EU, the economic prospects of the Western Balkan countries do not look good. Effective economic reform has often been delayed due to the fact that the Western Balkan economies are incapable of withstanding the competitive pressures of the EU common market. Throughout much of the region, economies have remained undeveloped, dependent on aid, loans and remittances, and prone to high levels of state intervention. Unemployment in the region is very high: 18% in Albania, 27.5% in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 30% in Kosovo, 28% in Macedonia, 19% in Montenegro, and 17.6% in Serbia.²⁹ Statistics are even more worrisome when it comes to unemployment rates among young people, aged between 15 and 24, as they show that in Bosnia and Herzegovina (57.5%), Kosovo (60%), Macedonia (55.3%), and Serbia (50.9%), more than half of the youth population is unemployed.³⁰

In most Western Balkan countries, the private sector remains underdeveloped, while the majority of the active population continues to be employed by state-owned enterprises or the state administration. The structural changes that have taken place have primarily favored the expansion of the service industry over production.

The main driving force for democracy and reform has been EU integration and the close cooperation with the countries of Western Europe that provide (and have done so for decades) a model, a partner and a goal for many citizens. This attraction has been powerful, yet its ability to

²⁷ http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_PRES-03-163_en.htm

²⁸ As in the case of the wiretapping scandal in Macedonia (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-greece-macedonia-arrests/macedonian-nationals-arrested-in-greece-over-wiretap-scandal-police-source-idUSKBN1CO1Y8>) or the Savamala incident in Serbia (<https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/news/meps-focus-on-serbian-savamala-affair/1094238/>)

²⁹ Regional Cooperation Council. Balkan Barometer 2015 Public Opinion Survey, Sarajevo, 2015.

³⁰ Ibid.

provide an incentive for countries to reform, to strengthen democratic institutions and to result in reform-oriented liberal democratic governments has been limited at the best of times—and now is not the best of times. The main magnet for change in the Balkans has dramatically reduced its intensity.

Thus, the EU no longer provides the seeming certainties of economic prosperity and even convergence with the wealthier countries of Europe, the offer of democratic institutions and their stability, and the certainty and predictability of stability that citizens experienced. Consequently, the previous reasons for aspiring to join the EU and thus for implementing a Western European model of governance, economy and social organisation no longer appear to be an obvious choice, as they used to.

These days, with growing Russian, Turkish, Chinese and United States' influence, “Europeanisation” in the Western Balkan countries is no longer “the only game in town”, with its alternatives arousing serious security concerns for the states, the region, and ultimately, for the European Union itself.

At least since the election of Donald Trump to the U.S. presidency, the “Russian threat” has been a key feature in Euro-Atlantic debates, from elections in Western Europe to geopolitical meddling in the Balkans. While there has been an undisputed increase in Russian meddling in the Western Balkans, sometimes at the request of governments (Serbia, Republika Srpska), sometimes allegedly directed against governments (Montenegro), the key lies with democracy. Russia is playing a weak hand strongly, because the EU has been weak. It has underplayed its strength in the region as the main investor, generator of reform and partner. Autocrats use Russia both as a partner and as a *bête noire* to shore up their support. Russia, together with Turkey, also provides a model, a self-confident proto-type of authoritarian rule within seemingly democratic structures, attractive for aspiring autocrats in the Western Balkans. Turkey and Russia also explicitly play on cultural similarities and use other soft tools to counter the more demanding relations of the countries with the EU.

The Balkans is the last part of Europe (before the former Soviet countries) that is yet to be fully integrated into Western political and security structures. And with the West distracted, a vacuum of leadership in the region has provided Russia with many openings to exert itself. In much of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, Russia is largely unpopular. In Orthodox majority countries popular attitudes towards Russia are more positive.

The Balkans is not of vital strategic interest for Russia. Instead, it sees the Balkan states as tools to influence broader European security issues. Russia's overarching goal is to delay and to complicate the expansion of NATO and of the EU. Another added benefit for Moscow is distraction. Russia's activity in the Balkans deflects Western attention from Russia's bad behavior in its immediate neighborhood.

Chinese influence in the Balkans has been growing since 2012 when the 16+1 platform was born. Since then, China has invested heavily in the Balkans into infrastructure, steel, and other sectors. When dealing with Chinese influence in Europe, many think that Chinese influence is basically the same as Russian influence. This is an incorrect assumption as China, unlike Russia, has much to gain from continuing EU integration and stability as the EU is its largest trading partner.

The Balkan market is not of particularly high interests for Chinese firms when it comes to trade and investment. When it comes to doing business, the Western EU is far more interesting to Chinese companies. But here lies the paradoxical importance of Balkans for developing economic ties with the (Western) EU and thus ensuring the economic development of China. Balkans is an important trade route connecting the Greek port of Piraeus with the rest of the EU. It is also an area where Chinese companies can test their capabilities on the European market and gain the necessary goodwill to enable them to expand in the EU. Secondly, the increasing dependency of Balkans on

Chinese money allows China to extract political concessions on sovereignty-related core interests. Should they become EU members in the future, Balkan countries can serve as Chinese proxies in dealing with those interests. All of this can be used by China for domestic propaganda purposes with the aim to create a domestic image of Chinese greatness and respect abroad, thus serving to legitimize the Communist Party.³¹

To counter the growing Chinese influence in the Balkans, the EU must take concrete steps just as in the case of Russia's presence in the region, which was enabled by the void created by the EU itself.

The sudden rise in the inflow of migrants into the EU via the Aegean Sea and Greece brought unexpected prominence to the Western Balkan region. According to the Eurostat office, the EU's 28 member states received a combined total of 1,255,000 first-time asylum applications over the course of 2015.³² The UNHCR registered 856,000 arrivals by sea to Greece during this period, a four-fold increase over the 2014 numbers that had stood at 219,000. The sudden popularity of the Balkan route underlined the region's often casually ignored location in the heart of the EU, as hundreds of thousands of refugees paradoxically crossed an EU and Schengen country – Greece – to escape through two non-EU countries – Macedonia and Serbia – to eventually reach another Schengen country further north. In a twist of irony, the failure of the Dublin system, with Greece unable to manage the massive inflows of refugees and the EU incapable of relocating them, led to the EU becoming a net exporter of instability to the Balkan region.

This brief moment in the limelight of the refugee crisis has done little to foster more strategic thinking on how to lastingly stabilise the countries of the region, ensure their sustainable democratic transformation and assist their economic development. In need of stable partners in general, and to tackle the consequences of the refugee crisis in particular, the EU has been all too ready to overlook democratic backsliding among the candidate countries.³⁴ On the contrary, a decisive re-launch of the enlargement process, using existing tools and EU leverage effectively, would enhance both the capacities of the Western Balkan countries to handle external shocks as well as advancement in their internal reform agenda. Such a change in approach, however, requires replacing the current auto-pilot mode with a political driver for the accession process.

The Western Balkans region today has fallen to one of the least advanced in Europe and one of the world leaders of brain drain. Unsecure and anxious environment encourages emigration of reproductive and capable layers of the population. SEE thus loses everything from its demographic to its social and intellectual potential for progressive change, leaving it ever more lagging behind the developed parts of the world. This regression is not only a result of socio-economic hardship and clientelism. It is also very much a consequence of a conservative, provincial political culture that is prone to authoritarianism and collective hysteria that has for too long taken root in our midst. Progressive thought is largely captured. The region remains divided due to previous war conflict, national and prolonged cross border tensions. This is why today, when the EU Enlargement and the further Europeanisation of the region are at stake and even questionable, new strategies and ways of integration the Balkans into Europe are needed.

³¹ <https://www.euractiv.com/section/china/opinion/china-in-the-balkans-motivations-behind-growing-influence/>

³² Detailed numbers available at http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Asylum_statistics.

³³ UNHCR, "Refugees/Migrants Emergency Response: Mediterranean", available at <http://data.unhcr.org/mediterranean/country.php?id=83>

³⁴ Srdjan Cvijic and Goran Buldioski, "Beyond the Migration route in the Western Balkans", November 2015, available at <http://www.esharp.eu/debates/external-action/beyond-the-migration-route-in-the-western-balkans>

The EU needs to sharpen its focus on monitoring the aspiring members on their paths to stable and prosperous democracies governed by the rule of law. The issue of consolidation of liberal democracy should be regularly addressed in the annual progress reports as a new negotiating chapter focusing on the core criteria set for new EU members.

A new type of EU reengagement with the region is crucial for the WB, which has gone adrift in recent years amid increased tensions, democratic backsliding and destructive geopolitical meddling by external actors. Only such an opportunity would allow the region to quickly arrive at the EU's doorstep by means of democratic and economic convergence. If this chance is missed, the WB risk remaining distant from the EU, without clear direction and menaced by instability that could spread to the EU as a whole.

The vision of an EU33 requires a new partnership between the EU and the Western Balkans countries, based on sincere and transparent engagement from both sides. The EU should be more attentive to WB governments and forthright in communicating problems publicly, while the governments of the region should commit with renewed sincerity to the enlargement process.

The decision to join the EU is a generational, political and socio-economic choice. It requires broad citizens' engagement in decision making, as well as the positive and constructive involvement of civil society and political opposition.

The language of the European Commission Strategy “A Credible Enlargement Perspective and Enhanced EU Engagement with the Western Balkans” signals a more integrative approach and marks new dynamics in the EU – Western Balkans relations. The Strategy sets out an Action Plan with six concrete flagship initiatives targeting specific areas of common interest: rule of law, security and migration, socio-economic development, transport and energy connectivity, digital agenda, reconciliation and good neighbourly relations.³⁵ However, WB countries still face a number of obstacles on their EU path, from fulfilling accession conditionalities and implementing fundamental reforms to solving numerous bilateral disputes. In the Strategy, the EU is clear about not accepting to import these disputes and instability they may entail and makes a bold stance by demanding that the responsible parties solve the bilateral disputes as a matter of urgency. This marks a shift from soft diplomacy that dominated the sphere of bilateral disputes in recent years, under which they were tackled only after getting highly politicised and flaring up to a point of seriously impeding relations between the two countries involved. Given the aspirations for a stronger, more stable and resilient Union in the coming decade, resolving outstanding disputes has now become even more of a priority. Bilateral disputes are rooted in the geopolitics and history of the Balkans region, the latest wars and the breakup of Yugoslavia, and encompass a vast range of issues.

Given that all the WB countries aspire towards the EU, the accession process should be used to encourage and facilitate the resolution of bilateral disputes. With the accession process, the countries of the Western Balkans have a historic opportunity to resolve their longstanding issues, both open and latent. Finding solutions is in the interest of the citizens, businesses and societies of these countries, to help them get on the path towards becoming fully-fledged members of the EU and enjoying political, economic and social prosperity. For this to happen, the engagement and commitment of the European Commission and European External Action Service needs to be enhanced and solidified in line with the EU's new Strategy for the Western Balkans. The Berlin Process³⁶ offers additional support, because the bilateral disputes fall naturally in its mini-intergovernmental nature and can play a significant role in setting up favorable conditions for resolving and subsequently implementing and sustaining solution of any bilateral issue.

³⁵ A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans
https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/communication-credible-enlargement-perspective-western-balkans_en.pdf (last accessed 07/04/2018)

³⁶ <https://berlinprocess.info/documents/>

The annual Summits provide a favorable setting for discussions at the high-political level, in the presence of the Member States supporting the process.

The continued fragility of the region, recently the most reflected in the renewed tensions between Belgrade and Prishtina, led to a “Western Balkans Meeting” in Berlin on April 29, 2019, convened by German chancellor Angela Merkel and French president Emmanuel Macron. They have suggested to six western Balkan countries aspiring to EU membership that there is little immediate prospect of their joining the bloc, telling them to get their houses in order first. Mr Macron focused on the need for “political stability” in the region, saying that Paris would assist in key economic, social, security and rule of law reforms rather than through the EU enlargement process. “We [will] work together on the stability of the region... Since 2000, we have withdrawn from the region, but today we want to work together,” he said before a meeting in Berlin with the leaders of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia and Kosovo. The EU has long held out the possibility of bringing western Balkan countries into the bloc to foster economic progress and improve broader regional stability. Montenegro and Serbia have already formally opened negotiations to join the EU, while Albania and North Macedonia are candidates and hope to be given the green light to open formal accession negotiations at a June summit, which other aspiring nations will see as a test of the EU's readiness to engage. Ms Merkel said she hoped the Berlin meeting would contribute to solving the dispute between Serbia and its former province Kosovo, whose 2008 declaration of independence it does not recognise. The German chancellor has been a stalwart opponent of any solution to the decades-long dispute that would involve a territory swap — an idea being floated in the region. Washington and Brussels have said they would endorse such a deal between Belgrade and Pristina. Observers say Ms Merkel and Mr Macron hosted the summit because of concern at developments in the region, despite the groundbreaking success of North Macedonia's naming deal, struck with Greece after decades of impasse. The conference came as Brussels has raised alarm about the increasing role of China and Russia in the region. Mr. Macron said he understood that other actors “have their interests in the Balkans, but that it is clear that European interests matter more”.³⁷

The most immediate area in which the region of the Western Balkans will feel the impacts of the 2019 European Parliamentary elections is the composition of the next European Commission. For the six Balkan countries it is especially important who will be the occupiers of the offices of the High Representative and Commissioner for Enlargement Negotiations. Furthermore, which parties are sitting in the Parliament is also an important question, because of the impact this situation has on the general political direction of the Union, which has only become stronger as the years and treaty changes came and went. The situation in this area is, however, everything but black-and-white. Here, the issue what especially concerns the Balkan states is the question of enlargement. There even some Eurosceptic parties are not necessarily against enlargement, for their own reasons. The expectations, however, go into direction of a less enlargement enthusiastic Parliament in general what would have negative repercussions on parliamentary support for the enlargement process.

The Western Balkans is the region in Europe where the EU is (still) highly popular and attractive.³⁸ The European Union has not lost its general appeal in a region which is however split between people who long for European integration and people who wish to cut oneself off all foreign partners. But the enlargement process appears murky and often opportunistic. The EU can present as many credible enlargement strategies as it wishes – if paperwork is not supported by meaningful action especially from certain influential Member States, the EU enlargement process will remain at the current stage. This means that countries are stalled in the waiting room while both EU and the Western Balkan governments trump themselves in hypocrisy and floor is given to other foreign powers who might seize the moment to intervene. In this status-quo the one side will – seemingly – continue to pretend that the Western Balkans are welcome in the European Union, and the other side will continue to fake reforms.

³⁷ <https://www.ft.com/content/0c8e1402-6a9f-11e9-80c7-60ee53e6681d?segmentid=acee4131-99c2-09d3-a635-873e61754ec6>

³⁸ <https://www.rcc.int/seeds/results/2/balkan-public-barometer>

How the Kremlin influences public opinion in Germany

The methods of Russian propaganda to influence public opinion in Germany differ significantly from the propaganda machine used in other countries. Nevertheless, there are some common elements linking the Kremlin's country-by-country approach. The German journalist and analyst Boris Reitschuster who has authored 5 books on modern Russia holds that the Kremlin employs old and reliable propaganda methods on a broad scale. "These are letters to media, bribes to journalists, letters to politicians and work in Trade Chambers. It feels like there is still the old approach which is upgraded from time to time. This is illustrated, for example, in the book by one of the first defectors to the West Georgiy Agabek /Stalin's Secret Politics: The confession of a Resident.³⁹

This book, for example, gives an account of the propaganda work through the Trade representations. By the way, we can observe the same thing in contemporary Germany. It suffices to observe the actions and the rhetoric of Andrea von Knoop,⁴⁰ the authorized representative of the Joint German-Russian Chamber of Industry and Trade, and president of the Association of German Industries in Russia. Vladimir Putin recently bestowed Russian citizenship on her. Naturally Mrs. Knoop greatly influences the opinion makers within the German business community. They see no problem to make business deals in the Crimea or around the construction of the North Stream pipeline. The upgrading of "old methods" is done differently in all cases and the work with opinion makers harnesses various arenas. For example, Russian propagandists mounted a broad litigation attack in France in 2019. In March 2019 criminal proceedings initiated by a citizens' group involving counts of libel and slander against Cécile Vaissé, professor of Slavic studies, ended. She had published a book on the Kremlin network in France. The verdict in the case is expected in a few months and the initiators may reach their goal.⁴¹ Similar court actions are in the pipeline relating to the book by journalist Nicolas Hénin "Russian France".⁴² In both instances, the case of the indicters is pleaded by the attorney of the RT television channel in France. According to the testimonial of the correspondent reporting to the Russian publication *The Insider*, the court session degenerated to debunking "Nazism in Ukraine" and "American plots".

During the court hearing concerning Cécile Vaissé's book on 14 March, 2019, the indicters tried to demonstrate that the Nazis had taken over in Ukraine and the Kremlin is not lying. Observers therefore dubbed this litigation "Kravchenko Case No 2". The French Communist Party had tried to prove in 1947, that the French translation of the book by Victor Kravchenko, a refugee from the USSR, „I chose freedom“ was slanderous, that there was no Gulag, that collectivization had brought general welfare and that Communism safeguarded human rights. At the end of the day, court proceedings became a famous battle for portraying a positive image for the USSR in the international arena.

There is nothing like that in Germany. The people charged with the German file know the German mindset very well. German mentality has some specific features which are described by one of the most well-known German politicians with a Russian background, Sergey Lagodinskiy.⁴³

³⁹ <https://www.litmir.me/br/?b=620326&p=1>

⁴⁰ https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D0%9A%D0%BD%D0%BE%D0%BE%D0%BF,%D0%90%D0%BD%D0%B4%D1%80%D0%B5%D0%Bo_%D1%84%D0%BE%D0%BD

⁴¹ <https://theins.ru/antifake/147120>

⁴² <https://ru.krymr.com/a/27819020.html>

⁴³ https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sergey_Lagodinsky

„The positions of the Kremlin concerning the German mainstream are built from several vantage points:

1. There is a German angst of escalation. During the Cold War, Berlin was a target of possible bombing. Therefore the pacifist movement “Remove the Pershing” was strong precisely there.
2. Anti-Americanism
3. Sympathies toward Russia as a victim. This, however is shared by older Germans

This thread is elaborated by Boris Reitschuster: “During the Cold War the Germans were immune, because it was clear who was friend and enemy. The Kremlin succeeded to upend the narrative. Germany knows that Putin is no democrat and human rights are violated in Russia. But they are convinced that this also happens in Trump’s United States. A part of the public is mesmerized by Russian propaganda and others ask, why they are not informed on human rights violations by German media. Putin’s popularity in Germany is a result of the fact that German media do not come to grips with their mission. They are afraid to be intolerant”.

My German colleagues (like those from Italy, France, Georgia and Lithuania) speak about the loss of societal trust in the mass media. This is evidenced by polls like the one run in Lithuania following the scandal about the emergence of cyber-states on Facebook (where propagandists drew a map of Lithuania including a Polish autonomous territory, cf. *Gazety Wyborcza* 14 February 2018). Despite the fact that Warsaw and the Eurocommission issued a strong protest note against the creators of these cyber-states, the event created disquietude in the region, where a strongly pro-Russian Polish minority lives (*Dziennik.pl*, 21 February, *Wirtualna Polska*, 26. February). It was revealed at that time, that around 60% of ethnic Poles in Lithuania follow the news primarily from Russian media (*Rzeczpospolita*, 26 April).

This needs further clarification. In 2018, we could observe the victory march of RT and Sputnik. These channels broadcast in German and English. They do not target Russian speakers and have reduced broadcasts for ethnic Russians in Germany to a minimum following presidential elections in March, 2018. Now, we can observe an obvious focus on working with the German voters. This work is performed with top-end quality and does not shy away from expenses: The sophisticated visual arrangements on the screen and the selection of media products causes the inexperienced user to opt for RT and Sputnik which provide quality imagery, operational presence and dense information. In comparison, German TV channels appear dull and static. Experienced users check YouTube and will find promoted brand channels with a high degree of probability which do not reveal that they are affiliated with RT.⁴⁴

RedFish is expanding its clientele by promoting the theme of left-wing protests. Redfish insists that they provide exclusively own productions (in this case, we are talking about investments amounting to millions of Euros). This, however, is dubious, what we see is rather a smart aggregation. Redfish does not make any bones about the fact that it is affiliated with the Ruptly-RT Video Agency with headquarters in Berlin⁴⁵ - Ruptly.⁴⁶ The dissemination of content uses dozens of agencies which are registered in Europe. Formally, these are marketing companies placing ads and paid postings in social media. The web abounds with service providers which disseminate videos at maximal range and at cheap rates, like SeedMotion. They are used by almost anybody from sellers of vacuum cleaners to spin doctors.

⁴⁴ https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCHgnQzZY7T9TxbI4oBmKJwQ/videos?fbclid=IwAR2VnTaBMIAIpv-_cWQ_rr-8HI2TwfoKhBoccZEqjHapLdOx9Kaokov3Q78 .

⁴⁵ https://www.facebook.com/pg/Redfishstream/about/?ref=page_internal

⁴⁶ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ruptly>.

⁴⁷ <http://www.bvre.de/o-nas.html>

«German authorities tolerate this. They think that this is a problem of Russian speakers. In reality, it is a problem for German speakers” says Sergey Lagodinskiy. Destabilization is promoted not via the Russian speakers. They have been manipulated long ago. The main strategy consists of influencing German and English speakers “.

To all appearance, the “Kremlin” (implying pro-Russian or Russian) specialists for influencing public opinion have changed their strategy and their target population. The Alliance of Russian-speaking parents of Germany⁴⁷ conducted a study of Russian-language bloggers in Germany during fall, 2017, on the eve of parliamentary elections. Thousands of blogs were analyzed, the majority of which spread propaganda in one or the other form. Alas, by March, 2019 they had vanished with the exception of RT employees such as Igor Mal’tsev.⁴⁸

Kremlin propaganda does not target Russian speakers in Germany. We see an “on-air pollution by Putin” using such old German resources as Heise.de,⁴⁹ or KenFM.⁵⁰ The scandal around journalist Moris Gatman is memorable.⁵¹ His reputation was destroyed after a serial had challenged his methods which were found to be inadmissible for the professional standards of journalism. In addition to the influence wielded on journalism, we see another trend that has become a mass phenomenon, namely the production of fake news. Here are a few recent examples. On 15 March the Russian outlet The Insider pointed at materials published by RIA Novosti on 14 March saying that „German media reported on the “renaissance” of the Russian Crimea”. The Insider pointed out that this was about a doubtful site with headlines without articles. Apart from such material there are almost no fully fledged articles on the portal Der Globus Deutschland. It is understood that Der Globus Deutschland is apparently a fiction itself. The button „About Us“ offers no contact information at all. There is only a short history of the British Newspaper The Globe which was published between 1803 and 1921, followed by the remark that the newspaper does not exist any more. “Der Globus Deutschland has no relationship with the above, but is inspired by this magnificent newspaper and tries to continue the great tradition of news journalism“.⁵²

„At closer sight, the material in Der Globus Deutschland consists of copied headlines und subtitles from articles...without original texts, without annotations and sources and not mentioning the author’s name. Most of the material on this site follows this set-up“, writes the Insider. The few bullet-proof texts are reproduced from other publications, often from the journal Der Spiegel, however, without mentioning the origin.⁵³

The original of the text on the “Crimea Renaissance” was detected in the little-known internet publication EU Reporter, which hosts other materials produced by the same author. Many among them are dedicated to Ukraine and have a pronouncedly pro-Moscow tendency.

This approach solves two tasks simultaneously: To „inform“ the Russian public over a leading news agency about non-existing facts, and then, quoting a solid agency source, to promote the „News about the news“ among the German readers by convincing them that German public opinion welcomes positive developments in the Crimea.

⁴⁸ <https://russian.rt.com/opinion/blog/igormalcev>

⁴⁹ <https://www.heise.de>

⁵⁰ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/KenFM>

⁵¹ <https://korrespondent.net/world/russia/1522968-avtor-spornoj-stati-o-pussy-riot-uproshchennyj-vzglyad-nevynosim>

⁵² <http://www.bvre.de/o-nas.html>

⁵³ <https://theins.ru/antifake/147077>

This already widespread phenomenon can somewhat flippantly be dubbed “black P.R.”. There is, however, also “gray” P.R. which almost looks „white“. This task has been assigned to ROSSOTRUDNICHESTVO.⁵⁴

Until recently, Rossotrudnichestvo was no major player in the market of influencing Western public opinion. They did, however, analyze their mistakes and embarked on a different path. In December, 2018 they adopted a new program (the details are classified) and are now busy to establish a global base for all countries within Russian interests and with a developed media infrastructure. This data base contains the most interesting journalists and opinion makers. They count the number of subscribers, reactions to articles, the number of shares and other reactions in the social media. Their plan is to work directly with those people. They offer personal grants „for research“. For work in Germany special funding is earmarked.

The new program of Rossotrudnichestvo is tightly adapted to the Russian Doctrine of Informational Security, which in turn is based on the work of Sergey Rastorguev, the deputy director of the Research Institute for Information Technologies of the FSB.⁵⁵

«Rastorguev imagined human beings as computers, which can be programmed. Their task was to program the computer hardware with Russian software and protect it from alien operating systems”, says the expert for information security of Transparency International Russia, Alexey Shlyapuzhnikov. “Therefore all those stories about the sovereign internet, blockades, the non-admission for Western content originate from the Doctrine of Information Security. A part is programmed by RT. Yet, they realized, that RT and similar Channels do not program the elites, but the rank-and-file voters. Russian speakers are considered programmed, for them, it is enough to wave the Russian flag. The programming of German voters is done by scientific, intellectual and cultural opinion makers. This work uses mediators such as like-minded endowments and institutions. There are confidential lists stored in Rossotrudnichestvo. Nevertheless, the „intermediate layers“ have to turn in financial reports at the end of the year. Here, one can identify, which entities are charged with research work and drafting articles which look innocent at first sight and what is changed in the process”

The work with opinion makers follows three different directions:

- Preparation for influencing national elections
- Work with politicians dealing with sanctions
- Work in relation to EU policy on sanctions against Russia in order to cut it down to national agendas

The Russian specialists take precisely this departure for their work with German public opinion. “They are tasked to destabilize the German party system and public opinion. And that has been achieved” says Boris Reitschuster. “Yet Putin is one of the factors, not the cause. These methods have worked for 60 years and were not overly successful, because we Germans enjoyed immunity. Now we have lost it. Germans talk about problems, about immigration, pollution and delinquency, but only at home. I have supported the left side all my life and all of a sudden I feel like a right winger, although I certainly did not change. Often people need no Putin to vote for the AfD. During the Cold War we had strong immunity, because it was clear who was friend and foe. They have succeeded in changing the entire narrative.”

⁵⁴ <https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D0%A0%D0%BE%D1%81%D1%81%D0%BE%D1%82%D1%80%D1%83%D0%B4%D0%BD%D0%B8%D1%87%D0%B5%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B2%D0%BE>

⁵⁵ <https://www.garant.ru/products/ipo/prime/doc/71456224/>
https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D0%A0%D0%B0%D1%81%D1%82%D0%BE%D1%80%D0%B3%D1%83%D0%B5%D0%B2_%D0%A1%D0%B5%D1%80%D0%B3%D0%B5%D0%B9_%D0%9F%D0%B0%D0%B2%D0%BB%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%B8%D1%87

Fear of the future, unrest because of migration and infrastructural problems, shortcomings in education and similar signs of a destabilized society characterize contemporary Germany. This is put into German public opinion from inside (home-grown) and from outside (propaganda). This creates ideal conditions to influence public opinions. In the words of media analyst Vasiliy Gatov: “The key problem of modern politics is that the public can only be moved by fear. In the absence of a propaganda machine, which permanently feeds this fear (and no other collective sentiment), the posting agenda cannot generate a sufficiently high emotional level in order to correct policies”.

Shift to the Extreme Right in Estonia.

Why Russian-speaking deputies supported Estonian Nationalists

The Ultra-Right “Conservative People’s Party of Estonia” (EKRE) took the 3rd place in the parliamentary elections in March, 2019. At the end of April, it became a governing party for the first time and obtained one third of the portfolios (5 out of 15). Their open radicalism and populist rhetoric as well as the sacking of journalists opposing them shocked the Brussels elite. Until recently, Estonia had passed as one of the most pro-European Baltic countries. The anxieties are well-founded, since the nationalists are set to fight not against the local Russians, but against potential migrants and the European bureaucracy which according to them is imposing toxic tolerance on the country.

The EKRE, which had been established following a merger of the agrarian-centrist People’s Union of Estonia and the Estonian Nationalist Movement needed several years to climb to power. Its founder and leader is Mart Helme, the former Estonian ambassador to Russia (1995-1999), today first deputy premier and minister of the interior. By skillfully riding on the wave of populism, Helme succeeded in bringing his party into parliament in the elections of 2015, where it garnered 8% of the vote. In 2019, this share had increased to 17.8%. EKRE membership is rapidly growing: While traditional parties lose their followers by the dozens, the nationalist attracted them by the hundreds.

The Estonian pro-European elite still holds that EKRE, irrespective of its 19 seats out of 101 in parliament, could remain a marginal party. The press and the representatives of other parties quoted the most glaring declarations of EKRE representatives with disgust (“If you are black-get lost!” Estonia has to be a white country”/Mart Helme/ “Fascism.....is an ideology which comprises many positive nuances necessary for the maintenance of the national state.”/Jaak Madison/). Yet, society was rattled more by the decision of Prime Minister Juri Ratas to include EKRE into his coalition and invite its representatives to the government than by the electoral success of the extreme right. Otherwise, he would have had to cede the premier to the Reform Party which had occupied the first place in the elections.

Without doubt, EKRE is the main nationalist party in Estonia. Even its web site uses exclusively the Estonian language. In its official documents it puts the national state on top. Its youth branch “Blue Awakening” conducts annual torchlight processions and demonstrates commitment to traditional pagan rituals of pre-Christian Estonia. EKRE honors Estonians fighting on the side of Hitlerite Germany in the “First Estonian Waffen SS”. Critics of the party say that it at least does not block the influx of neo-Nazis into its milieu and even propagates the same views, which are barely softened for public use.

At this point, the Helme family has captured the Estonian information agenda. In addition to Mart Helme, one talks about his wife Helle-Monika Helme, a deputy for EKRE in the parliament and visible party activist, his son Martin Helme, the head of the parliamentary EKRE group who was nominated minister of finance as well as his nephew Peter Helme, a philosopher and writer, who some weeks ago headed one of the major Estonian publishing outlets, the newspaper and portal Postimees.

Unsurprisingly, the path to power for EKRE began with media scandals. Postimees journalist Vilja Kiisler who had lambasted the right left the publisher. According to her, this happened because of the censorship enacted by the new editor-in-chief. According to Peter Helme’s testimony the reason was differences of opinions on her writing style. Other journalists have experienced censorship pressures but have asked not to mention their names. The popular radio anchorman Achto Lobja, another critic of EKRE ended his employment at the State Radio- and TV Company.

In his Facebook account, he wrote: “They didn’t fire me. They let me choose between self-censorship and discontinuing my work“. Before, such cases had been rare in Estonia: the country has always ranked high in the ratings for freedom of expression. The growing popularity of the extreme right evidences the further shift in the Estonians’ mood. In the eyes of the voters, the party system increasingly reminds the party systems in some West European countries. “Instead of a state we built a state apparatus which cares for paperwork more than for the people“: This is how one of the most popular founders of the Reform Party, Jüri Grisin commented his exit from the party. According to him, liberalism in Estonia has ground to a halt and had given way to the growing influence of the bureaucracy.

Like many citizens in EU states, a part of the Estonian electorate is disappointed with the leadership qualities of traditional party bosses and the failure to address questions of real concern for the citizens in political discourse. EKRE was founded with an eye on this change. On the first party congress in 2012 Mart Helme declared: “There is not a single political party in the Riigikogu (parliament) which represents the Estonian people, our national interest and traditional values. Our government bases itself on left- and right-liberal and socialist ideas. For them, people are statistical units, taxpayers and in the best case, consumers“.

EKRE rhetoric follows the trail of other European populists, who have taken line after line during the recent years. This represents a mix of leftist economics (state support for the citizen from the cradle to the grave) and radical right views when it comes to issues of identity, migration and sexual ethics. When he was still in opposition, Mart Helme frequently commented on the LGBT issue, tolerance and multi-culturalism using hard-ball language. He called gay parades “sicko marches“ and called for a school education that would protect the country from “homosexual, and multicultural propaganda and so-called tolerance“. Even in atheist Estonia (according to Pew Research, the country compares with Denmark and the Czech Republic), where conservatism rests not on Christian values, but rather on individualism and economic freedom, society is not ready to fully accept the shift to the left in sexual ethics and morality that has been the characteristic trend in Western Europe during recent years., EKRE lambasted the Law on Partnership which was adopted in Estonia in 2016. It permitted same-sex civil partnerships and to this point is not fully operative due to the lack of updates in the relevant sub-decrees. Nevertheless, after its inclusion in the government, EKRE has taken a more nuanced position: the party will not come out for the invalidation of the law, but will not promote its fully-fledged implementation either.

Mart Helme frequently makes harsh statements in relation to the other key issues for the Baltics, namely demography. Although Estonia’s population has shown a tendency to grow during recent years, birth rates have remained low and the share of labor migrants seeking occupation in other EU states are still high. Nevertheless, EKRE resolutely protests against immigrants from Africa and the Near East. In this sense, the party represents the general mood in the Baltic area, a mood which is also characteristic of many countries of Central and Eastern Europe. Sociologists have explained this phenomenon by referring to reminiscences of recent Soviet occupation, leading to the wish to preserve national identity.

For present-day Estonia, this threat is rather hypothetical. Syrians, Iraqis, Afghans and other migrants use Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia as a spring board to reach the richer European countries. The only migrants whose target is Estonia and whom the country welcomes are the Ukrainians. Nevertheless, the U.N. Global Compact for Migration, which was adopted in Marrakesh in 2018, triggered fierce discussions in Estonian society. This document is legally not binding, but recommends high standards for the acceptance of migrants. Some EU countries including Austria have not signed the Compact. Estonia has signed and the criticism of this step taken by Jüri Ratas’ cabinet boosted the popularity of EKRE, while it was still in opposition.

It would seem that the nationalist EKRE party is unfit to make inroads into the Russian-speaking electorate. Nevertheless, the right cannot neglect such a large segment of voters, comprising 25% of the Estonian population. Already during the election campaign Mart Helme switched his rhetoric

relating to Russia according to the target audience: In Estonian, he talked about the “land of the aggressor” and in his interviews with Russian-language media he mentioned the separate Russian civilization with its rich culture, which must be taken into account in order to build a closer relationship with it: “I agree with Sergey Lavrov, who said, that a loyal and peace-loving Russia is the safeguard for security in the Baltic area” the leader of the nationalists declared in his interview to Rus. Postimees.

The majority of Russian speakers like such declarations. The world view of these people, which has predominantly been formed by Russian television, ties in with the eurosceptical attitudes promoted by EKRE (“Estonia lost its independence, all commands come from Brussels, the big European countries grab the economic assets”) as well as with xenophobic rhetoric (“migrants have flooded Europe”).

The party has moderated its stance in the issue of Russian schools. While before, Helme had declared several times, that it was about time to teach exclusively in Estonian, he now speaks only about the continuation of language reforms. These reforms have been foot-dragging since one decade, and its “continuation” means it can drag on for several more years, in any case, until communal elections in 2021. One may expect, that the nationalists will leave the “Russian” theme untouched.

To all appearance the change in the rhetoric of the EKRE is a consequence of the coalition with the Centrist party, for which a majority of Russian speakers in Estonia cast their vote. Its representatives, like the deputy to the Europarliament Jana Toom, defend the rights of non-citizens publicly and block the language reform. The centrists have a very pragmatic reason to do so: as long as the local Russians have the possibility to occupy an autonomous enclave without complete integration into Estonian culture, the media and linguistic space, the centrist party will have a loyal electorate.

Nevertheless, the coalition with EKRE, which has been perceived by society as an attempt at staying in power by all means, can come with heavy price for the Centrist party. While Jana Toom mused right after the elections about the impossibility of a coalition with the extreme right, who believe, “that if you knock a negro on his head, you hit a hollow place”, she announced to a Postimees journalist at the beginning of May, that the “alliance of the centrists with EKRE is no longer a nightmare for Brussels”. This turn-coat attitude cost the Centrist party the second place in the party rating: according to polls taken in March, EKRE had replaced it.

Somehow, the success of the extreme right in Europe is right up Putin’s alley. If we have in mind that a dissemination of Euroscepticism and a polarization of societies with individual countries is favorable for Moscow, the activities of EKRE in tandem with other European radicals may reap indirect benefits for the Kremlin. Yet, it should not be forgotten, that the views of the conservative party matches the views of the Estonian mainstream, when it comes to defense and security issues. It is committed to NATO membership and comes out for U.S. positions. Some deputies including Helle-Monika Helme are members of the parliamentary group for the support of Donald Trump. The party leaders never demanded the moderation of sanctions against Russian corporations and did not propose the softening of the steadfast pro-Ukrainian policy of Estonia.

The main test for EKRE will be the upcoming elections to the Europarliament. In Estonia, they will be held on 26 May. Among other candidates, Helme Sr. and Helme Jr. will run. The party hopes that it will garner even 3 mandates out of 6, which are allocated to Estonia in the Europarliament. The results of these elections will show, to what extent the nationalists have performed well in the eyes of the voters.

Influencing European Parliamentary Elections: Is It Likely to Happen Tomorrow?

Let us have a fresh look onto facts, first. December 5th 2018, Brussels: the vice-president of the European Commission, Andrus Ansip, the commissioner for digital economy and vice-president of the European Commission, Mariya Gabriel, the Justice commissioner, Vera Jourova, and Julian King, the British security commissioner, held a press conference to announce what measures could the EU take in counteracting Kremlin's disinformation offensive. The venue was used to officially launch the “Action Plan Against Disinformation”,⁵⁶ in line with the March 2015 European Council conclusions, where the European Commission and the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy were tasked to present, in a three year timeframe, proposals for a coordinated response to the challenge of disinformation. It was back then, in 2015 that the European Council first recognized the threat posed by disinformation campaigns. Throughout 2018, there was almost no European Council meeting whose conclusions would not have mentioned the necessity of offering EU member states the above quoted strategic paper, as to build a framework for protecting democratic systems, combat disinformation and manipulation, “...including in the context of the upcoming European elections”. To put it short: the Action Plan represents a major step forward in safeguarding the very political nature of the EU, its unity, cohesiveness, and strategic weight. It is not about taking a passive or contemplative attitude, but about promoting active measures to counteract what has been perceived, from 2015 onwards, as an act of pure aggression targeting the Union.

Mr. Ansip's discourse was quite clear about the issues of the day: “the war against disinformation” (caused by Russian ongoing fake-news production) is an attempt to protect the EU upcoming elections. As he pointed out, the Russian President Putin thrives on spending more than 1.5 bn Euro/year to spread lies about the EU, through Russian-run media enterprises, as part of a military strategy designed to cause division in Europe. Mr. Ansip is quoted saying: “There is strong evidence pointing to Russia as the primary source of disinformation in Europe”, and more: “Disinformation is part of Russian military doctrine and its strategy to divide and weaken the west. [Russia](#) spends €1.1bn a year on pro-Kremlin media. You will also have heard of the 'troll factory' based in St Petersburg and the bot armies.”

The Commission pledged to set up a rapid alert system to help EU member states recognize disinformation campaigns, and increase the budget set aside for the detection of disinformation from £1.69m to £4.4m (€5m). This Plan would also press technology companies to play their part in cracking down on fake news. The Plan is also designed to foster cooperation between the member states and facilitate joint responses to disinformation. We should bear in mind that, beneath political will in Brussels, there is an increased level of civic awareness regarding the dangers posed by fake-news assaults: 83% of Europeans are likely to interpret fake-news as threats to democracy itself.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/action_plan_against_disinformation.pdf (April 2019)

⁵⁷ Flash Eurobarometer 464, http://data.europa.eu/euodp/en/data/dataset/S2183_464_ENG (April 2019). As of May 17th 2019, the European Council added weight to fighting against disinformation campaigns, establishing a framework which would allow the EU to impose sanctions to whichever external political entity would resort to cyber-attack the Union (<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2019/05/17/cyber-attacks-council-is-now-able-to-impose-sanctions> , May 2019)

Against this background, Mr. Ansip, a former prime minister of Estonia, said he did not believe the increased budget of €5m was large enough to deal with the extent of disinformation, mentioning, as I wrote before, that one St. Petersburg troll factory, known as the Internet Research Agency, has something like 1,000 or more full time workers, and plenty to do.

And here comes Mr. Ansip again: “But in comparison with €1.9m it is a little bit better (...). Our aim is not to create something like they have already in Russia.” And he resumed saying that the Russian disinformation campaigns started “during the KGB time” and that sources would disclose that about 85% of the KGB's budget would have been spent “not to get some secrets from somewhere but to spread lies”. “We will not create some kind of propaganda machine in the European Union,” said Mr. Ansip. “We would like to detect the disinformation and then we have to understand where those threats are coming from, who is behind the disinformation and then debunking, using facts to expose lies.”

A couple of words about Mr. Ansip would do good to our readers: former PM of Estonia (2005-2014), he was also employed as acting Commissioner for digital economy and society in 2017. He knows well what the vicinity of Russia means to the small Baltic state. I met him several times, also in the context of relocating the ill-famed Bronze Soldier of Tallinn (erected by the Soviets in 1947, as homage to the Red Army for “liberating” Estonia at the end of WW2; the Estonians dubbed it The Unknown Rapist!!) from the centre of the capital to the Defense Forces Cemetery, in 2007, thus spurring mass protests and nights of rioting of the Russian-speaking minority parties and groups, with a heavy involvement of the Russian intelligence agencies.

Mostly because of this episode, 2007 became the year when Estonia happened to be subject to a series of large scale cyberattacks (April 2007), targeting websites of national Estonian importance, such as the Parliament, banks, ministries, newspapers, broadcasters, that had a direct influence onto the general public. It finally led to the creation of NATO's Cooperative Cyber Defense Centre of Excellence in Tallinn.

What happened in those days of mayhem, is well described by a local witness: “Suddenly, the lights go out. Communication lines fall silent. Internet connections are lost. People venturing into the congested streets discover that banks are closed, ATMs are malfunctioning, traffic lights are jammed. Radio and TV stations cannot broadcast. The airports and train stations are shut down. Food production halts, and the water supply starts rapidly diminishing as pumps stop working. Looters are on the rampage; panic grips the public; the police cannot maintain order.” And the story resumes: “The reaction was swift. In Tallinn, protesters took to the streets. Rioting continued for two days. Shops were looted, cars burned. Molotov cocktails flew. Tear gas and water canons were deployed. One person died from a stab wound, many were injured and hundreds were arrested. Meanwhile in Moscow the Estonian embassy was besieged by thuggish Russian activist groups, who blockaded the building for days. The street violence had no political precedent in Estonia: during the country's elegantly orchestrated march to independence in defiance of the Soviet Union in the 1980's and 90's, not a drop of blood was spilled. The situation in Tallinn was often tense, but Estonia's revolution and transition were bloodless.

As the rioting began to subside, cyberattacks escalated. For days, Russian-language web forums lambasted Estonia for relocating the Unknown Soldier, with managers of these websites inciting “patriots” to protect Mother Russia from the “F--cking Estonian Fascists.” (Interestingly, national polls show that Russians consider tiny Estonia as the leading threat to their security.) Calling for vengeance, the Russian websites advocated a strategy for destroying the e-systems, that have become a vaunted success, as the arteries of government and business in Estonia. This infrastructure could be shut down by overloading them with unprecedented volumes of traffic, the Russian websites said, offering directions on how to organize and launch this type of cyber offensive, technically known as “denial of service” attack. In this case, it was also a “distributed

denial of service” attack, because the electronic invaders took control of many other computers to join and reinforce the assault, and add to the paralyzing burden of millions of incoming messages.”⁵⁸

It was by far, an act of terrorism under existing EU law. The EU defines terrorism as any action liable to seriously damage a country and committed with the aim of intimidating a population, or unduly compelling a government to perform or abstain from performing any act, or seriously destabilizing or destroying the fundamental political, constitutional, economic or social structures of a country.⁵⁹

This attack took negative emotions as trigger, and aimed at testing the cyber offensive capabilities of Russia with a small EU/NATO country .

Let us come back to the press conference I mentioned. Commissioner Julian King enters the scene: Major social media platforms have already signed up to a code of conduct, but they were told, to “get serious” on living up to their commitments. He said the EU would not stand for “an internet that is the Wild West, where anything goes”. “No excuses, no more foot-dragging, because the risks are real,” he said. “We need to see urgent improvement in how adverts are placed. Greater transparency around sponsored content, fake accounts rapidly, effectively identified and deleted”. Against this background, Facebook admitted there are between 60m and 90m fake [Facebook](#) accounts, accounting for between 3-4% of users on the platform, King said – “and some of those accounts are the most active”.

It is blatant that, on a longer term, the EU needed to invest in media diversity and educate the public to be aware of the news they digest, King said, but that in the short term Brussels needed to see an “improvement in how we detect and call out disinformation”. “We have said publicly, and we repeat it here today, that if the necessary progress is not made we will not hesitate to reconsider our options including eventually regulation,” he added.

Sir John Sawers, former head of MI6, lectured some weeks ago in Vienna, invited by the Institut für die Wissenschaften von Menschen (IWM), as guest speaker. Among other considerations, he described what the impact of social media platforms could be onto societies, whose popular mentalities have been splitting along answers to simple questions, just like “what is the use of the EU?” The answer he pointed to is startling: young generations, inconsistently fed with memories or knowledge about the reasons why the EU exists, are likely to take the actual situation for granted, notwithstanding the basic civic obligation to keep EU's spirit and philosophy alive. The loss of generational memory is to be blamed (i.e. EU exists as a continental peace project, and was born in the ashes of WW2 and the crude reality of the Cold War). Social media platforms accentuate divisions inside societies, the more that participating into exhibiting personal opinions would not undergo a process of validation.

In other words, “rational choice” becomes “irrational”, i.e. decisions and choices would spring forth from the very darkness of human soul, the lack of opinion confrontation notwithstanding. When it comes to large numbers, what we need to expect is an upsurge of basic emotions (rage, aggressiveness, revenge etc.) fed by fake images of the reality or by fake historical/mythological narratives, that can be funneled into political actions, such as EU elections.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ See Kertu Ruus, *Cyber War I: Estonia Attacked From Russia*, in <http://www.europeaninstitute.org/index.php/component/content/article?id=67:cyber-war-i-estonia-attacked-from-russia> (April 2019)

⁵⁹ https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/crisis-and-terrorism_en (April 2019)

⁶⁰ See Livia Benkova, *The Rise of Russian Disinformation in Europe*, in <https://www.aies.at/publikationen/2018/fokus-18-03.php> (April 2019)

“It's about broadcasting thoroughly tailored narratives, which are not even based on the news. This happens on purpose on major TV channels controlled by the Kremlin,” Nataliya Popovych, the co-founder of the Ukraine Crisis Media Center, is quoted to said back in 2018.⁶¹ She could not be more right about the matter. Russian broadcasters wage a relentless campaign against Europe, with an average of 18 negative references a day. Europe is usually depicted as dangerous, decadent, immoral, and home to fascism and revisionism. “The EU is falling apart. Germans and Scandinavians routinely take children away from Russian families and give them to “gays”, Russian state TV claims, against the very logic of our understanding. What helps the Russian system to work this way, are the Sputnik platform, or the RT platform - based in London (HQ) – which look as the most important and effective mechanisms of fake-news creation and promotion throughout the continent.⁶²

Russia has today the mechanisms of influencing basic emotions. If it is about a war against disinformation, we could call it a war on emotions and symbols. Fringe extreme parties enter this design, and are likely to act accordingly.

Serious questions would come to our analysis: is there a perverted “cultural attraction” to Russia, based mostly on historical/cultural arguments? Yes, there is! And it is about a psycho-cultural attraction that finds solid reasons in history, but works against the evidence of the past century. Russia is about Lenin and Stalin, too, not only about Putin or Tchaikovsky, or Dostoyevsky. I recently came across Bruno Le Maire's book, called *Le nouvel empire. L'Europe de vingt et unieme siecle*, Gallimard, 2019. For the author, the enemies of Europe are the US and China, and not Russia! Moreover, Europe would need to rebuild itself into a kind of Renaissance-like empire, basically federal, while paying respect to national identities. Such assumptions point out toward the fastest way political dissolution of the EU would become possible, while severing trans-Atlantic historical links.

What we have not learned after the 1990s, is that European solidarity should be defended at all costs, may they be domestic, political or economic, and sometimes against the outcome of local polls and votes. It has been exercised throughout the Cold War, but we left it behind because of our individualistic imaginary of the four essential liberties, the EU could provide to all its citizens, against the need of holding us together.

Coming back to our matter of discussion: which could be Russia's major plans concerning the EU? First, “to help” the EU become a frail, uncertain, and non-combative strategic power, unable to project its strategic common interests outside the continent, abroad. Provided this happens, NATO would be directly affected, and thus weakened. Second, to keep the EU as the most important economic partner to Moscow, and make the Union dependent to bilateral trade. Russia needs an economic powerhouse in potential future trade wars with China and/or USA.

Such plans cannot be achieved, but in the medium- and long-run, as they engage the offensive capacity of the Russian MFA and its diplomacy, as well as the subversive actions of the intelligence agencies, including mechanisms of social influence or cyber-attack, when needed. Targets are most likely to be sought for at national level, such as: social/economic/strategic state-run national systems (the Estonian case is exemplary), or Eurosceptic/anti-European/illiberal/extreme right and left parties (prone to evolve from fringe formations to political national forces, and determine fundamental changes of popular attitude and mentalities toward the EU, as in the case of Brexit), or personalities of different sorts and categories, of high public prominence and with capacities of largely influencing the public sphere.

⁶¹ See Image of European Countries on Russian TV, https://issuu.com/disinfoportal/docs/image_of_european_countries_on_russ (April 2019)

⁶² See Naja Bentzen, Online Disinformation and the EU's Response, [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document.html?reference=EPRS_ATA\(2018\)620230](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document.html?reference=EPRS_ATA(2018)620230) (April 2019)

I tend to affirm that the principal scope of Russia's plans against the EU, is about dissolving EU member states' solidarity, i.e. EU's disruption at various levels (political, economic, social), thus rendering the EU (partially, at least) dysfunctional and lame.⁶³

The forthcoming EU parliamentary elections are likely to be a testing ground, the more that decisions taken at the level of the EU Parliament cannot impede Russia's ongoing charm-strategy. The outcome would then decide how much and with which resources, Russia could take into consideration a larger influencing campaign for 2024's next round of EU elections. In the meantime, what looms as likely, is influencing decisions and votes at the level of the European Council, where consensus rule could render anti-Russia proposals worth nothing, mostly when it comes to Russia's links with the EU. On the same basis, I would affirm there could be a higher risk of interference into EU national elections, than into EU parliamentary vote.

To put it in a nutshell: Russia's influence on upcoming EU elections would be rather minimal. Moscow would wait for the outcome, and then see who and what could become a subject of support, in view of influencing executive decisions up to 2014. Its interest in influencing votes in the European Council is likely to grow.

And I would end, as a topic to ponder over, on what the role of national Orthodox Patriarchates would be, as duly considered. In countries like Romania, Bulgaria, Montenegro, Serbia etc., the influence of the Russian-oriented national Orthodox Patriarchates deserves consideration, the more it overlaps anti-EU political movements and communitary narratives. In all Christian Orthodox countries, there are serious fractures between pro-occidental and pro-nationalist orientations, overlapping political divisions. And if political interests would involve religious actions, then the whole picture of EU's popular support may change.

⁶³ See Influenta propagandei ruse in campania pentru alegerile europarlamentare din Romania. Interviu cu sociologul Nicolae Tibrigan, <https://larics.ro/influenta-propagandei-ruse-in-campania-pentru-alegerile-europarlamentare-din-romania-interviu-cu-nicolae-tibrigan-expert-larics/> (April 2019)

