Conventional bedfellows: The Russian propaganda machine and the western far right

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Anton Shekhovtsov traces how pro-Kremlin forces seek to influence political processes in western democracies using local activists and politicians, and how far-right groups across Europe and the US increasingly use Russian web hosting services to spread anti-western propaganda.

In early August 2008, Russian-backed separatists in the Georgian region of South Ossetia successfully provoked Georgia’s then president, Mikheil Saakashvili, into attacking and taking control of the separatist stronghold of Tskhinvali. On 8 August, Russia launched a war on Georgia –Moscow called it ‘a peace enforcement operation’ – and won in five days, concurrently occupying South Ossetia and another Georgian region, Abkhazia. Russian ultranationalist journalists welcomed the blitzkrieg and some of them even proclaimed that the war had made Russia a genuinely sovereign power that could ‘independently determine its politics’ and had ‘the resources to implement them’.

The overwhelming majority of Russian citizens supported the Kremlin’s actions; some would blame Saakashvili for initiating the conflict, others would accuse the US for allegedly attempting to influence Russia’s neighbours. However, in the months that followed, many Russian politicians, experts and officials discussed one particular paradox: Russia easily won the Russian-Georgian war, but lost the information war, implying that it failed to convince the international community of the righteousness of Moscow’s invasion of Georgia. Some commentators attributed this paradox to the mistakes of the military command. For example, only Russian journalists were allowed to report from Russian positions, while Georgia hosted journalists from various international agencies; the Russian military press service kept silent for several days after the start of the offensive, while – in the absence of other information – Georgia’s official stances were more visible in the international media space.

Gleb Pavlovsky, who at that time was one of the Kremlin’s major ‘political technologists’ – broadly speaking, political strategists – argued that ‘Russia’s loss of the information war with the western media’ was determined by the lack of Russian global media. Other
commentators were even more pessimistic and complained that the westerners would anyway trust what Georgians, Lithuanians, Estonians or Ukrainians had to say, rather than anything said by Russians. Another reason for losing the information war was - and Vladimir Putin himself was of this opinion - the sheer ‘power of the West’s propaganda machine’.

Among a few other analysts, Anatoliy Tsyganok, the director of the Moscow-based Centre of Military Forecasting, was more specific and practice-oriented. According to him, Russia lost the information war because it was not prepared for it at all. To win at information warfare in the future, he claimed, Russia needed to employ ‘information forces’ that would ‘engage in propaganda, disinformation and cooperation with the international media’. The ‘information forces’ would supply the international media with ‘ready-to-use imagery’ for which writers and scriptwriters were needed.

The perception of losing or having lost the information war pushed Russian media to desperately look for western commentators who would endorse Moscow’s line on the Russian-Georgian war. It is important to stress that, at that time, this was not retaliation against the predominant public opinion in the West sceptical of the Kremlin’s actions; rather, looking for western pro-Moscow positions was an act of self-defence for domestic consumption: Russian media needed to demonstrate to Russian society that there were people in the West who sympathised with Russia’s actions in Georgia. The desperation was evident. For example, one newspaper, Nezavisimaya gazeta, even decided to run an article that reviewed the comments sections in several Spanish online newspapers and reproduced any pro-Moscow comments published in those sections; the article was titled ‘Spanish bloggers are on Russia’s side’.

Fortunately for the Russian media, they found more significant allies than mostly anonymous ‘bloggers’. On 20 August 2008, the Russia Today TV channel ran an interview with Jeffrey Steinberg, director of the right-wing conspiracy theory magazine Executive Intelligence Review founded by American fascist Lyndon LaRouche in 1974. In the interview for Russia Today, Steinberg opined that ‘Russia’s actions in South Ossetia [had been] a response to a brutal assault by Georgian forces against Russian citizens’. The next day, 21 August, Russia Today interviewed LaRouche himself, who suggested that ‘the Georgian assault on South Ossetia [had been] probably a British-led operation with U.S. support’.

In October 2008, the Russian media located a new western ally of the Kremlin, namely Heinz-Christian Strache, the leader of the far-right Freedom Party of Austria. That month, Strache took part in the conference ‘Europe-Russia-Georgia’, held in Vienna by Austrian Technologies GmbH, managed by Freedom Party member Barbara Kappel. At this conference, he made statements critical of Saakashvili, and the Russian media immediately picked up these statements and quoted Strache as saying that Saakashvili ‘had installed a dictatorial regime’, that Russia ‘had not acted as an aggressor’ in its war on Georgia and that ‘EU member states should not take their cue from the US’ in response to Russia’s actions in Georgia.

**From soft power to dark power**
The major result of Russia’s perceived defeat in the assumed information war with the West was the reframing of the Russia Today TV channel in 2009. Russia Today was launched in 2005, and – according to its long-standing editor Margarita Simonyan – the aim and objectives of the channel were to ‘tell a story about Russia and show Russia’s position on what was going on in the world’. Discussing the launch of Russia Today in retrospect, Putin said, in 2013, that, with Russia Today, they ‘intended introducing another strong player on the international scene, a player that would not just provide unbiased coverage of events in Russia but also try […] to break the Anglo-Saxon monopoly on global information streams’. This notwithstanding, Putin’s argument about ‘breaking the Anglo-Saxon monopoly’ seemed to be false hindsight. Before 2008-2009, Russia Today was a harmless media channel, largely neglected by international audiences – similar to the Voice of Russia (VoR) radio station, which was established in 1993 and tried to promote Russia ‘soft power’ in several languages. Russia Today was far from ‘breaking the Anglo-Saxon monopoly’ or being subversive. To put it simply, the message of Russia Today before 2008 was simply ‘Russia is good’.

In 2009, the concept and the message changed. Russia Today was renamed RT, if not to conceal the Russian origin of the TV channel, then to appeal to international audiences who might not be so easily wooed by a channel that would presumably be talking, literally, just about Russia today. The message of the channel became more offensive and could be described as ‘The West is bad; that is why it cannot understand that Russia is good’.

The reframing of Russia Today was apparently successful in terms of expanding its audience. In 2010, Simonyan said that for as long as Russia Today had been ‘a quiet, little-noticed channel telling stories from Russia, our audience was negligible. When we started being really provocative … our audience started to grow’.

**Finding allies**

Promoting this message was problematic for the same reason that the Russian media struggled during and after the Russian-Georgian war: there were too few western commentators who would support the ‘Russia is good’ narrative, and even fewer who would, at the same time, endorse the ‘West is bad’ message. Yet the solution to this problem was the same: engaging with western far-right activists and politicians, conspiracy theorists, isolationists and fringe bloggers to whom RT would give a platform out of all proportion to their significance at home.

The US became the main target of RT. As an expert on the Russian media, Ilya Yablokov, insightfully argued, conspiratorial ideas on RT could be distinguished between those ‘genuinely American conspiracy theories’ and ‘ideas of conspiracy in relations between the US and Russia’. The first type included conspiracy theories about the September 11 attacks being ‘an inside job’; claims that Barack Obama had been born outside the United States and was thus ineligible for the presidency; or that the US was a tool of the New World Order. However, RT engaged not only with American conspiracy theorists, but with European too. For example, in 2010, the channel invited then-member of the French far-right National Front Aymeric Chauprade to its show ‘9/11: Challenging the official version’ to discuss his book *Chronicle of the Clash of Civilisations* (2009) that challenged the ‘official version’ of the September 11 attacks.
The EU became a target too. RT tried to capitalise on specific weak spots in a united Europe and – addressing European audiences – aggravate problematic areas such as the cohesion of the eurozone, immigration or the integration of minorities. ‘Reports’ on these and other areas were evidently biased, as they aimed at presenting Europe as a disadvantageous and declining political project, rather than giving a balance account. Thus, while ‘reporting’, in 2011, on a eurozone finance ministers meeting in Brussels and discussing the EU bailout fund, RT used commentators none of whom could have possibly provided even a neutral view on the eurozone: two members of the Eurosceptic UKIP including its then leader Nigel Farage and a member of the far-right Danish People’s Party, Morten Messerschmidt. Or, ‘reporting’ on the riots of ‘hundreds of mostly immigrant teenagers’ in Sweden in 2013, RT offered exclusive commentary only from those people who were critical of immigration: Ingrid Carlqvist and Lars Hedegaard of the racist newspaper Dispatch International, Gerolf Annemans who was then the leader of the far-right Flemish Interest party, and Kent Ekeroth, a member of the far-right Sweden Democrats party.

Furthermore, RT created an entire area of fake expertise. It turned to fringe ideological activists, presented them as ‘experts’ on specific issues (about which, in fact, they had little or no knowledge), and transmitted their opinions as authentic expertise. Thus, American neo-Nazi Richard Spencer became, for RT and its audience, an expert on Libya and Syria; Polish far-right fringe activist Mateusz Piskorski was ‘a prominent geopolitical analyst’; German far-right editor Manuel Ochsenreiter assumed the role of ‘political analyst’ and ‘Syria expert’. Other Russian media that broadcast internationally similarly misrepresented the nature of their foreign ‘experts’, sometimes in a particularly cynical manner. For example, Márton Gyöngyösi, one of the leading figures of the Hungarian far-right party Jobbik, who was involved in a 2012 anti-Semitic scandal in which he suggested drawing up lists of Jews who posed a ‘national security risk’ to Hungary, was suddenly a legitimate commentator for VoR on anti-Semitic sentiments in Hungary – according to Gyöngyösi, these were, predictably, illusory.

VoR played an important role in helping launch two European media resources run by far-right activists. In 2012, Gilles Arnaud, a former regional advisor of the French National Front and also a member of the far-right Party of France, founded the internet-based TV channel ProRussia.TV, for which he and his team received €115,000 for the first year of operation and €300,000 for the next. ProRussia.TV was hosted in Russia and its logo closely resembled the logo of Russia’s ruling party ‘United Russia’. Officially, ProRussia.TV was the product of collaboration between Arnaud’s Agence2Presse, Russia’s ITAR-TASS, Interfax and VoR, and the Iranian Mehr News Agency. It was, however, not until the closure of VoR in 2014 and consequent suspension of Russian funds for ProRussia.TV that it became clear that the French far-right TV channel was developed primarily in cooperation with VoR, rather than with any other media resource. This was also implied by the strong partnership between VoR and ProRussia.TV: they shared materials, some members of their staff worked for both services, while Sylvie Collet, Arnaud’s wife and also a member of the Party of France, presented a weekly news bulletin produced by ProRussia.TV for VoR.

Another far-right media resource launched with the help of VoR was the website of the Lombardy-Russia Cultural Association. The head of the Association is Gianluca Savoni, spokesman of the leader of the right-wing Italian party the Northern League, Matteo
Salvini; its honorary president is Aleksey Komov, a close associate of the Russian ultranationalist Orthodox oligarch Konstantin Malofeev who has been involved in several initiatives aiming at strengthening relations between Russia and western ultraconservative and far-right activists. The association itself was spearheaded in 2014 by Max Ferrari, a member of the Northern League and a contributor to the Italian service of VoR, which was also listed as ‘official partner’ on the association’s website. This has now been replaced by Sputnik, which supplanted VoR in 2014. Eliseo Bertolasi, a stringer for the Italian edition of VoR and, later, for the Russia Today news agency (not be confused with RT), also contributed to the development of the association.

Virtual Russia as a far-right media host

On 12 August 2017, during the Unite the Right rally that took place in the American city of Charlottesville and featured hundreds of neo-Nazis, neo-Confederates and other far-right activists, a neo-Nazi named James Alex Fields drove his car into a crowd of counter-protestors, killing Heather Heyer. The next day, the major American neo-Nazi website Daily Stormer (dailystormer.com) published an article by its editor, Andrew Anglin, that called the murdered counter-protester ‘a fat, childless 32-year-old slut’. On 14 August, against the background of social outrage sparked by the Unite the Rally itself and, especially, the murder of Heyer in an attack that resembled Islamist attacks in European cities, GoDaddy Inc., the domain registrar and web hosting company, cancelled its contract with The Daily Stormer. The website attempted to register with Google Domains the same day, but Google, too, cancelled the registration within hours. After this, editors of The Daily Stormer announced that the website would be found on the so-called Dark Web, the part of the internet which is only accessible using special software like Tor, but users had problems accessing the website on the Dark Web. On the 16 August, The Daily Stormer re-appeared as dailystormer.ru, which implied that Anglin and his team had registered the new name with a Russian domain registrar, namely the Internet Technical Centre. It was not entirely clear where exactly The Daily Stormer hosted its website because it was protected by Cloudflare Inc., a US company that proxied their traffic and made it impossible to determine the real location of the webhosting company and its name. However, evidence that appeared on the internet suggested that at least some parts of the website of The Daily Stormer (its mail server and forum) had been hosted by a Russian hosting company even before it was shut down by GoDaddy.

In the opening message at their new, Russian address, Anglin ridiculed (or rather trolled) those who sensationalised apparent contacts between Donald Trump and Russia, by stating that Trump called Vladimir Putin and asked him to provide ‘the Stormers’ with a new internet home: ‘Can you help them with your team of haxxors [hackers] who helped me win the election by haxxoring [hacking] the mean old witch’s emails (or by sending a lawyer to meet my son or however that happened)?’. Yet moving to the .ru domain zone did not help The Daily Stormer. First, Cloudflare cancelled its contract with the neo-Nazi site, effectively taking it down, and then the Russian domain registrar company Ru-Center administered the coup de grâce by de-registering dailystormer.ru.

However, The Daily Stormer’s attempt to find a ‘new home’ in Russia – despite its failure – reflects a certain trend among the western far right, namely moving to Russian hosting services and domains. In the past, some European more extreme far-right websites preferred US hosting. The First Amendment to the US Constitution guarantees, inter alia,
the freedom of speech, and many extreme-right written narratives like, for example, Holocaust denial, which would be illegal and punishable in the EU, have been mainly been tolerated by the US authorities and internet companies. Even Cloudflare, when it cancelled the contract with The Daily Stormer, explained that it did it not because of the neo-Nazi views that the website propagated, but because ‘the Stormers’ had claimed that Cloudflare was secretly supporting their ideology; otherwise, Cloudflare would have ‘remained content neutral’ and continued providing services to The Daily Stormer. (‘A website is speech. It is not a bomb’, Cloudflare’s CEO Matthew Prince argued in 2013 when accused of providing services to an unnamed ‘controversial website’.)

However, trust in the US authorities and internet companies was undermined in 2011 when the Austrian security services and police arrested Gottfried Küssel, the founder of the largest Austrian neo-Nazi forum, Alpen-Donau.info. Austrian authorities had tried to close down Alpen-Donau.info, as well as identify its owners, for a very long time, but the forum was hosted by the US company DreamHost, which resisted political pressure. Nevertheless, the Austrian authorities were persistent, and not only did DreamHost shut down Alpen-Donau.info, but US investigators also helped the Austrian Interior Ministry gain access to its servers, which led to the identification of the persons operating the forum.

The Austrian authorities’ successful cooperation with their counterparts in the US was probably the reason why two new Austrian far-right websites that appeared in 2014 chose to use Russian hosting services.

Freies-oesterreich.net (Free Austria) was registered in January 2014 and, until it went silent in February 2015, was hosted by the Russian internet company Spaceweb. In its opening message, the author(s) of the website claimed, in German and Russian, that the blog was published in St. Petersburg and that freedom of speech in Russia was guaranteed by the Constitution of the Russian Federation. The awkward Russian phrasing gave away the non-Russian origin of the author(s) of the blog, and although all the materials were in German, the blog had a subtitle in German and Russian saying ‘we fight for freedom of speech and human rights’. The blog was anti-Semitic, anti-American, anti-Ukrainian, but, most notably, openly pro-Kremlin.

The focus on freedom of speech and human rights was also stated on the website Volksherrschaft.info (People’s Rule) that was launched by the Austrian far-right party Working Group for Democratic Politics in June 2014 and has been hosted by Russia-based REG.RU ever since. The website, in particular, features the party newspaper Wiener Beobachter, which was previously hosted by the German internet company Loomes, and its e-mail is registered with the Russian company Mail.ru. The agenda of the website is available in German, English and Russian, and, again, only the German version reads as a text written by a native speaker. Unlike Freies-oesterreich.net, however, Volksherrschaft.info does not stress its pro-Kremlin stances (although they are present), but mostly promotes anti-immigration narratives.

Curiously, in March 2015, a month after Freies-oesterreich.net stopped being updated, Austrian far-right activist Karl Winkler launched a new anti-American and pro-Putin magazine Info-Direkt. The cover of the first issue featured a photograph of Putin and stated: ‘We want one like Putin’. Its website (info-direkt.at), which was registered in
February that month, was first hosted in Austria. In August 2015, the website published a story alleging, by dubious reference to an anonymous employee of the Austrian Defence Office, that the US was involved in the illegal smuggling of refugees from Asia and Africa to Europe. After publishing this scandalous story, Info-Direkt moved to the .EU domain zone (info-direkt.eu), but the website was still hosted in Russia by REG.RU. In 2016, however, info-direkt.eu moved to Austrian servers.

Neither Freies-osterreich.net nor Volksherrschaft.info was the first western far-right website to find a home on Russian servers. As early as 2003, the Slovak neo-Nazi website NS Info Slovensko, which became notorious for publishing a hit-list of ‘enemies of the white race’, used at least three Russian free hosting services (nm.ru, narod.ru and by.ru) before moving to a server provided by the shady 1st-Amendment.org that offered ‘REAL free speech web hosting solutions’. However, hosting in Russia or registering a domain in the .ru zone is still a relatively recent phenomenon.

Despite the frequent use of Cloudflare services to conceal hosting location and protect websites from distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) attacks, as well as similar services such as Domains By Proxy, specific internet tools sometimes help identify the location of at least some parts of far-right websites. This is the case with two Hungarian websites, Szent Korona Rádió and Deres.TV – both are apparently affiliated with the Hungarian far-right Sixty-Four Counties Youth Movement. In 2013-2014, it was revealed that their mail servers were located in Russia and operated by the Moscow-based company TC TEL. After these revelations, Deres.TV moved its mail servers away from Russia and they are now operated by GoDaddy; Szent Korona Rádió, nevertheless, kept their mail servers with TC TEL.

Yet if Deres.TV was somehow ashamed by the revelations about its connection to a Russian internet company, the illegal Hungarian website Hídő, which is maintained by anonymous contributors and apparently coordinated by István Győrkös, the founder of the extreme-right paramilitary movement Hungarian National Front, seems on the contrary to deliberately stress its Russian connection. It was originally registered with and hosted by GoDaddy, as well as having an international address, hidfo.net, but in 2015 it first registered the address hidfo.net.ru with Ru-Center, and eventually moved to the address hidfo.ru (while maintaining its hosting agreement with GoDaddy), which is puzzling considering that its entire content is in Hungarian. One explanation for this move is offered by experts at the Budapest-based Political Capital Institute, who believe that Hídő is ‘a public messaging board and propaganda site maintained by Russian intelligence officers residing or operating in Hungary’. Whether this is true or not, the website is emphatically pro-Kremlin and anti-western, and, in August 2014, became the source of a scandalous fake news story about secret deliveries of tanks from Hungary to Ukraine.

There could be various reasons why some far-right websites use Russian internet services, but the major reason seems to be that the operators of these websites believe that hosting on a Russian server is more reliable in terms of security than hosting in Europe or even in the US, with its First Amendment protections. Another major reason may be a symbolic one: Putin’s illiberal regime is a ‘beacon of hope’ for many far-right activists, and virtual proximity to Russia is not only an internal display of loyalty to illiberalism, but also a symbolic challenge to the liberal West.
However, Russian internet companies do not always live up to the expectations, and the shutting down of The Daily Stormer’s ‘Russian website’ is not the only such example. For example, after German police arrested, in January 2016, two German right-wing extremists during an investigation into the international neo-Nazi news website Altermedia, the officials asked the Russian service provider Mir Telematiki Ltd., which hosted the website, to shut it down, and the company immediately complied with the request. Ironically, Altermedia was previously hosted in the US and migrated to Russia because the Americans shut it down.

Nevertheless, some far-right websites do benefit from finding refuge on Russian servers, especially when they are not straightforwardly neo-Nazi like Altermedia or The Daily Stormer, and when their agenda is related to the subversive, anti-western agenda of Putin’s Russia. This thesis is best illustrated with reference to four German-language far-right websites that are hosted in Russia: Anonymous News, Migrantenschreck, BRD–Schwindel and Unser Mitteleuropa.

Anonymous News (anonymousnews.de) was registered on 21 May 2016, one day after Facebook, following numerous complaints, shut down the page Anonymous.Kollektiv that – with almost 2 million ‘likes’ – was arguably the most popular German-speaking page on the social network. Anonymous.Kollektiv, which had been launched in 2012, promoted core ideas of the Anonymous movement, criticising censorship of the internet and defending the principle of the unrestricted dissemination of information. As is common with various Anonymous groups, Anonymous.Kollektiv was prone to spreading anti-government and anti-establishment conspiracy theories. Eventually, however, conspiracy theories started to dominate the content of the Anonymous.Kollektiv group, while the core ideas of Anonymous dwindled. After the start of the Russian-Ukrainian war in 2014, the group became flooded with links to the German edition of RT and the German far-right magazine Compact.

Anonymous.Kollektiv also increasingly turned to anti-refugee and anti-leftist rhetoric. After the group disappeared from Facebook, it moved to anonymousnews.de, but on 31 May 2014 they registered a new domain, anonymousnews.ru (hosted by Ru-Center), and all requests to the .de domain were forwarded to the .ru domain. Since then, the content of Anonymous News has been aimed at destabilising German society and fuelling hatred towards refugees, migrants, left-wing politicians and the German government itself. At the same time, the website praises Vladimir Putin and other authoritarian leaders such as Bashar al-Assad. In general, Anonymous News reads as a long status report from the battlefield: refugees and migrants are waging a war on Germans, but the German people are ultimately betrayed by their ruling ‘globalist’ elites who have already surrendered the country to foreigners.

Anonymous News also has an account on the Russian social network VK. At the time of writing, it had over 51,000 followers; according to information provided by the users themselves, the majority of followers reside in Germany, but the second largest group are in Russia. However, it should be noted that a significant number of the followers residing in Germany are Russian-speakers. Nevertheless, all the discussions under links to articles on the Anonymous News website are conducted in German.

Given the anti-migrant belligerence of Anonymous News, it is hardly surprising that
Anonymous News heavily promoted the website Migrantenschreck (migrantenschreck.ru) that was hosted on the same Russian server and was apparently created by the same people who launched Anonymous News. Migrantenschreck, which can be translated as 'Migrant Fright', sold rubber and gas bullet guns in cooperation with Hungarian vendors. The names of the products clearly indicated that the website incited violence against migrants and political opponents. For example, an MS60 weapon was called ‘Migrantenschreck MS60’ (literally ‘Migrant Fright MS60’), while an AS125 weapon was labelled ‘Antifaschreck AS125’ (‘Antifa Fright AS125’); the latter would also be described with references to ‘unwashed and impudent’ anti-fascists: an ‘Antifaschreck AS125’ would ‘amplify’ anger against them. Migrantenschreck was closed by its creators after the German police started to track down its customers: someone apparently leaked part of their customer database to the German authorities. Requests for migrantenschreck.ru are now forwarded to an article entitled ‘Pogrom against customers of Migrantenschreck’ published by Anonymous News.

The BRD–Schwindel website registered its domain brd-schwindel.org in December 2011 with DreamHost, while the location of its hosting server was protected by Cloudflare. However, in summer 2016, the website moved to one of the data centres of the Russian hosting provider Selectel Ltd., but still maintained the registration of its domain with DreamHost. The content of BRD–Schwindel, which is often taken from other websites and blogs, is similar to that of Anonymous News: it is against refugees and migrants, especially from Muslim-majority countries; it is anti-establishment and harshly criticises German Chancellor Angela Merkel; it is anti-EU, anti-American, anti-NATO and pro-Kremlin. Apart from these narratives, BRD–Schwindel also promotes traditional conspiracy theories about the dangers of vaccines and GMOs, about chemtrails and about the coming ‘New World Order’.

In its turn, Unser Mitteleuropa (‘Our Central Europe’) was registered in March 2016 and claims to represent ‘a group of patriotic-minded people from Germany, Austria and Hungary’ concerned with the refugee crisis in Europe. Despite this self-representation, the website was initially registered not with an internet company in Germany, Austria or Hungary, but with the Russian internet company REG.RU, which has hosted the website since then. Politically, Unser Mitteleuropa supports the major far-right parties in the three countries: Alternative for Germany (AfD), the Freedom Party of Austria and Hungary’s Jobbik. Similar to Anonymous News and BRD–Schwindel, the website is anti-immigrant, anti-establishment, anti-EU, anti-American and pro-Kremlin, but it does not promote conspiracy theories (especially traditional ones regarding chemtrails or GMOs) to the same extent as the others.

Attacking the liberal-democratic consensus in Europe

In 2017, developments on the eve of the presidential election in France and parliamentary elections in Germany demonstrated the combined attempts by Russian actors and European far-right media to influence these two electoral processes, which were arguably the most important in 2017 to the future of the EU. In particular, these attempts aimed to boost support for the National Front leader Marine Le Pen and the AfD.

In the French case, despite the political and financial support provided to the National
Front by various Russian actors in 2014-2015, official support from Moscow seemed to have been discontinued for Le Pen’s party at the end of 2016 and in early 2017. The reason for this was a number of French public opinion polls that consistently showed that, in the second round of the presidential election, Le Pen would face the centre-right Republican candidate François Fillon who would defeat Le Pen by a landslide. Moreover, the second round appeared a win-win situation for the Kremlin, as both major candidates, Fillon and Le Pen, were known for their Moscow-friendly positions. Hence, the Kremlin would have been happy with Fillon becoming France’s new president and did not render any assistance, at least publicly, to Le Pen, if only to avoid souring relations with Fillon, for whom Le Pen was the major competitor.

The situation changed drastically in January-February 2017 with the dramatic decline of popularity of Fillon and the rise of the pro-EU and Russia-sceptic candidate Emmanuel Macron. Public opinion polls suggested that Macron and Le Pen would win the first round of the presidential election (thus, Le Pen would be the only ‘Russian candidate’ in the second round), but that Le Pen would lose to Macron in the second round.

This was a wake-up call for the Kremlin. At the beginning of February, Russian state-controlled media outlets such as RT and Sputnik started publishing materials aimed at undermining the growing popularity of Macron. RT focused on Macron’s highly paid position at Rothschild & Cie Banque, which is controlled by the Rothschild family, thus playing the anti-globalist and anti-Semitic card. Furthermore, Sputnik alleged – with reference to Nicolas Dhucq, a French MP representing the Republicans and a member of the board of the French-Russian Dialogue Association – that Macron was ‘an agent of the big American banking system’ and backed by a ‘very wealthy gay lobby’, as well as spreading rumours that Macron himself was a closet homosexual.

Also at the beginning of February, Russian newspaper Izvestiya claimed – and these claims were widely distributed by the French editions of RT and Sputnik – that Julian Assange, the founder of WikiLeaks, had some compromising materials that would supposedly discredit Macron. WikiLeaks never published these ‘compromising materials’ (the existence of which is doubtful), unlike in the case of the presidential election in the US in 2016, when the website published hacked e-mail messages sent to and from Hilary Clinton’s campaign chairman John Podesta. Apparently, the Russian media hoped that a simple mention of ‘materials’ alone would damage Macron, because Podesta’s hacked e-mails had indeed damaged Clinton.

Macron won the first round of the presidential election, while Le Pen finished second. Despite all the polls suggesting a Macron victory in the second round on 7 May, Russian actors continued their attempts to help Le Pen win. On the evening of 5 May, American far-right activist Jack Posobiec started promoting, using the hashtag #MacronLeaks, a large trove of e-mail messages and files related to the Macron campaign that had appeared on the anonymous document sharing website Pastebin. Posobiec’s tweet and the hashtag #MacronLeaks immediately went viral with the help of French far-right and American pro-Trump Twitter accounts. Posobiec’s tweet appeared just minutes before midnight on 5 May, which marked the end of the official campaign, and therefore limited the Macron campaign’s ability to respond.

The French cyber-security agency Anssi declared that there was no evidence that Russia
had been behind the ‘Macron leaks’ and that they could have been the actions of ‘an isolated individual’. However, investigative journalists and forensics specialists from various countries who analysed the ‘leaks’ seemed to prove otherwise. In particular, they discovered that some of the leaked Excel ‘documents’ had been modified on the Russian version of Excel and on Russian-language computers. Moreover, it was established that at least one document had been modified by a user named Georgiy Petrovich Roshka. Russian investigative journalists from The Insider identified Roshka as an officer of the main centre of the special service of Russia’s Main Intelligence Directorate that specialises in cryptography.

Neither the Russian insinuations, nor the ‘leaks’ prevented Macron from decisively winning the second round of the presidential election.

In the German case, Russian actors did not resort to hacks or leaks to influence the electoral process, although many experts and observers feared that Russia would indeed do so: already in 2016, Russia had been accused by Germany’s domestic security agency of performing a series of cyber-attacks against the German parliament in 2015; the same Russian hacker group was linked to attacks against the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) led by Chancellor Angela Merkel in 2016. In 2017, however, instead of cyber-attacks, Russian actors mainly tried to damage Merkel and boost support for the AfD through media and social networks.

Chancellor Merkel, with her robust support for the EU sanctions introduced against Russia in response to its annexation of Crimea and its war against Ukraine, was the primary target for the Russian ‘information warriors’ and their western far-right allies. The main strategy adopted against Merkel was a wave of vicious attacks related to her decision to open Germany’s borders to hundreds of thousands of refugees in 2015, as well as conspiracy theories linked to that decision. Among all the other German politicians and political forces, Merkel and her CDU received the most negative coverage in the reports on the German parliamentary elections in the Russian international and Russian-language media, and the main focus of these reports was Merkel’s refugee policy.

One reason why Russian-language media outlets such as the First Channel and RTR-Planeta TV or RIA Novosti played a role in undermining Merkel was that the entire ‘Russian campaign’ in Germany was partly aimed at mobilising Germany’s ‘Russian world’ – a disparate Russian-speaking community consisting primarily of the so-called ‘Russlanddeutschen’ (ethnic Germans who were born and resided in the Soviet Union but moved to Germany after its reunification and the collapse of the Soviet Union) and non-German Russian-speaking immigrants who have managed to acquire German citizenship and, thus, become eligible to vote. According to various estimates, Germany’s ‘Russian world’ numbers around 3 million people, or around 3.5% of the population.

Considering this significant number, the AfD positioned itself, in foreign policy, as the major defender of Putin’s Russia, and, domestically, as the main champion of the Russlanddeutschen; it even formed a Community for the Interests of the Russlanddeutschen as a group within the party. Thus, the promotion of pro-Kremlin and pro-Russian narratives in Germany’s ‘Russian World’ was an important strategy pursued by the Russian-language media to support the AfD. Naturally, these narratives were often
combined with anti-Merkel, anti-establishment and anti-refugee narratives.

Yet another type of involvement by Russian actors in the German electoral campaign was the amplification of pro-AfD, anti-Merkel and anti-refugee messages on social networks, especially on Twitter. It should be noted, however, that not only Russian trolls and botnets were involved in this activity, but far-right activists from other countries too. One of the most notorious cases of large-scale joint endeavours by Russian and western far-right activists, trolls and bots was pushing a message about the AfD being a victim of electoral fraud. The first wave of these accusations came in May 2017 and drew on the AfD’s complaints about alleged electoral fraud in the North Rhine-Westphalia state election where the CDU decisively defeated all its opponents. The second wave came just two days before the elections: a Twitter account supposedly owned by a young left-wing woman tweeted that ‘she’ would be working at a polling station during the elections and would be destroying ballots cast for the AfD. Quoting and retweeting this message from a dubious account, Russian and western far-right users produced a Twitter storm using a hashtag #Wahlbetrug (electoral fraud), thus insinuating that the forthcoming elections would be rigged by the establishment parties.

In the parliamentary elections held on the 24 September, the AfD obtained 12.6% of the vote and became the third largest party in Germany – a historical record for the German post-war far right. Numerous reports and analyses acknowledged the fact that a significant element of Germany’s ‘Russian world’ votes for the AfD, especially in what was formerly East Germany. In May 2017, i.e. before the start of the most aggressive period of the anti-Merkel, anti-refugee, pro-AfD and pro-Kremlin campaign, massively reinforced by Russian and western far-right activists, trolls and bots, public opinion polls had suggested that the AfD would get 7-9% of the vote. Given the difference between these numbers and the AfD’s final electoral results, it seems possible to suggest that the joint efforts of various Russian actors and their allies in the West may have helped convince some Russlanddeutschen and Russian-speaking Germans to support the far right.

**Conclusion**

There is ample evidence that, for many years, various Russian pro-Kremlin actors have tried to exert influence on political processes in the West with the help of western illiberal activists and politicians. These efforts are underpinned by the Kremlin’s reactions to the growing isolation of Russia in the international community. This manifests itself through the sanctions that the overwhelming majority of western nations have introduced against Russian officials, politicians and businesses, via criticism of Moscow’s repressive domestic politics and aggressive foreign policy, and through the curtailing of cooperation in different areas between Russian and western societies.

However, the acknowledgement of the fact that Russian actors are trying to interfere in the political processes in the West, which Moscow, in its turn, sees as waging a war on Putin’s right-wing authoritarian kleptocracy, does not automatically mean that Russia is succeeding in these efforts: the sanctions are still in place and western leaders are not ready to go back to ‘business-as-usual’ with Russia. Moreover, the rise of the far right in Europe and elsewhere in the Europeanised world is driven largely by internal developments, rather than by Russia’s interference. Nevertheless, one can suggest that
Moscow’s efforts aiming at destabilising western societies and undermining the liberal-democratic consensus in the West – if largely unsuccessful in the short-term perspective – may have greater repercussion in the medium term due to the effect of accumulation of far-right pro-Kremlin narratives combined with declining trust in the establishments of the West.

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