



# RUSSIA AND THE FAR- RIGHT

INSIGHTS FROM TEN EUROPEAN COUNTRIES



EDITED BY KACPER REKAWEK,  
THOMAS RENARD & BÀRBARA MOLAS

# **Russia and the Far-Right**

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The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT) is an independent think-and-do tank based in The Hague, Netherlands. Since 2010, we have provided research, policy advice, training, and other solutions to support better counter-terrorism policies and practices worldwide based on evidence and compliant with human rights and the rule of law. We also contribute to the scientific and public debates in the fields of counter-terrorism and countering violent extremism, notably through our publications and events.

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## List of Abbreviations

ABW	The Polish Internal Security Agency
ACLR	Associazione Culturale Lombardia Russia (Cultural Association Lombardy Russia)
AENM	The Alliance of European National Movements
AfD	Alternative for Germany
AFS	Alternativ för Sverige (Alternative for Sweden)
BCSP	The Belgrade Centre for Security Policy
BIA	Bezbednosno-Informativna Agencija (Security Intelligence Agency)
BIS	Bezpečnostní Informační Služba (Czech Security Information Service)
CCR	Comités Canal Résistance (Resistance Channel Committees)
CDU	Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands (Christian Democratic Union of Germany)
CSTO	Collective Security Treaty Organisation
DCA	Defence Cooperation Agreement
DIICOT	Directorate for the Investigation of Organised Crime and Terrorism
DSSS	Dělnická strana sociální spravedlnosti (The Workers' Party of Social Justice)
ECDHR	European Council on Democracy and Human Rights
EU	European Union
FdI	Fratelli d'Italia
FI	Forza Italia (Forward Italy)
FIMI	Foreign Information Manipulation and Influence
FNJ	Front National de la Jeunesse (National Youth Front)
FPÖ	Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (Freedom Party of Austria)
FvD	Het Forum Voor Democratie (The Forum for Democracy)
GRU	Glavnoye Razvedyvatel'noye Upravleniye (Main Investigative Administration)
GUD	Groupe Union Défense (Union Defence Group)
HVIM	Hatvannegy Varmegye Ifjusagi Mozgalom (Sixty-Four Counties Youth Movement)
JRE	Journées de Retrait de l'École (School Vacation Days)

LGBTQ+	lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, plus
MEPs	Members of the European Parliament
MNR	Mouvement Nationaliste Révolutionnaire (Revolutionary Nationalist Movement)
MW	Młodzież Wszechpolska (All-Polish Youth)
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
NCOZ	Národní Centrála Proti Organizovanému Zločinu (The National Centre Against Organised Crime)
ND	Národní Demokracie (National Democracy)
NIS	Petroleum Industry of Serbia
NRM	Nordic Resistance Movement
NSC	The National Security Council
ONR	Obóz Narodow-Radykalny (National Radical Camp)
PNFE	Parti Nationaliste Français et Européen (French and European Nationalist Party)
RDS	Russian Democratic Society
REMVE	Racially or Ethnically Motivated Violent Extremists
RIM	Russian Imperial Movement
RN	Rassemblement National (The National Rally)
SBB	Serbia Broad Brand
SCRF	Security Council of the Russian Federation
SD	Sweden Democrats Party
SFRY	Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia
SNS	Serbian Progressive Party
SPD	Strana Přímé Demokracie (The Party of Direct Democracy)
SPS	Socialist Party of Serbia
SRS	Srpska Radikalna Stranka (Serbian Radical Party)
UNI	The Union Nationale Inter-universitaire (The National Inter-University Union)
UR	United Russia
VRWE	Violent Right-Wing Extremism
WCF	World Congress of Families
ZOG	Zionist Occupation Government

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# **Introduction: Russia’s “Political Warfare” via the Far-Right**

**Bàrbara Molas and Kacper Rekawek**

Russia has an established record of waging political warfare on its competitors on the world stage or practising “an ongoing subversion campaign in Europe and the United States, using tactics short of war.”<sup>1</sup> Effectively, such an approach equals “the employment of military, intelligence, diplomatic, financial, and other means – short of conventional war – to achieve national objectives.”<sup>2</sup> As was demonstrated by the likes of Anton Shekhovtsov, this approach also involves liaising with and supporting anti-systemic far-right parties intent on redrawing the political map of different Western countries.<sup>3</sup> By 2024, it should not be a surprise that Russia encourages, funds, inspires, and rallies a string of radical and extremist actors who explicitly may not even be pro-Moscow, but act as political disruptors in their respective countries.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, Russia itself is a non-democratic state that suppresses minorities, occupies territories, and has repeatedly failed to honour international agreements, including by challenging the sanctity of international borders. In other words, Russia is “[...an] increasingly right-wing, authoritarian, patrimonial and anti-Western” polity.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, in the eyes of the many far-right or REMVE (racially or ethnically motivated violent extremist) individuals present in the Western World, Moscow is morphing into a traditionalist, anti-modernity and anti-liberal role model.<sup>6</sup> The extent to which this is an accurate portrayal of modern Russia, which features large Muslim minorities (some sources suggest that these constitute even up to 25 percent of the population),<sup>7</sup> and given its divorce rate (top three in the world), that Russia could be seen as a stalwart of traditional or family values is debatable.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, the Russian government has an ambivalent relationship with the



country's far-right milieu, which at times is given free rein to, for example, attack representatives of the Muslim minorities or activists, or journalists professing liberal views and critique of the Kremlin. However, this licence to act has often been curtailed at the whim of the far-right's Kremlin curators, who also have a track record of literally terminating their nebulous support for the country's nationalists and criminalising them en masse.<sup>9</sup> Regardless of Russia's approach to its far-right/REMVE activists, the threat from Moscow has become a growing concern for Western policymakers since at least 2014 and Russia's annexation of Crimea, magnified by the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022,<sup>10</sup> but also, to some extent, the Russo-Georgian war of 2008.<sup>11</sup> This threat was clearly voiced in the infamous speech of President Vladimir Putin at the 2007 Munich Security Conference where, according to Daniel Fried and Kurt Volker, "the Russian leader firmly rejected the post-Cold War system he's still trying to torpedo."<sup>12</sup> Ironically, at no point did the Western far-right/REMVE feel any threat from or concern about Russia. It was thus happy to align itself with an anti-mainstream/disruptive force/country that caused so much controversy among the far-right's mainstream and pro-Atlanticist political opponents.<sup>13</sup>

Ironically, the Western far-right/REMVE's fascination with Moscow, despite the latter's falling short on some of the anti-Muslim or pro-family metrics and its repression of the Russian nationalist milieu, continues to persevere. It even withstood the test of the full-scale Ukrainian war when Moscow sent troops flying the Soviet banner into Ukraine and relied on its Asian or Caucasian units and recruits in the initial push onto Kyiv. In the eyes of Moscow's European backers, this amounted to the alleged traditionalist Moscow fighting "white" Europeans (Ukrainians) with its own Muslims.<sup>14</sup> Shocking as it was, it hardly led to changes in opinions on the Western far-right/REMVE positive view of Russia or its foreign policy. It seems that the ties that bind these two parties of this arrangement – the Russian government and western far right/REMVE actors – are stronger than one might have thought.

This book aims to interrogate and highlight these ties by focusing on cases in which Russian influence in European countries is evident or at least strongly suspected. By demonstrating the practicalities of Russian support to a variety of far-right/REMVE actors present in ten European countries, the volume will dissect the forms and extent of influence, and the degree of support that Moscow offers to its fans, backers, and supporters abroad. The book will refer to the

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individuals, groups, movements, organisations, or parties discussed in its twenty case studies as far-right (and alternatively REMVE). The far-right, according to a classic definition of the phenomenon by Mudde,<sup>15</sup> is a broad concept that encompasses both radical and extreme rights. The latter is more akin to the US concept of REMVE. In fact, the volume addresses entities or individuals who are nationalist, endorse nativist and anti-immigrant/anti-refugee policies, and aim to preserve an identity of a given racial, social, national, or regional group or entity by constructing illiberal and antidemocratic unequal societies. In this scenario, ethnicity, religion, tradition, nationality, culture, language, and gender become variables in the construction of such societies.<sup>16</sup> Some wish to achieve this in a democratic manner by winning elections, while others endorse violence, and other sections yet of this milieu gravitate towards positions which are often called “anti-government” or “anti-institutional.”<sup>17</sup> In short, the far-right landscape has become a complex and evolving phenomenon which suits Russia as it wages its “political warfare.” In this sense, it can now choose from a potentially very wide spectrum of potential political disruptors as its allies or outlets. This book zooms in on the result of Moscow’s choices while discussing the aforementioned twenty cases, which saw different degrees of Russian influence over and interference in the far-right/REMVE scenes of ten European countries.

### **Russia’s Relationship with the Far-Right in the West**

The relationship between the European, and more broadly, the Western far-right, and Russia has been addressed by a few important works in the last ten years. Shekhovtsov’s contribution to the field has already been mentioned and is, moreover, one of the chapters in the current volume. A similar case concerns Nicolas Hénin and Przemyslaw Witkowski, both of whom penned monographs on their countries’ (far-right) relationships with Russia (France<sup>18</sup> and Poland<sup>19</sup> respectively). Other contributions meriting a mention include the work of the Counter Extremism Project, which discussed the cooperation between Russia and the West in this sphere in a broader, comparative setting.<sup>20</sup> Works by Clover, Horvath, and Teitelbaum, as well as those of Due Enstad,<sup>21</sup> Fenghi,<sup>22</sup> Garner,<sup>23</sup> or Laruelle,<sup>24</sup> which focus on aspects of the Russian far-right/REMVE milieu, provide a more contextualised understanding of the phenomenon. As these indicate, Russia has a long and rich track record of far-right politics and actions by REMVE militants, who are often used and abused by the Kremlin for domestic policy ends or, as was the case with the 2014 hybrid war against Ukraine – also

while effectively conducting Russia's foreign policy during its invasion of a neighbouring country.<sup>25</sup>

Russia, which at times represses its nationalists, continues to be seen as a standard bearer for far-right forces hostile to the EU.<sup>26</sup> As Moscow counters the EU and the broader West in the name of fighting for a "multipolar world" (i.e. one with Russia at the top table), Polyakova demonstrates that the far-right is raging against the same "globalist" forces while wishing to preserve national sovereignty and cultural identity of a given country or region.<sup>27</sup> In turn, as Götz and Renaud Merlen put it, Russia then uses the Orthodox Church as an element in forging its separate and distinct identity, which impresses the identity-oriented anti-Western forces of the European far-right/REMVE.<sup>28</sup>

Similarly, Antonis Klapsis argues that the far right in Europe sees Putin's Russia as a model of "neo-conservatism" and "semi-authoritarianism" that can counteract the undermining of nation-states spearheaded by the EU as well as NATO.<sup>29</sup> In other words, Europe's far-right/REMVE sees in Putin the model of a strong, conservative leader able to defend tradition and oppose a decadent West. According to Klapsis, the far right seeks a close relationship with Russia to achieve a gradual disassociation of their countries from a Euro-Atlantic sphere of influence and the institutions that represent it. From Moscow's point of view, these groups are an opportunity to expand its own geopolitical influence, for example, if far-right groups and parties become big enough to exert considerable pressure on EU governments to favour a relationship with Russia.<sup>30</sup> Highlighting Europe's far-right initiative in establishing relationships with Moscow, Anton Shekhovtsov demonstrates that efforts to build a (geo)political alliance with Putin are based on hopes that Russia could help Europe "reconstruct the mythologised and romanticised nation-state".<sup>31</sup> The formation of coalitions and alliances with Europe's far-right is thus beneficial to Moscow as, according to Shekhovtsov, this constitutes a type of "active measure" to achieve major foreign policy objectives in case other softer measures do not work.<sup>32</sup>

According to Paul Stronski and Annie Himes, such foreign policy objectives include sabotaging the unity of the West and its opposition to Moscow's illiberal vision while weakening democratic projects and values (especially when spreading in neighbouring countries) to prevent these from permeating Russia and undermining Putin's rule. Stronski and Himes argue that such aims require

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influence, which Russia has developed mainly through five tools: energy, information, culture, politics, and proxies.<sup>33</sup> (Dis)information tools have been especially relevant to Russia since COVID-19, in particular, to exert influence in Eastern Europe and delegitimise Western action towards the pandemic and overall credibility.<sup>34</sup> This Russian “infodemic” has continued until today through the spread and normalisation of conspiratorial narratives about the West, including in post-Soviet countries, where these efforts have been strengthened by promoting “Slavic brotherhood” narratives as well as shared Orthodox Christianity.<sup>35</sup>

Overall, Russia wishes to appear as a viable and legitimate alternative to lead international relations (in opposition to Brussels) for like-minded or sympathetic groups and parties. To that end, Russia actively backs political leaders and candidates it views as vulnerable to influence in regions of interest, for example, by organising high-profile diplomatic meetings to demonstrate its leadership in neighbouring countries, or by aggressively controlling paramilitary groups in strategic regions, including in Ukraine.<sup>36</sup> On the other hand, Russia finances and connects far-right groups and parties in many European countries, which allows Putin to keep allies at the forefront of the European political arena while fostering political and social polarisation, as showcased by Beatrix Futak-Campbell. In her work, Futak-Campbell explains that divisions among Europe’s political actors are strategic and beneficial for Russia because these are as disruptive as they are distracting.<sup>37</sup>

The literature above overlaps extensively in explaining the nature of the relationship between Russia and Europe’s far-right as an alliance of convenience aiming to undermine democratic systems and values, together with the institutions that represent them. To Russia, Europe’s far-right is a destabilising tool from which Putin can take advantage to gain legitimacy and geopolitical influence. To the far right, befriending Russia can empower alternative socio-political views within Europe, allowing nondemocratic and illiberal-leaning groups and parties to gain credibility and influence in the European political landscape. In the literature examined these insights emerge from studying direct forms of Russian influence. Complementing such an approach, this edited volume focuses instead on indirect forms of influence, including those based on circumstantial evidence which may be linked to Russia. These are important because they shape the threat landscape as much as direct attempts to manipulate

opinion and behaviour and, therefore, constitute a risk to consider in efforts to counteract Russia's strategies to debilitate liberal democracies.

Despite some of the existing literature offering regional examples to illustrate Russia's harmful influence, there are no systematic, comparative analyses that showcase how such an influence manifests across multiple countries. Moreover, when there are attempts to do so, such as Stronski and Himes (2019), Russia is presented as the dominant actor, removing local actors of agency (and accountability) in their efforts to establish closer ties with Putin. Filling this gap, the present volume looks at Russia's tactics to influence different regions across Europe, as well as analyse the steps undertaken by regional actors associated with the far right to build a useful relationship with Russia. In other words, it considers Russia's harmful influence upon the European threat landscape as a two-way street in which actors on both sides play an equally active role in shaping power relations. All for one common goal: destroy democratic debate at home and abroad.

Finally, while some of the literature provides recommendations on how to address Russia's harmful influence, including Gotz and Merlen (2019) and Stronski and Himes (2019), these seem only applicable as generic guidelines at the international level. It is thus unclear who exactly might be able to make use of those recommendations, in what capacity, and in what context, especially as it relates to the regional level. In contrast, our book offers both country-based tailored recommendations in addition to practical and rule-of-law-grounded advice to inform transnational counter-extremism and counter-terrorism efforts against Russia's activities with the far right. In doing so, this book represents both an analytical contribution to the study of this subject as well as a tool kit for practitioners.

### **Structure of the Book**

The collection of studies that this book presents is organised by country-focused chapters, where each chapter considers two case studies within that country. Some case studies centre around a group, a movement, a party, or an individual, and they may span short or long periods of time, but all of them are evidence-based cases relevant to today's threat landscape and the current threat perception among counter-terrorism and prevention agencies. Following the same research

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questions, each chapter sheds light upon the types of (direct and indirect) Russian influence that can be observed in each region, including what means were used and by whom to allow for the development of such an influence to emerge. Towards developing a risk assessment for every country, each chapter will also investigate what type of impact the influence identified had or could have had, specifically highlighting what the risk of violence is and where it stems from.

In addition to providing a threat analysis, each chapter discusses any existing responses at the country level designed to tackle Russia's harmful influence. This might include very concrete measures taken by platforms, but also administrative measures voted by the governments, specific legislations, and even lesser responses such as political figures acknowledging the problem in public or in parliamentary debates. An assessment of whether any existing measures are sufficient will set the stage for recommendations. Accordingly, each chapter provides advice tailored to their regional focus and planned for policy makers and practitioners in the field of counter-terrorism and prevention to inform their practise. In addition to country chapters, the volume provides a concluding comparative chapter that helps understand the similarities and differences between all case studies. The purpose of this chapter is to determine whether patterns in Russia's influence on Europe's far-right exist and, if so, how we can better address them when constituting a problem both at the national and transnational levels. This comparative analysis also underlines the challenges in coordinating efforts against such patterns, providing recommendations on how to do so more effectively.

This edited volume has three main goals. Above all, it aims to provide original and evidence-based case studies that contribute to our understanding of Russia's influence on the European far right. In doing so, it (secondly) hopes to contribute to our understanding of the evolving far-right landscape, including by offering new conceptual insights around this form of (violent and nonviolent) extremism. Finally, it intends to increase policymakers' understanding of the ways in which Russia supports far-right movements, organised groups, parties, and individuals in Europe, with particular attention to the risk of violent extremism.

## **Themes Within, and Order of, this Book**

The book's ten country chapters discuss Russian influence on the REMVE scenes in ten European countries. They are organised into five pairs of thematically linked countries, which help further elucidate the character of Russia's presence in this milieu. The first pair, including the Austro-German, introduces a situation in which Russia gains a considerable foothold amongst, or influence over, prominent members of a parliamentary and established political party, both sitting on the far-right of either Austrian (FPÖ) or German (AfD) politics. This, as will be shown, comes on top of activities with less 'mainstream' entities, such as the Suvorov Institute in Austria or even Russia's so-far troubled (lack of) relationship with the anti-institutional/anti-government German Reichsbürger.

The second pair, consisting of Serbia and Hungary, showcases a situation in which Russian influence in a given country far exceeds forays into the REMVE milieu and effectively influences the actions of governments. In Serbia, the country's defence and security sector openly cooperates with its Russian counterparts. This is done while suppressing the political activity of the Russian emigres residing in the country or during the demonstrations organised by the Serbian opposition when the country's prime minister thanked the Russian security services for the alleged tip-off on the upcoming protests.<sup>38</sup> Simultaneously, the government is playing a proverbial cat-and-mouse game with the REMVE political forces in the country, which are both seemingly critical of its alliance with Moscow but also stridently anti-Western and ideologically more in line with the preferences of Russia. Similarly, the Hungarian government also seems keen on assisting in both the growth and repression of a pro-Russian, but especially anti-Ukrainian, local REMVE scene. This allows for the adoption of a political attitude in which the current government in Budapest presents itself as a safer, less radical pair of hands to some of its internal and external critics. Consequently, Viktor Orbán's government is then keen on warning all who would listen of the political dangers should the REMVE actors gain more political prominence in the country. However, this does not stop the government or the far-right from overtures to Moscow.

The third pair, consisting of France and Italy, demonstrates how the online ecosystem of the REMVE milieu is keen on spreading ideas and talking points in favour of Moscow. Moreover, it also showcases how REMVE influencers (be it individuals or political parties) prioritise ideological viewpoints (such as anti-



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modernism, anti-feminism, or an anti-LGBTQ+ agenda), which are also close to Moscow's heart. These seemingly non-political points are then used to drive a wedge between the broader REMVE/far-right milieu proponents and voters and the rest of the electorate. This aforementioned ecosystem also produces and shares some of the most bizarre anti-government/anti-institutional conspiracies, of which one (as will be discussed in the French chapter), led to an attempted coup d'état.

The fourth pair, consisting of the Czech Republic and Slovakia, demonstrates how Russia's influence is spreading among individuals, voters, and organisations that are naturally and inherently positively predisposed to Moscow. They may not all politically come from the wider REMVE/far-right milieu, but while endorsing anti-government and anti-institutional positions (especially in relation to the EU, NATO, and the Russo-Ukrainian war) and professing social conservatism and an anti-immigrant agenda, all veer towards nationalist and pro-Russian positions. At the same time, both countries feature political or even paramilitary forces which have never hidden their fascination with or support for Russia.

Finally, the fifth pair, consisting of Sweden and Poland, presents cases of outright terrorist violence coming from the respective REMVE scenes, which can be tied to Russia. Such an approach allows Moscow a cover of plausible deniability as it was not its citizens nor its officials who prepared terrorist attacks in Sweden or Ukraine (by Polish REMVE individuals). These two chapters also discuss pro-Russian, or rabidly anti-Ukrainian, activities of individuals who are either Swedish (for Sweden Democrats) or Polish (Confederation). They started their political journeys on the fringes of their respective political systems, but years or decades later are enjoying the socio-political spotlight. At the same time, they have not, it seems, renowned nor changed their views.

In terms of individual chapters, the book begins with a chapter on Austria, which discusses two case studies. The first case study is that of an established, albeit situated on the radical right of the political spectrum, political party, Freedom Party of Austria, FPÖ or the Freedom Party of Austria, which tops the opinion polls in the country as of early 2024.<sup>39</sup> The second case focuses on the Suvorov Institute, an entity functioning on the fringes of political life in Austria. The first one zooms in on the scale and depth of FPÖ's dealings with Russia, especially during the period prior to 2019 when it co-led the Austrian government. Before

2019 the party moved beyond notional support for Russia, via e.g. signing of a ‘friendship agreement’ with United Russia – Russia’s governing party – towards participation in a government remembered for its pro-Russian policies. It seems that as much as FPÖ was responsible for driving the more mainstream parties in Austria towards pro-Russian positions, the Suvorov Institute played a role in mobilising the more radical political actors, such as the Identitarian Movement, for the benefit of Moscow. In this sense, the two entities, albeit disparate and not directly connected, actually led to a complementary existence.

The second chapter on Germany, mirrors the approach from the Austrian chapter as it also discusses an established, radical right, political party – the Alternative for Germany (AfD) and a more fringe entity, the Patriotic Union. The first case demonstrates an evolution of what initially started as a Eurosceptic political force and evolved into a political force publishing manifestos in Russian and calling for a détente in relations with Moscow as a pre-requisite for peace in Europe. The second case study provides fascinating detail on the little-known coup attempt from a group of Reichsbürger (a group of citizens of the Reich – an anti-state movement functioning in Germany which sees the Federal Republic as illegal) who attempted to win Moscow’s blessings for its planned violent revolutionary action.

The third of the national chapters focuses on Serbia and discusses the macro-influence of Russia on the Serbian government, led by the nationalist Serbian Progressive Party (SNS). Moreover, it showcases the role and the development of the even more radically nationalist and, at times, violent, People’s Patrol as a force in Serbian politics. The two, SNS and the People’s Patrol, are effectively competing for the same supporters, voters, donors, enablers, etc. and have both been developing their respective ties to the Russian government or the Russian far-right/REMVE milieu, which only appears independent of the Kremlin.<sup>40</sup> The chapter offers three ideas as to why this state of affairs persists and how beneficial this could be to the government in Belgrade and its counterpart in Moscow.

The fourth chapter addresses the situation in Hungary and the multifaceted and multipronged Russian efforts vis-à-vis the Hungarian far-right/REMVE scene. Interestingly, the Kremlin again seems to have prioritised targeting all subsections of this scene in Hungary – both via the more violent and extreme (via the Hungarian National Front) but also radical right (Jobbik and the case of the

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KGBéla – a Russian asset among its Members of the European Parliament, MEPs). Simultaneously, however, as the chapter demonstrates, Moscow could also count on more than a sympathetic ear from other sections of the country’s far-right, namely the Our Homeland political party – a splinter of the aforementioned Jobbik. The key here is not only an imagined sharing of conservative values between Moscow and Our Homeland as similar alliances or understandings exist between political forces in other European countries and the Russian government or the Russian governing party, United Russia. However, and this is unique among all countries covered by this volume, the Hungarian far-right forces also perceive Russia as an enabler of geopolitical changes in the neighbourhood, which, they hope, would lead to the restoration of pre-1920 Hungarian borders. As the longing for ‘Greater Hungary’ is one of the most potent animating factors for the Hungarian nationalists, Russia, which effectively attempts to forcibly redraw its borders with Ukraine, becomes an ally in an attempt to reset if not destroy the post–World War II order in Europe. This scenario would allegedly benefit Budapest as it borders Ukraine and, prior to 1920, saw today’s Ukrainian Zakarpattia/Transcarpathia regions within its borders. This would, in the minds of the Hungarian nationalists, allow for a claim to parts of Western Ukraine, should Ukraine lose the war against Russia. Consequently, the territorially-minded Hungarian far-right stands out among such political forces in Europe, which remain more intent on building transnational ideological alliances without getting into potentially toxic discussions on history and territory.

The fifth national chapter looks at the two cases from France, both of which are manifested mostly online. They bear some striking similarities as the main protagonists, Joël Sambuis and Remy Daillet, respectively, resided abroad while attempting to make the most of their online (in the former’s case) or both online and offline (in the latter’s case) activism. Sambuis, a French far-right activist since at least the 1980s, with prison sentences to his name, is sought by the French state in relation to an attempt on the life of the French president, Jacques Chirac, in 2002. Currently, he is a Russian citizen and enjoys Moscow’s protection while broadcasting his anti-Western, pro-multipolar world messages via multiple French websites and online channels while based in Russia. Daillet, on the other hand, a former foreign fighter in the Yugoslav wars on the Croat side, is a well-known and long-standing popular conspiracy theorist who, during the COVID-19 pandemic, decided to attempt a coup d’état in France. He rallied his followers

to the cause by hinting that he enjoyed Kremlin support, which would allow him to topple the “corrupt” French government. Both cases testify to the fact that Russia acts to support a wide variety of anti-systemic and not only far-right/REMVE political forces – Sambuis is a more traditional nationalist, whereas Daillet is more of an anti-government/anti-institutional extremist. Russia also fashions itself as an attractive alternative to such forces without explicitly and directly, as seems to have been the case with Daillet but also the aforementioned German Patriotic Union, endorsing these.

The sixth national chapter zooms in on the two cases from Italy. The first is seemingly more in line with cases of established radical-right political parties discussed in the German or Austrian chapter as it focuses on the League party. However, as the chapter dives into the details of the Russian influence it also uncovers layers of online political messaging and signalling which benefit Russia and appear at least partly inspired by similar talking points delivered by Moscow. The second case fully dwells on the online aspect of the Russian influence as it discusses the Kremlin’s influence on Italy’s far-right’s supporters. It uses an interesting case study of cyber-attacks, conducted by pro-Russian hacktivist collectives, on the websites of Italian institutions. These were allegedly attacked as a punishment for Italy’s support for Ukraine after the Russian full-scale aggression began in February 2022. The chapter then assesses the perception of these attacks by the aforementioned Italian activists and supporters of the far-right political party New Force.

Chapters seven and eight of this volume focus on the Czech and Slovak cases. Each of the four instances covered in these two chapters may not look similar at first glance, but this does not do justice to a single factor binding the REMVE scenes of the countries: the inherent and long-lasting pro-Russian sentiment of a variety of political forces and huge segments of the public. Consequently, the Slovak *Republika* radical-right party, the Slovak paramilitary Conscripts, or the Czech anti-government protestors from the streets of Prague all are fond of Moscow and see it as a viable and attractive geopolitical alternative to the European Union and NATO. At the same time, these are not pariahs as far as such sentiments are expressed in Czech and Slovak societies. These contain mainstream, and not always far-right political forces which often, at least proverbially, side with Moscow on emerging issues of the period. Regardless of the above, however, as is shown throughout these two chapters, the pro-Russian

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REMVE milieu comes in different shapes and forms and is actively involved in challenging the seeming status quo prevailing in the two countries. It is at its most effective once it combines its pro-Russian approaches with other causes dear to anti-systemic or anti-mainstream voters, namely COVID-19 lockdown measures or opposition to a given country's support for Ukraine in repelling Russian aggression.

The last pair of chapters (nine and ten) focus on rare events related to Russia's influence over the REMVE scenes in Europe, namely outright terrorist attacks as seen in Sweden and Poland. In Sweden, it is conducted by a group of right-wing extremists who trained in a camp run by a Russian far-right organisation which is designated by the US – the Russian Imperial Movement (RIM). This was the result of an understanding between RIM and a Nordic counterpart - the Nordic Resistance Movement – gone wrong. What was meant to be “just training” did not satisfy the trainees who, upon coming back from the camp, engaged in an ultimately unsuccessful campaign of terrorism in Sweden without the sanction of their leaders. The Polish case is different – it is one of the most remarkable testaments of a Russia-sponsored transnational connection of different REMVE actors across Europe: a German publicist/propagandist ordered an attack on a Hungarian centre in Ukraine and hired Polish far-right militants to do it for him. All of it happens so that Ukrainian-Hungarian relations could be further soured. Apart from the two violent cases, the chapters also focus on political actors who evolved from ideological positions and later entered parliament. First, the Sweden Democrats used to be known as a far-right, if not extreme-right political party, but now have a confidence and supply arrangement with the current Swedish centre-right government. In Poland, Grzegorz Braun evolved from a conspiratorial figure on the Polish far-right scene into one of the stalwarts of a political party that prior to the 2023 election in Poland seemed destined to break the duopoly between the Law and Justice and Civic Platform parties which have been alternating in government since 2005.

The volume finishes with a concluding chapter in which the findings of the previous ten are discussed in a comparative manner. Patterns of Russian behaviour vis-à-vis the European far-right/REMVE scenes are discussed to dissect the commonality of approaches by Moscow to utilise their adopted, real, or imagined ideological allies to proverbially rock the boat in the West. This is to ensure that in the future, policymakers have a viable compendium of what to

expect from the far-right/REMVE-Russia dealings, how these are built and developed, and how to best counteract such developments.

### **A Note on Concepts**

Russian influence is not clear-cut. Above all, there can be either direct or indirect forms of influence. For example, an indirect form of influence could be an independent (unaffiliated) user endorsing and spreading pro-Russian narratives about the invasion of Ukraine. In such a case, while Russia might not be actively sponsoring or supporting this user to inflict change in the opinion or behaviour of others, harmful action can take place due to the mainstreaming of a discourse favourable to the Kremlin's agenda anyway. Conversely, a form of direct influence could be Russia providing financial assistance to a party candidate in a European country in order to assist it in being successful during elections. Both types of influence are equally valuable and thus present in this study.

As it will be shown, the case studies covered in this book demonstrate a wide variety of cases in which Russia either acted directly while dealing with the far right, went through middlemen (either Russian or of other nationalities), or were sought by a given individual, group, organisation, or party as a potential sponsor or supporter. Moscow also gave refuge to some of the individuals discussed in this book. At the same time, in some cases, Russia hardly had to perform any action before a given entity gravitated towards pro-Russian positions. In this sense, one should not assume that anyone who is friendly towards Moscow and, for example, praises the “multipolar world,” is automatically on the receiving end of Russian largesse. This volume discusses a string of cases which hardly needed any prodding from Moscow to sing Russia's praises. Additionally, it also presents individuals or groups which began their anti-systemic far-right journey while embracing anti-US, anti-Semitic, or anti-European conspiracies. These hardly featured any mentions of Russia, but some of their proponents gravitated towards Moscow through a peculiar learning process which saw them, for example, take an anti-migrant stance in general and then graduate towards anti-Ukrainian positions as Europe accepted refugees from Ukraine. Some Russian supporters are scornfully called Russia's “useful idiots” but as this volume will demonstrate, they often reach their ideological positions because of peculiar historical or ideological grudges, often imagined.<sup>41</sup> The subsequent endorsement of such grudges has nothing to do with their proponents' mental or intellectual conditions,

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and it would be wrong to write these individuals off as mere fools or “useful idiots.” One must accept that some in the West consciously chose to reject the transatlantic alliance or European integration and, while doing so, aligned with external forces (Russia) seemingly sympathetic to their cause, regardless of the consequences of such a move. Due to the fact that a considerable section of such individuals comes from the far-right/REMVE milieu, it is only prescient to dissect such cooperation or understating between the two in detail.



- <sup>1</sup> Freedom House, “Russia: Transnational Repression Origin Country Case Study,” Special Report 2021, n.d. <https://freedomhouse.org/report/transnational-repression/russia>.
- <sup>2</sup> Seth G. Jones. “The Return of Political Warfare,” *Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)*, February 2018, 1–4. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/return-political-warfare>.
- <sup>3</sup> Anton Shekhovtsov, *Russia and the Western Far Right: Tango Noir*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017).
- <sup>4</sup> Elias Götz and Camille-Renaud Merlen. “Russia and the Question of World Order,” *European Politics and Society* 20, no. 2, 2019, 133–153. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23745118.2018.1545181>; and Mitchell A. Orenstein. *The Lands in Between: Russia vs. the West and the New Politics of Hybrid War*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).
- <sup>5</sup> Shekhovtsov, *Russia and the Western Far Right: Tango Noir*, 20.
- <sup>6</sup> For more, see e.g. Charles Clover, *Black Wind, White Snow: The Rise of Russia’s New Nationalism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020) or Benjamin R. Teitelbaum, *War for Eternity: The Return of Traditionalism and the Rise of the Populist Right* (London: Penguin, 2020).
- <sup>7</sup> See: “Russia 2022 International Religious Freedom Report,” US Department of State, n.d. <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/441219-RUSSIA-2022-INTERNATIONAL-RELIGIOUS-FREEDOM-REPORT.pdf>.
- <sup>8</sup> See: “Divorce Rates by Country 2024,” World Population Review, n.d. <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/divorce-rates-by-country>.
- <sup>9</sup> For more on this issue, see: Robert Horvath, *Putin’s Fascists. Russkii Obraz and the Politics of Managed Nationalism in Russia* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2022).
- <sup>10</sup> For more on the pre-2022 war see: Dominique Arel, Jesse Driscoll, *Ukraine’s Unnamed War: Before the Russian Invasion of 2022* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023). For a detailed study of the full-scale war’s first phase (February–November 2022) see: Michał Bruszewski, Marek Kozubel, Maciej Szopa, *Wojna rosyjsko-ukraińska. Pierwsza faza [Russian-Ukrainian War. First Phase]* (Warsaw: Bellona, 2024).
- <sup>11</sup> See: Roy Allison, *Russia, the West, and Military Intervention* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).
- <sup>12</sup> Daniel Fried and Kurt Volker. “The Speech In Which Putin Told Us Who He Was,” *POLITICO*, 18 February 2022. <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2022/02/18/putin-speech-wake-up-call-post-cold-war-order-liberal-2007-00009918>. For totality of Putin’s speech, subtitled in English, see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hQ58Yv6kP44>.
- <sup>13</sup> Beatrix Futak-Campbell, “Political Synergy: How the European Far-Right and Russia Have Joined Forces Against Brussels,” *Atlantisch Perspectief* 44, 2020, 30–35.
- <sup>14</sup> See: Kacper Rekawek. “Western Extremists and the Russian Invasion of Ukraine in 2022: All Talk, But Not a Lot of Walk,” *Counter Extremism Project*, May 2022. [https://www.counterextremism.com/sites/default/files/2022-05/Western%20Extremists%20and%20the%20Russian%20Invasion%20of%20Ukraine%20in%202022\\_May%202022.pdf](https://www.counterextremism.com/sites/default/files/2022-05/Western%20Extremists%20and%20the%20Russian%20Invasion%20of%20Ukraine%20in%202022_May%202022.pdf).
- <sup>15</sup> For a division between radical (not anti-democratic but nativist and nationalist, often “anti-systemic”) and extremist (anti-democratic and often violent) right, and the far right as an all-encompassing term see: Cas Mudde, *The Far Right Today*, London: Polity, 2019.
- <sup>16</sup> On the far right and defining it, see: Damon T. Berry, *Blood and Faith: Christianity in American White Nationalism* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2017), 194; Terri E. Givens, *Voting Radical Right in Western Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,

2005), 20; Cas Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 22. On the far right and multiculturalism, see: Uwe Backes and Patrick Moreau, eds., *The Extreme Right in Europe: Current Trends and Perspectives* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2012), 75–76; Tamir Bar-On, “The Radical Right and Nationalism”, in Rydgren, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of the Radical Right*, 31; Ja-Wener Muller, *What Is Populism?* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016) which concludes that at populism’s core is a rejection of pluralism.

<sup>17</sup> See e.g. Barbara Molas. “The Insurrection Wave: A Comparative Assessment of Anti-Government Attacks in Germany, the US, and Brazil,” *ICCT Policy Brief*, September 2023. <https://www.icct.nl/sites/default/files/2023-09/Molas%20-%20The%20Insurrection%20Wave%20final%20to%20publish.pdf>.

<sup>18</sup> Nicolas Hénin, *La France russe: Enquête sur les réseaux de Poutine* [Investigation into Putin’s Networks] (Paris: Fayard, 2016).

<sup>19</sup> Przemysław Witkowski, *Partia Rosyjska* (Warszawa: Arbitor, 2023).

<sup>20</sup> Counter Extremism Project, *Violent Right-Wing Extremism and Terrorism – Transnational Connectivity, Definitions, Incidents, Structures and Countermeasures*, November 2020, [https://www.counterextremism.com/sites/default/files/CEP%20Study\\_Violent%20Right-Wing%20Extremism%20and%20Terrorism\\_Nov%202020.pdf](https://www.counterextremism.com/sites/default/files/CEP%20Study_Violent%20Right-Wing%20Extremism%20and%20Terrorism_Nov%202020.pdf).

<sup>21</sup> Johannes Due Enstad. “Right-Wing Terrorism and Violence in Putin’s Russia,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 12, No. 6, December 2018, pp. 89–103.

<https://www.universiteitleiden.nl/binaries/content/assets/customsites/perspectives-on-terrorism/2018/issue-6/a6-due-enstad.pdf>.

<sup>22</sup> Fabrizio Fenghi, *It Will Be Fun and Terrifying: Nationalism and Protest in Post-Soviet Russia* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2021).

<sup>23</sup> Ian Garner, *Z Generation. Into the Heart of Russia’s Fascist Youth* (London: Hurst, 2023).

<sup>24</sup> Marlene Laruelle, *Is Russia Fascist?* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2021).

<sup>25</sup> See: Kacper Rekawek. *Foreign Fighters in Ukraine. The Brown and Red Cocktail* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2023).

<sup>26</sup> Luke Harding. “We should beware Russia’s links with Europe’s right,” *The Guardian*, December 2014. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/dec/08/russia-europe-right-putin-front-national-eu>.

<sup>27</sup> Alina Polyakova. “Putinism and the European Far Right,” *Institute of Modern Russia (IMR)*, November 2015: 1–11.

[https://imrussia.org/images/stories/Russia\\_and\\_the\\_World/Putin-Far-Right/alina-polyakova\\_putinism-european-far-right.pdf](https://imrussia.org/images/stories/Russia_and_the_World/Putin-Far-Right/alina-polyakova_putinism-european-far-right.pdf).

<sup>28</sup> Götz and Merlen. “Russia and the Question of World Order”.

<sup>29</sup> Antonis Klapsis, “An Unholy Alliance: The European Far Right and Putin’s Russia,” *Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies*, (2015): 15, 17.

<https://www.martenscentre.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/far-right-political-parties-in-europe-and-putins-russia.pdf>

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Shekhovtsov, *Russia and the Western Far Right: Tango Noir*, 247.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. p. 252.

<sup>33</sup> Paul Stronski and Annie Himes. “Russia’s Game in the Balkans,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, January 2019, 1–21.

[https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Stronski\\_Himes\\_Balkans\\_formatted.pdf](https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Stronski_Himes_Balkans_formatted.pdf).

<sup>34</sup> Rebecca Goolsby and Ritu Gill, *COVID-19 Disinformation: A Multi-National, Whole of Society Perspective*, (Cham: Springer, 2022), 35. See also: Miriam Matthews, Katya

Migacheva, and Ryan Andrew Brown, *Superspreaders of Malign and Subversive Information on COVID-19* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporations, 2021).

<sup>35</sup> See, for example: Ralph S. Clem, Erik S. Herron, and Ani Tepnadze. “Russian Anti-Western Disinformation, Media Consumption and Public Opinion in Georgia,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 75, no. 9, July 2023, 1535–1559. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2023.2220997>; or Scott Radnitz. “Solidarity through Cynicism? The Influence of Russian Conspiracy Narratives Abroad,” *International Studies Quarterly* 66, no. 2 June 2022. <https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqac012>; and Stronski and Himes. “Russia’s Game in the Balkans”.

<sup>36</sup> Stronski and Himes, “Russia’s Game in the Balkans”.

<sup>37</sup> Futak-Campbell, “Political Synergy”.

<sup>38</sup> Lili Bayer. “Serbia opposition doubles down on election fraud claims as full results released,” *The Guardian*, 4 January 2024.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/jan/04/serbia-opposition-doubles-down-on-election-claims-as-full-results-released>.

<sup>39</sup> An opinion poll from 12 January 2024 gave the party 32 percent of the vote, nine percentage points above its nearest rival. See Richard Schmitt, “*FPÖ startet mit 32 Prozent ins Wahljahr - jetzt Großalarm bei SPÖ und ÖVP!* [FPÖ starts the election year with 32 percent - now a big alarm for SPÖ and ÖVP ],” *Exxpress*, January 2024

<https://exxpress.at/fpoe-startet-mit-32-prozent-ins-wahljahr-jetzt-grossalarm-bei-spo-und-oevp/>.

<sup>40</sup> To appreciate the extent of this cooperation between the Kremlin and the country’s far right, and how the latter is being curated by the former, see: Robert Horvath. *Putin’s Fascists Russkii Obraz and the Politics of Managed Nationalism in Russia*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2021.

<sup>41</sup> See, e.g. *The Economist*, “Vladimir Putin’s useful idiots,” 3 July

2023. <https://www.economist.com/europe/2023/07/03/vladimir-putins-useful-idiots>.

## 2

# Austria: Scandals, Politics, and Identitarians

**Fabian Schmid**

Far-right movements in Austria have built close relationships with Russia in the last two decades. The Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ), one of the country's three major political parties, has begun to develop ties to Russian politicians and oligarchs since around 2005. This culminated in a so-called friendship agreement with the Russian Kremlin party, United Russia, at the end of 2016. There are also numerous indications that the FPÖ was willing to accept money from Russia-linked oligarchs. Criminal investigations allege that party-leaders received several million euros from an Eastern Ukrainian oligarch, and a secretly filmed meeting between party-leader Heinz-Christian Strache and a woman claiming to be an oligarch's niece led to the downfall of Strache, and the end of the government coalition between the FPÖ and the conservative ÖVP 2019. Currently, there are several investigations into connections between FPÖ-aligned officials and Russia, including former foreign affairs minister Karin Kneissl, who famously moved to Russia in 2023. "We were a pro-Russian government", former chancellor Sebastian Kurz (member of the Austrian People's Party, ÖVP) told a court in October 2023 – he is indicted for perjury. This is not only true for the ÖVP-FPÖ government from 2017 to 2019, but also for previous administrations (2007–2017) consisting of Social Democrats (SPÖ) and the ÖVP. Several former chancellors or high-ranking officials have later worked for Russian companies or lobbied for pro-Russian politicians. While SPÖ and ÖVP seem to be primarily motivated by economic reasons, the FPÖ also has ideological common ground with Kremlin politics.

The FPÖ is generally described as a populist party with mostly far-right policies and rhetoric. The core of its political agenda is a fierce stance against migration

and a scepticism against the European Union (EU). The FPÖ describes itself as neither aligned with Brussels, Washington DC, or Moscow, but as neutral. It is calling for an end to sanctions against Russia and a cease-fire in Ukraine. The party is agitating against LGBTQ+-friendly policies but uses attacks on the LGBTQ+-community by migrants or refugees to call for deportations. Similarly, there have been instances of antisemitism and neo-Nazism within the party, yet the FPÖ has repeatedly criticised “imported antisemitism” by Muslim refugees.

While the FPÖ is a main hub for the political far-right in Austria, there are even more radical organisations like the youth group Identitarian movement. In the past decade, the FPÖ has mostly denied connections to these groups, even though policies and personnel overlap. Under the current party leader Herbert Kickl, the party has fully embraced its ties to extremists, even though there have been instances of violence linked to the Identitarians. The far-right Australian terrorist Brenton Tarrant has donated several thousand euros to the Austrian Identitarian movement and possibly met members of the organisation when travelling to Austria.

One offspring of the Identitarian movement is the Suvorov Institute, a seemingly unimportant pro-Russian organisation. Its current leader Alexander Markovics has been a founding member of the Identitarian movement in Austria. The Suvorov Institute is one of very few entities still actively cooperating with Russian organisations after the attack on Ukraine in 2022. The Suvorov Institute is also working together with other groups with a history of violence, for example the Artgemeinschaft Germanic Faith Community from Germany, which was banned in 2023.

In this chapter, the manifold connections between the FPÖ and Russia will be described. After a short overview of how the FPÖ built up ties to the Kremlin, evidence of its pro-Russian actions in government is presented. While the shock of the Ibiza video brought a sudden halt to FPÖ’s relationship with Russia in 2019, the party is still pushing for policies beneficial to Moscow. This is indicated by an analysis of the party’s press releases about the war in Ukraine.

The second case study is the Suvorov Institute, as it shows how Russian influence is still seen on the fringes of politics and even on the fringes of the FPÖ. This is

evidence that Russian entities have no reluctance to cooperate with groups that are linked to violence themselves or other violent groups.

## **Case Study 1: The Freedom Party**

### ***Austria as a Friend of Russia***

Alongside the SPÖ and the conservative ÖVP, the FPÖ has established itself as the third major force in Austrian politics. The party has been criticised for its rhetoric and policies regarding migrants and refugees, and its ties to neo-Nazism and far-right extremism. It has also been plagued by corruption. Still, the FPÖ managed to be in government twice in the last twenty years (2000–2006 and 2017–2019); with the conservative ÖVP claiming a coalition with FPÖ was needed to break up the deadlock of forever-coalitions between SPÖ and ÖVP.

The FPÖ's ties to Russia have only been a minor cause for criticism by the other two main parties – probably because they have developed similar connections themselves. This is shown by one scene alone from 2014 when Chamber of Commerce president and ÖVP-politician Christoph Leitl joked with Putin about how long he himself had been at the helm of the organisation – Putin then ironically called him a “dictator.”<sup>1</sup> The Austrian economy is closely intertwined with Russia: the partly state-owned energy group OMV concluded joint ventures with Gazprom.<sup>23</sup> Raiffeisen Bank International (RBI), part of the most powerful banking conglomerate, for example, is still active in Belarus and Russia.<sup>4</sup> ÖVP politicians worked for Raiffeisen after their political career had ended, and the Raiffeisen Bank gave out multimillion-euro loans to the ÖVP.<sup>5</sup>

### ***A Friendship Agreement Years in the Making***

In December 2016, the then-leadership of the FPÖ visited Russia and had a photo of them taken smiling in Moscow's Red Square. The leading<sup>6</sup> party cadres were in Russia for working meetings, they said at the time. In fact, Secretary General Harald Vilimsky, party leader Heinz-Christian Strache, and his deputies Norbert Hofer and Johann Gudenus had travelled to Moscow to conclude a friendship agreement with the Kremlin party United Russia, whose chairman was Russian Prime Minister Dmitri Medvedev. The agreement was signed by Sergei Zhelesnyak, deputy secretary of the Party General Council.<sup>7</sup> It was by far the most crucial party in Russia that declared its support for the FPÖ. De facto, it is led by

Russian President Vladimir Putin, who, according to the constitution, must not be a party member. Interestingly, hardly anything planned in this agreement ever came to life.

In terms of domestic policy, however, the FPÖ for the first time clearly and officially acknowledged its closeness to Russia and Putin. For some time, no one could have imagined this. When the party was founded after World War II as the Association of Independents, it gathered mainly former Nazis, so-called expelled ethnic Germans, and liberals.<sup>8</sup> They were all united by a fervent anti-communism. Even after the fall of the Iron Curtain, the FPÖ was not interested in Eastern Europe. The party leader at the time, Jörg Haider, wanted to give his party, which was isolated in Europe, foreign policy weight but to do so he travelled primarily to the Middle East to visit dictators like Muammar Gaddafi and Saddam Hussein.<sup>9</sup>

All that changed when Heinz-Christian Strache took over as chairman of his party in April 2005. Strache's closest confidant was Johann Gudenus, who was then chairman of the Freedom Party's youth organisation. Strache and Gudenus were connected through their fraternity, the Viennese penal fraternity Vandalia, where Strache was Gudenus's *Leibvater* there, in a sense his mentor.<sup>10</sup> For the FPÖ, fraternities are important as a recruiting ground and as informal networks. Historically, fraternities played a key role in the revolution of 1848, when students and other groups called for freedom of speech and other liberal reforms in Austria.<sup>11</sup> The FPÖ sees itself in this tradition – thus the term freedom is part of its official name. Over the next decades, developed rigid antisemitism and moved to the political spectre. After World War II, fraternities in Austria had become breeding grounds for neo-Nazism. Nowadays, most fraternities are seen as far-right and obscure groups,<sup>12</sup> partly because of their rites – some members still fence without protection and proudly wear their scars. As a *Leibvater*, Strache had responsibilities for Gudenus, who in return pledged a lifelong allegiance to him.<sup>13</sup> Gudenus himself had close ties to Russia. The son of an FPÖ member of parliament and convicted Holocaust denier, he had attended summer courses at Moscow University in the 1990s, spoke Russian, and had conducted business in Russia.<sup>14</sup>

Through Gudenus, FPÖ quickly established contacts in the post-Soviet space, for example with pro-Russian actors from Georgia or with the oligarch Konstantin Malofeev, a well-known oligarch.<sup>15</sup> This was followed by what can

now be described as the typical programme of Russophile European parties: FPÖ politicians travelled to Moscow and Chechnya, participated in meetings and congresses there.<sup>16</sup> None of this, however, prevented the conservative People's Party from entering a coalition with the FPÖ in December 2017 and making FPÖ politicians, among other things, rise to the level of foreign minister and interior minister.<sup>17</sup>

### ***The FPÖ in Power***

What happened then is an example of the dangers posed by the participation of the pro-Russian FPÖ in government – ironically, it was then a supposed connection to Russia, of all things, that brought the FPÖ down for the time being. Even before the FPÖ joined the government, a dossier was circulating with accusations against high-ranking police officers and members of the Office for the Protection of the Constitution, the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (BVT), Austria's civilian counterintelligence agency. When longtime FPÖ Secretary General Herbert Kickl became the interior minister at the end of 2017, his team pushed the anti-corruption prosecutor's office for action to be taken because of the allegations included in the dossier. The dossier sounded like it was written by a disgruntled insider, who alleged that that money had been divested from hostage-saving operations by office officials or that the agency was misused by the ÖVP to collect damaging information on other parties.<sup>18</sup>

Consequently, on 28 February 2018, numerous police officers from an anti-drug unit led by an FPÖ-affiliated chief, raided the Office for the Protection of the Constitution whose director Peter Gridling was suspended. The measures were directed against several suspects in the intelligence department, which is responsible for counterintelligence. The accusations were that expenses had been falsely charged and that the rights of certain North Koreans had been violated because they had been surveilled without the consent of the legal protection officer.<sup>19</sup> To date, there has not been a single guilty verdict in the matter.

European and US partner services reportedly reacted with horror to the raid.<sup>20</sup> During the raid, countless secret documents were rummaged through and transported to the public prosecutor's office. Among them were documents related to Russia.<sup>21</sup> Peter Gridling, head of the BVT at the time of the raid, told the *Financial Times* (FT) that “we were very worried about the Freedom party's contacts with Russia”. The BVT investigated how “Russia might finance them,



offer them jobs”. When the FPÖ came into power “they wanted to change the [intelligence service] immediately”, Gridling said to the FT. Interior Minister Kickl unsuccessfully tried to suspend Gridling and halt the renewal of his association as the head of the BVT.<sup>22</sup> At the time, the Office for the Protection of the Constitution had already been the target of investigations because of a suspected data leak: an employee named Egisto Ott allegedly sent data from BVT to his private email address. To this day, Ott is suspected of having spied for Russia, which he continues to deny.<sup>23</sup> Only in recent years has it become clear that Ott and a network of acquaintances had been working with the FPÖ and that they were involved in the events surrounding the search in February 2018 by allegedly handing over internal information about their BVT colleagues to the FPÖ and associates. Investigators even allege that the FPÖ paid Ott for secret information and documents.<sup>24</sup>

A key figure here is the former head of the department at the Office for the Protection of the Constitution, Martin Weiss. He left the BVT shortly before the raid to work for Jan Marsalek, then-manager of Wirecard, a German fintech company worth billions of euros that was ensnared in a huge fraud case in 2019. Marsalek allegedly lied about Wirecard’s assets worth three billion dollars. When auditors could not find these assets, Marsalek fled to Belarus to escape prosecution. Intelligence agencies assess that he is now living in a suburb of Moscow.<sup>25</sup>

Investigators suspect that Ott conducted illegal data queries for Weiss and, thus, for Marsalek. Marsalek is suspected of having cooperated with Russian intelligence services for several years.<sup>26</sup> There are several examples of his involvement, which was unknown before Wirecard collapsed: his immediate entourage included Stanislav Petlinsky.<sup>27</sup> To protect his business interests in Libya, Marsalek hired Russian mercenary troops managed by Petlinsky. He also allegedly travelled with the Main Directorate of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation (GRU) to Palmyra, Syria.<sup>28</sup> Another axis of Marsalek’s contacts with Russia and the FPÖ reaches into the Austrian Foreign Ministry: Marsalek is said to have obtained secret information from the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) on the Novichok poison attack against Russian ex-agent Sergei Skripal in Salisbury.<sup>29</sup> Skripal was targeted by Russian agents who used the Novichok nerve agent for their assassination attempt. Skripal and his daughter survived, but an uninvolved

British woman died. The OPCW did an analysis of the Novichok samples and distributed them to its member states. According to investigative files from Austria, this document allegedly originated from the Foreign Ministry, with the FPÖ-aligned secretary general there at the time, Johannes Peterlik, requesting the document.<sup>30</sup> Shortly afterwards, Peterlik allegedly showed Egisto Ott the document, who filmed the report – and possibly forwarded it to Marsalek.<sup>31</sup> Those involved deny this. Peterlik's wife, an employee of the Asia department in the Office for the Protection of the Constitution, was in turn one of the prosecution's witnesses whose statements led to the raid there.<sup>32</sup> Peterlik and Marsalek were both members of the Austrian-Russian Friendship Society, which also featured Gudenus and other FPÖ politicians. Gudenus met with Marsalek several times. Through an intermediary, a businessman with ties to and interest in Russia, Marsalek relayed information from sources within the intelligence community to Gudenus, who in turn shared it with other FPÖ politicians. This is documented in investigative files from the office prosecuting corruption.<sup>33</sup>

Political scientist Karin Kneissl, who was chosen as foreign minister by the FPÖ, was also associated with the Friendship Society. During her time in office, she attracted attention with her pro-Russian positions—for example, no Russian diplomat was expelled from the country after the poison attack in Salisbury. A few weeks later, Kneissl personally invited Putin to her wedding, where he appeared with an entourage of bodyguards and danced with the bride. The lady's traditional curtsy at the end of the dance became one of the most shared and commented on photos in Austria's recent history.<sup>34</sup> For her wedding, Putin gave Kneissl expensive jewellery, which she planned to use privately after her term.<sup>35</sup> According to chat messages from FPÖ politicians, Russian investors planned to enter business relations with Kneissl's husband.<sup>36</sup> After leaving the ministry, Kneissl first became a member of the Russian petroleum company Rosneft's supervisory board, then in June 2023 it became known that she would in the future head a state-related think tank in St. Petersburg.<sup>37</sup> Former Committee for State Security (KGB) agent Sergei Shirnov said in an interview that Kneissl would have been an ideal candidate for recruitment by Russian intelligence agencies.<sup>38</sup> Kneissl is now living in Russia.<sup>39</sup>

### ***The Ibiza Video***

Kneissl's term ended, just like that of all other FPÖ ministers, in May 2019, when a video recorded two years earlier appeared online. In it, Strache and Gudenus

can be seen negotiating crooked deals with a supposed Russian businesswoman in Ibiza in July 2017. They discussed party donations with her avoiding official reporting offices; urged her to invest in Austria's largest daily newspaper and change its reporting to suit the FPÖ; and offered the prospect of state contracts in return.<sup>40</sup> However, it was a sting operation: security consultant Julian Hessenthaler had stalked Gudenus on behalf of a lawyer to gather incriminating material on the FPÖ. To do so, he invented the figure of the fake oligarch businesswoman. After the recording in the summer of 2017, there were allegedly attempts to sell the video to various other parties and entrepreneurs, which did not work out. As a result, the parties involved reportedly contacted German journalists Frederik Obermayer and Bastian Obermair. In May 2019, research on the video then appeared in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* and *Der Spiegel*. They sealed the end of Strache's and Gudenus's political careers and brought down the government.<sup>41</sup> The incident clearly shows that the FPÖ attempted to profit from its relations with Russia during the Strache era, and vice versa. It demonstrated a willingness to receive financial support from the Russian sphere.<sup>42</sup> Party leader Strache also spoke in the video about having some friends in Moscow who would have a lot of money. Despite intense criminal investigations around the finances of the party and several political special committees, so far, no flow of money from Russia could be officially determined. However, the expensive wedding gift to the then foreign-minister Karin Kneissl, the willingness of Russian investors to do business with her then-husband, Kneissl's involvement with Rosneft, and now the think tank in St. Petersburg are indications of some form of monetary influence.

The many visits to Russian conferences or of Russian politicians have helped to present the FPÖ as an internationally active and recognised party. Logistical support was also provided by the fact that FPÖ politicians were regularly interviewed in Russian propaganda media close to the state, for example RT or Sputnik.<sup>43</sup> Conversely, Russia has clearly benefitted from FPÖ's activities. As an opposition party, the FPÖ in Vienna, for example, called for a crackdown on Chechen asylum seekers. This position was also taken during a working visit to Chechen dictator Ramzan Kadyrov.<sup>44</sup> Although there have always been tensions within the Chechen community in Austria, most of the diaspora consists of people who fled from Kadyrov. By agitating this community, the FPÖ has politically prepared the ground for enabling deportations of Chechens to Russia. Opposition figures in particular are threatened with torture and imprisonment after

deportation. The FPÖ was also useful to the Russian government in terms of foreign policy: the invitation to the wedding of the foreign minister shortly after the attack in Salisbury gave Putin the means to publicly highlight a division within the European Union. While other member countries expelled Russian diplomats, the Austrian foreign minister danced with the Russian president.

The events show clear dangers from Russian influence in Austria:

- Jan Marsalek and indirectly his alleged GRU contacts were offered a way to influence the BVT via the FPÖ and internal documents were possibly forwarded to him. British investigators allege that Marsalek has led Russian spy operations even after he fled Germany.<sup>45</sup>
- The actions of the Freedom Party Interior Minister Kickl severely damaged the Office for the Protection of the Constitution, making it highly unlikely that it could adequately perform its counterintelligence duties. This also led to the investigative journalist Christo Grozev, who has written extensively on Russian corruption for online outlet Bellingcat,<sup>46</sup> having to flee Vienna because he no longer felt safe from Russian agents there.<sup>47</sup>
- The Chechen community in Austria became the target of political attacks by the FPÖ. Here, too, the lack of operational capability on the part of the Office for the Protection of the Constitution was noticeable.

### ***The FPÖ Today***

Due to several factors, the FPÖ's pro-Russian stance has declined in recent years or has not been demonstrated equally openly. After the Ibiza video, party leader Strache and his confidant Gudenus had to leave politics: both are now no longer party members. Contents of the video became the subject of a parliamentary investigative committee – this would have generated increased attention and negative publicity for the FPÖ for any recent contacts in the Russian-speaking world. Meanwhile, the party is led by Herbert Kickl, who served as interior minister under the former government and previously as his party's secretary general for years. Kickl had repeatedly made known his scepticism about Strache's Russian connections and is said to have been unhappy about the conclusion of the association agreement with UR.<sup>48</sup> After the start of the full-scale Russian aggression against Ukraine, however, a pro-Russian stance has once again shone through. This is shown by an analysis of more than 130 press releases published by the FPÖ's parliamentary club in the first year of the Ukraine war.

For this chapter, an examination of whether these messages expressed criticism of arms deliveries, NATO or the US, Ukraine, Russia, or the sanctions or featured Austrian “neutrality,” was performed. Overall, criticism of the sanctions was voiced in almost 60 percent of all press releases. Russian actions were condemned, but Ukraine or its leaders were criticised almost as often. This is due to the Freedom Party’s interpretation of neutrality, which is considered a kind of national treasure in Austria. In a June 2022 poll, more than 70 percent of respondents favoured maintaining military neutrality.<sup>49</sup> Yet, it is disputed how neutral Austria actually is and how the country should live out this principle. In principle, neutrality was enshrined in law in 1955 and in a declaration of intent with the Soviet Union before the latter, and the three other occupying powers left Austria. Ever since Austria joined the EU in 1995, it has been unclear how neutral the country has been, given its commitment to the Common Foreign and Security Policy. In the early 2000s, then-conservative Chancellor Wolfgang Schüssel spoke of neutrality as being like Mozartkugeln and Lipizzaner horses—in short, a kind of folklore.<sup>50</sup> However, there have been no serious debates about Austria joining NATO since then.

The FPÖ ties indirectly with this myth of neutrality. It interprets the neutral status not only militarily, but also diplomatically. This is a big difference to the current chancellor Karl Nehammer (ÖVP), who visited Putin after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine and declared that Austria is not “morally neutral”, meaning that Austria will not send military aid to Ukraine, but does condemn the Russian attack.<sup>51</sup> Although Russia’s war of aggression is condemned by the FPÖ as well, according to the party, Russia should bear no consequences for its aggressive behaviour, i.e. neither via sanctions nor the expulsion of Russian diplomats. In FPÖ’s vision, Austria positions itself as a place for negotiations between Russia and Ukraine which are repeatedly called for in press releases – regardless of the fact that Ukraine would have to accept massive land losses for peace.

In the first days of the Russian attack on Ukraine, FPÖ’s broadcasts clearly condemned the invasion. But even at this early stage, the party warned against sanctions. Moreover, it immediately blamed the USA for the war.<sup>52</sup> Thus, already on 22 February 2022, MEP Harald Vilimsky spoke of US President Joe Biden being a “Cold Warrior” who “does not shy away from further escalation in Eastern Europe (...) Both Biden and Putin endanger European security and peace in Europe with their actions.”<sup>53</sup> Foreign policy spokesman Axel Kassegger let it be

known that “there is never only one side to blame.” NATO “is arming just as much as the Russian side”.<sup>54</sup> In the following months, the FPÖ vehemently agitated against a possible EU accession status for Ukraine, as well as for EU funds for reconstruction or military support for the attacked country. The sanctions were linked to inflation and inflationary pressures and were referred to as “knee-jerk sanctions.” Following Hungary’s example, the FPÖ then agitated for a referendum on the continuation of the sanctions.<sup>55</sup>

## **Case Study 2: The Suvorov Institute**

FPÖ, the party clearly leading in the polls for most of 2023 with 32 percent and therefore nearly 10 percent more support than the Social Democrats,<sup>56</sup> plays a major role in Austrian politics. The second case study is focused on the fringes of the political sphere: the Suvorov Institute. The Suvorov Institute for the Promotion of Austrian-Russian Dialogue was officially registered in September 2014, half a year after the illegal annexation of Crimea.<sup>57</sup> From the very beginning, the association’s slant was clear: it organised demonstrations for the Donbas and invited predominantly far-right guests to geopolitical discussions in which strong pro-Russian opinions were expressed, as one can see by the manifold postings and summaries of events on its Facebook page.<sup>58</sup> There are also clear connections to other groups and individuals linked with violence. To the Identitarian movement in Austria, which had at least 32 members with a record of violence; to people involved with the Artgemeinschaft Germanic Faith Community, whose members had ties to right-wing terrorism; or to the Russian Night Wolves, who were promoting violence against Maidan activists.<sup>59</sup> The Suvorov Institute caused a stir above all because of one man: Alexander Markovics. Markovics, born in Vienna in 1991, is said to have been politically active already during his school days. His first points of contact were with fraternities and with the FPÖ, for which he ran as a candidate at the district level in 2010. Markovics achieved a certain notoriety starting in 2012 when he founded the far-right Identitarian movement in Austria. This is an offshoot of the French Generation Identitaire, thus an organisation of the so-called New Right, which packages its extreme content in a modern way.<sup>60</sup>

The ideological core of the Identitarians is the conspiracy theory of the Great Replacement: the autochthonous population is “exchanged” by the ruling elites for immigrants who, out of gratitude, henceforth support their claim to power.<sup>61</sup>

Subsequently, the programme of the Identitarians turns against LGBTQ+ and the emancipation of women. Thus, there are strong ideological points of contact with Russia. Markovics, however, seemed to have developed a particular soft spot for Russia even within the Identitarians. Early on, the activist became involved with the propagandist and philosopher Alexander Dugin, reviewing his books and interviewing him for far-right media like *Deutsche Stimme*, a publication of the extreme German political party NPD.<sup>62</sup> At the Identitarians, Markovics was the leader of the theory group within the movement. In 2017, however, a conflict arose within the far-right grouping which was now publicly represented primarily by Martin Sellner. In an interview with a neo-Nazi German magazine, Markovics later stated that the Identitarians had “itself become part of what it claimed to fight”; there was a “sectarian climate” and “intrigue within the leadership” there. Markovics quickly found a new political home: the Suvorov Institute.<sup>63</sup>

### ***A Quick Overview: The Identitarian Movement***

The Identitarians gained popularity, in particular at the height of the refugee movement in 2015. At its peak, the far-right group, which was monitored by the Office for the Protection of the Constitution in Austria, had several thousand followers, meaning people who support their ideas and occasionally show up to events, and around 300 members.<sup>64</sup> There were several criminal proceedings against the Identitarians. Markovics, Sellner, and other leading cadres were charged with forming a criminal organisation and incitement in Graz in 2018 but were acquitted. The indictment alleged that Sellner, Markovics, and others formed a group – the Identitarians – to repeatedly commit crimes (incitement), hence the designation of criminal organisation.<sup>65</sup> In 2019, the movement came under renewed pressure following the terrorist attack in New Zealand. The right-wing terrorist Brenton Tarrant, before he murdered more than 50 people in two mosques, corresponded with Identitarian leader Sellner and donated €1,500 to him.<sup>66</sup> In the months before his terrorist attack, Tarrant had made a trip around the world, including a visit to Austria. Authorities suspected a meeting with Sellner, but they could never prove it.<sup>67</sup> The investigation was eventually dropped. After that, the Identitarians did not regain their former clout; in the end, the movement split into several groups.<sup>68</sup>

In the aftermath of the Identitarians’ dissolution, Markovics began to appear as a Suvorov Institute employee in 2017, first as press spokesman, then as secretary general.<sup>69</sup> He had already participated in events there before. The chairman of the

association before Markovics was Igor Belov, a Russian journalist who, among other things, worked for the state-affiliated *Sputnik* as a Vienna correspondent. Research by the daily newspaper *Der Standard* and this author led Belov to resign from this position, probably because *Sputnik* did not want to be officially associated with the Suvorov Institute.<sup>70</sup> The founder of the Suvorov Institute is believed to be Patrick Poppel, a pro-Russian activist who had previously been active in extremist Christian movements.<sup>71</sup> Poppel is currently secretary general of the Austrian-Abkhazian Society, as well as South Ossetia's representative in Austria. He is thus involved with two republics in the territory of Georgia that are under the protection of Russia and are not officially recognised.<sup>72</sup> In a 2018 interview with the *Wiener Zeitung*, Poppel evoked his great love for Russian culture. He sees the country as the “successor to the Byzantine Empire,” which was “conceived as Christian from the beginning.”<sup>73</sup>

From the beginning, the Suvorov Institute cooperated closely with official Russian organisations as well as related associations. The Austrian-Russian Friendship Society, for example, promoted Russian language learning at the Suvorov Institute, which in turn was shared by the Russian Cultural Institute in Vienna.<sup>74</sup> Poppel welcomed to Vienna the motorcycle group Night Wolves, a Russian organisation that is seen as homophobic and ultranationalist, and whose current leader has been sanctioned by the EU. The Night Wolves have existed for more than three decades. Every year they celebrate the Soviet victory in World War II by touring its former frontlines.<sup>75</sup> Photos show Poppel with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov<sup>76</sup> or with Sergey Valeryevich Aksyonov, the president of the unrecognised Republic of Crimea.<sup>77</sup> There are also close contacts with Gunnar Lindemann, a member of the Berlin State Parliament for the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD). Together they founded the German initiative Königsberger Freunde, which aims for a “better dialogue with Russia”.<sup>78</sup> Poppel also announced that he would cooperate with Zoran Stanojevic and his organisation Slavia.<sup>79</sup> Stanojevic was described by the German newspaper *Die Welt* as a “Russian influence agent”, his organisation Slavia, allegedly posing as a charity, but according to *Die Welt*, it has not left any noticeable track record of charitable work. Stanojevic is said to have conspicuously sought proximity to top Social Democratic politicians.<sup>80</sup>

While Poppel has visibly focused on his role with the Austro-Abkhazian Society, Markovics's influence increased via the Suvorov Institute, which thus networked



even more strongly in far-right circles. In an interview with Gegenstrom, a website of the publishing house *Metapol*, Markovics explained his point of view on the Russo-Ukrainian war. For him, Ukraine has been a “US outpost on the Eurasian World Island” since the Maidan revolution in 2014. The people in Donbas had tried to “break out of Western hegemony,” and the Lugansk and Donetsk People’s Republics had tried for years, together with Russia, “in vain to find a peaceful solution to the conflict (...) here.”<sup>81</sup> After the 2022 Russian invasion, the Suvorov Institute euphorically posted on Facebook in German: “Today Russia’s President Putin recognised the Donbas as independent in its old borders—for the warmongers of NATO and the West this means an end to their evil game! Long live the Donbass [sic]! Long live the Donetsk and Lugansk People’s Republics! Long live Russia! Long live Eurasia! Long live the multipolar world!”<sup>82</sup>

Markovics connects the identitarian theory of great exchange with Dugin’s so-called Eurasianism.<sup>83</sup> Without a multipolar world, that is, with centres of power like Moscow next to Washington, there will be only the American unified man, Markovics argues.<sup>84</sup> Dugin himself was interviewed by Markovics for the neo-Nazi magazine *Deutsche Stimme*, which is published in the environment of the German political party NPD (now Die Heimat), an extremist right-wing organisation that the German constitutional court described as unconstitutional but too yielding and too insignificant a political influence to constitute a threat to German democracy. Consequently, the German Federal Constitutional Court found no grounds to ban the part.<sup>85</sup> Markovics also attended the Congress on Fourth Political Theory organised by Dugin in August 2020. The conference “united people from all over the world in the intellectual struggle for their own identity against the liberal system,” as Markovics wrote. One participant, for example, was Maram Susli, known as the Syrian Girl: a Syrian-Australian influencer who allegedly advocated for Bashar al-Assad’s regime and participated in Russian disinformation campaigns. Also in the mix, among others, were far-right Georgian businessman and politician Levan Vasadze, and US radio host Tim Kirby.<sup>86</sup> Similar lineups of personnel could be observed at the Global Conference on Multipolarity, which Markovics attended in April 2023. More than 100 experts from over 60 countries would participate in the conference online, the Russian Foreign Ministry announced.<sup>87</sup> Lavrov welcomed the participants, among which was oligarch Konstantin Malofeev, who is sanctioned by the US, the EU, and the UK. According to the European Council, Malofeev is “closely linked to

separatists in eastern Ukraine and Crimea” and is a former boss of Alexander Borodai,<sup>88</sup> so-called prime minister.<sup>89</sup> Intercepted phone calls and emails showed how closely Malofeev colluded with the Kremlin in his activities related to Gudenus.<sup>90</sup>

Markovics, and thus the Suvorov Institute, continued to be intensively associated with proponents of the New Right in German-speaking countries. For example, with the French right-wing extremist Pierre Krebs;<sup>91</sup> with hard neo-Nazism, for example, in the form of the NPD, although the boundaries between the New Right and neo-Nazism are fluid.<sup>92</sup> However, the Suvorov Institute also provided direct support for the separatists in the Donbas: the former South Tyrol terrorist Herbert Fritz, for example, was active there as a language teacher “and ambassador of patriotic Europe”.<sup>93</sup> Fritz had been arrested in the 1960s for his alleged participation in a terrorist attack in South Tyrol, but was acquitted. He was part of a movement that violently fought to recognise South Tyrol as an Austrian territory, as it was part of Austria until 1918.<sup>94</sup> In the following years, Fritz founded several right-wing publications and organisations.<sup>95</sup> Fritz also travelled to Afghanistan after the US troops pulled out. In the right-wing magazine *Info Direkt*, which is close to the Identitarian movement, he wrote that Afghanistan is now “safe again”.<sup>96</sup> Only a few weeks afterwards, Fritz was arrested by the Taliban on espionage charges. In October 2023, several high-ranking politicians of the FPÖ, like former MEP Andreas Mölze, travelled to Kabul to secure Fritz’s release. They were not successful.<sup>97</sup> These connections demonstrate more than ideological and likely logistical support from Russia for the Suvorov Institute and its proponents. They are invited to conferences and trips and in return they spread Russian propaganda in Austria. The question of financial support is unresolved. According to several officials at the Directorate General for Public Security (DSN) – the new agency that is a direct successor to the BVT – the Suvorov Institute is monitored and investigated.<sup>98</sup>

There are equally clear links to organisations or individuals in whose environment violence happens. Pierre Krebs, with whom Markovics has made several appearances, is a prominent member of the Artgemeinschaft Germanic Faith Community.<sup>99</sup> In September 2023, German interior minister Nancy Faeser banned the 70-year-old organisation, which promotes a neo-pagan way of living—hence the name. According to German authorities, the Artgemeinschaft’s ideology is a

“continuation of the National Socialist’s ideology”. The organisation had been led by German neo-Nazi Jürgen Rieger from 1989 until his death in 2009. Rieger was also deputy party leader of the NPD and he had been sentenced for violent crimes several times.<sup>100</sup> The neo-Nazi-terrorist Stephan Ernst was also a member of the Artgemeinschaft; he was allegedly removed from its ranks because he did not pay his membership fees. In 2019, Ernst murdered the conservative politician Walter Lübcke, who had argued for the intake of refugees. Ernst was sentenced to life in prison.<sup>101</sup> The Artgemeinschaft is also connected to people close to the neo-Nazi-terror organisation NSU (Untergrund), which is responsible for the murder of nine migrants and one policewoman. A former NPD politician, who was a member of the Artgemeinschaft, has been sentenced for helping the NSU. After his release from prison, he lived with the then-head of the Artgemeinschaft.<sup>102</sup>

There have also been repeated violent incidents in the environment of the Identitarians themselves, for example, against anti-fascist counter-demonstrators.<sup>103</sup> According to investigation files that had been leaked, 32 members of the Identitarian movement had been sentenced because of manifold violent crimes like rape, assault, robbery, or blackmailing.<sup>104</sup> Identitarian groups have also trained in self-defence in public spaces and produced stickers bearing the slogan: Street fight experience since 1529 (referring to the siege of Vienna by the Ottoman Empire).<sup>105</sup>

### **Threat Analysis**

The two case studies show how Russia is influencing Austrian politics in manifold ways. With the FPÖ, the Kremlin has a powerful ally who enacted pro-Russian policies in government and who might come out of the 2024 national elections as the strongest party. The FPÖ’s policy undermines EU solidarity with Ukraine. The party also presents a multitude of complex problems in a populist manner as seemingly easily solvable. A future FPÖ participation in government, possibly even a chancellorship, would significantly complicate the EU sanctions regime. Likewise, financial support for Ukraine would no longer be possible.

It should be noted that some of the same personnel from the era of party leader Strache are still active, such as foreign policy spokesman Axel Kassegger, who attended events in Crimea before the war; or MEP Harald Vilimsky, who was

present at the signing of the so-called “friendship agreement” in Moscow. The FPÖ is also working more closely with extremist groups like the Identitarian movement and its offspring. Current party leader Herbert Kickl called the group a “right-wing NGO” and sees no need for distancing. This could also produce a closer relationship with the Suvorov Institute. The so-called rescue mission of high-ranking FPÖ politicians in Afghanistan for Suvorov-aligned extremist Herbert Fritz is an indication of this. Therefore, the FPÖ could, via proxies, also build contacts to violent groups and the Institute’s activities could influence foreign policy decisions.

### **Policies: Current Measures**

In its fight against Russian influence, Austria is guided primarily by the requirements of the EU. This applies, for example, to the ban on broadcasting Russian state broadcasters such as RT, the code of conduct to combat disinformation, and the list of sanctioned individuals and organisations. The tracing of assets of sanctioned persons is mainly carried out by the Directorate of State Protection and Intelligence (DSN). Counter-intelligence and extremism divisions are also located there. The Directorate is still struggling with the aftermath of the raid at its predecessor, the BVT. According to the interior minister and the DSN director, foreign partners slowly began to trust Austria’s security services again.<sup>106</sup>

In the wake of the Ibiza affair, numerous legislative initiatives have been implemented. For example, parties are now only allowed to accept individual donations amounting to a maximum of €7,500. In total, donations may not exceed €750,000 per calendar year. The Court of Audit, the state audit institute for party financing, among other things, was also given more rights of insight into the conduct of political parties.<sup>107</sup>

In addition to this, the criminal law on corruption was tightened. In the future, individuals or organisations will not be allowed to buy a seat in parliament by placing the person of their choice on a good list position following a party donation. Also, hypothetical corrupt deals about actions in positions that a person will attain will not be allowed in the future.<sup>108</sup>

## Policy Proposals

Experts and opposition politicians have repeatedly called for the establishment of a parliamentary investigative committee to investigate the manifold connections between authorities, government parties, and other institutions to Russia. This would indeed make sense since it would be possible to question officials and active or former members of the government in public, and to demand files.<sup>109</sup>

Very little is publicly known about the connections between government bodies and former Wirecard manager and alleged Russian spy Jan Marsalek. An in-depth public investigation of his contact's actions in different agencies and ministries – like the foreign ministry's former general secretary Johannes Peterlik or the BVT's Egisto Ott – is needed. However, the chances of such a committee are slim, as its findings could potentially harm all three major parties, i.e. the social democratic SPÖ, the conservative ÖVP, and FPÖ.

It would be beneficial to provide the Office for the Protection of the Constitution (DSN) with significantly more expertise. The latter could no longer share its analyses annually in the Constitutional Protection Report, or in regular publications, in order to make society more resilient against Russian influence. A stronger cooperation with independent think tanks and other entities is needed as well. In *Mythos Gerasimov Doctrine*, the authors Christoph Bilban and Hanna Grininger argue that the famous article of the Russian general Valery Gerasimov – seen as the key document about the Russian hybrid warfare, e.g. through disinformation and espionage – has hardly been analysed in Austria.<sup>110</sup>

Complicating the situation, the accusations of Russian espionage within the country's own ranks are still causing unrest at the intelligence agency. Stephanie Krisper, a member of parliament for the liberal Neos-party, has repeatedly criticised the intelligence agency, which has led to a lack of expertise and a slow recruitment process.<sup>111</sup> The current figures are unknown, but personnel files from 2017 and 2018 indicate that only a handful of officials at the BVT were tasked with tracking Russian influence and intelligence operations.

The DSN itself has argued for a new law targeting fake news and disinformation campaigns. An expert from the DSN, who was not named, argued in an interview with the magazine *Profil* that the spreading of fake news should become illegal. The interior minister and DSN director denied such plans but explained that without criminal liability, the intelligence agency's legal capabilities to

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investigate fake news are limited.<sup>112</sup> Therefore, the DSN should be provided with the means to identify actors in the disinformation sphere and investigate links to foreign entities while still upholding freedom of speech. Due to the war in Gaza, the DSN is working with the Department of Education on a new methodology to prevent extremism at schools.<sup>113</sup> Similar initiatives should be introduced in regard to Russian disinformation campaigns.

Due to its widely reported precarious resource situation, the Office for the Protection of the Constitution is only in a limited position to actively search for Russian assets in Austria. The Greens, who currently provide the Minister of Justice, have therefore proposed an anti-money-laundering authority.<sup>114</sup> Specialising in this area in a separate, multidisciplinary organisation would certainly make sense and lead to more fruitful results. As long as Russian investments and assets in Austria remain high, there will be political influence from the Kremlin and associated oligarchs.

<sup>1</sup> Heute, “Putin nennt WKO-Präsident Leitl Diktator”, [Putin calls head of chamber of commerce a dictator], June 2014. <https://www.heute.at/s/putin-nennt-wko-prasident-leitl-diktator-10481859>.

<sup>2</sup> Stefan Melichar. “OMV: Im Vorjahr Gas für 6.8 Milliarden Euro von Gazprom” [OMV: Gas for 6.8 billion euros from Gazprom in the previous year], *Profil.at*, June 2023. <https://www.profil.at/wirtschaft/omv-im-vorjahr-gas-fuer-68-milliarden-euro-von-gazprom/402470402>.

<sup>3</sup> Jan Michael Marchart. “Ex-Kanzler Kern zieht sich als Aufsichtsrat von russischer Staatsbahn zurück” [Former Chancellor Kern resigns from Russian state railroad supervisory board], *DerStandard.at*, February 2022. <https://www.derstandard.at/story/2000133619501/ex-kanzler-kern-zieht-sich-als-aufsichtsrat-bei-russischer-staatsbahn>.

<sup>4</sup> DerStandard, “Raiffeisen Bank International verschiebt Russland-Ausstieg, [Raiffeisen Bank International postpones exit from Russia], *derStandard.at*, August 2023. <https://www.derstandard.at/story/3000000181230/raiffeisen-bank-international-schrieb-im-ersten-halbjahr-weniger-gewinn>.

<sup>5</sup> Renate Graber, Fabian Schmid, Oliver Das Gupta. “Türkise Löcher in schwarzen Kassen: Wie es um die Finanzen der ÖVP steht, [Turquoise holes in black coffers: The state of the ÖVP’s finances]”, *derStandard.at*, June 2022. <https://www.derstandard.at/story/2000136655933/tuerkise-loecher-in-schwarzen-kassen-wie-es-um-die-finanzen>.

<sup>6</sup> Karl Oberascher, Evelyn Peternel und Peter Temel. “Heftige Kritik an Moskau-Reise der FPÖ: “Außenpolitische Geisterfahrt, [Fierce criticism of FPÖ’s trip to Moscow: “Foreign policy ghost ride”]”, *Kurier*, 19 December 2016. <https://kurier.at/politik/inland/oevp-moskau-reise-der-fpoe-ist-aussenpolitische-geisterfahrt/236.608.002>.

<sup>7</sup> APA/sif, “FPÖ will Russland-Vertrag nicht offenlegen, [FPÖ does not want to disclose Russia treaty]”, *Kurier.at*, February 2023. <https://kurier.at/politik/inland/fpoe-will-russland-vertrag-nicht-offenlegen/402323640>.

<sup>8</sup> Gerald Heidegger, “VDU, FPÖ und Mythen, [VDU, FPÖ and myths]”, *Orf.at*, October 2019. <https://science.orf.at/v2/stories/2993400/>.

<sup>9</sup> Holger Kulick. Irak-Reise, “Entsetzen über Haiders Besuch bei Saddam, [Trip to Iraq: Horror over Haider's visit to Saddam]”, *Der Spiegel*, February 2022. <https://www.spiegel.de/politik/ausland/irak-reise-entsetzen-ueber-haiders-besuch-bei-saddam-a-182066.html>.

<sup>10</sup> News.at, “Gudenus: Straches Mann in Moskau”, [Gudenus: Strache’s man in Moscow], *News*, September 2014. <https://www.news.at/a/gudenus-straches-mann-in-moskau>.

<sup>11</sup> Parlament, “175 Jahre bürgerliche Revolution, [175 years of the civil revolution]”, *parlament.gv.at*, March 2023. [https://www.parlament.gv.at/aktuelles/pk/jahr\\_2023/pk0352](https://www.parlament.gv.at/aktuelles/pk/jahr_2023/pk0352).

<sup>12</sup> Andreas Peham. “Durch Einheit zur Reinheit, [Through unity to purity]”, *Dokumentationsarchiv des Österreichischen Widerstands (DÖW)*, <https://www.doew.at/erkennen/rechtsextremismus/rechtsextremismus-in-oesterreich/durch-reinheit-zur-einheit>.

<sup>13</sup> Christiane Langrock-Kögel, “Burschenschaften: Ein Verhältnis fürs Leben, [Fraternities: A relationship for life], *SZ.de*, May 2010. <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/karriere/burschenschaften-ein-verhaeltnis-fuers-leben-1.488904>.

<sup>14</sup> Viennese state assembly, the protocol of the 8<sup>th</sup> session on 26 January 2007, p. 34. <https://www.wien.gv.at/mdb/ltg/2007/ltg-008-w-2007-01-26-034.htm>.

<sup>15</sup> Herwig G. Höller, “Moskaus blaue Freunde”, [Moscow’s blue friends], *Zeit.de*, September 2014. <https://www.zeit.de/2014/40/russland-oesterreich-kreml-fpoe>.

<sup>16</sup> APA, “Gudenus und Stadler als “Wahlbeobachter” auf Krim, [Gudenus and Stadler as “election observers” in Crimea]”, *Salzburger Nachrichten*, March 2014. <https://www.sn.at/politik/weltpolitik/gudenus-und-stadler-als-wahlbeobachter-auf-krim-3774655>.

<sup>17</sup> Heute.at, “Kickl wird Innen-, Kunasek Heeresminister” [Kickl becomes Minister of the Interior, Kunasek Minister of the Armed Forces], *Heute.at*

<sup>18</sup> Fabian Schmid, Maria Sterkl, Renate Graber, “Die BVT-Affäre auf einen Blick”, [The BVT Affairs at a glance], *derStandard.at*, October 2018.

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<sup>19</sup> Fabian Schmid, “Der aktuelle Stand der BVT-Affäre, so einfach wie möglich erklärt”, [The current status of the BVT affair, explained as simply as possible], *DerStandard.at*, May 2018. <https://www.derstandard.at/story/2000076202205/der-aktuelle-stand-der-bvt-ffaere-so-einfach-wie-moeglich>.

<sup>20</sup> Suoad Mekhennet, Griff Witte, “Austria’s far-right ordered a raid on its own intelligence service. Now allies are freezing the country out”, *Washington Post*, August 2018.

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<sup>21</sup> Fabian Schmid, “Russland-Aktivitäten der FPÖ waren auch im BVT ein Thema” [The FPÖ’s activities in Russia were also an issue in the BVT], *DerStandard.at*, August 2018.

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<sup>22</sup> Sam Jones, “Austrian spymaster warns of Russian ties as far right claws back support”, *Financial Times*, September 2023. <https://www.ft.com/content/c1fa3a17-34f7-4972-b89d-06ecef9895d4>.

<sup>23</sup> Anthony Faiola, Souad Mekhennet. “After the invasion of Ukraine, a reckoning on Russian influence in Austria”, *Washington Post*, July 2022.

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<sup>25</sup> Ben Taub. “How the Biggest Fraud in German History Unravelling”, *New Yorker*, February 2023. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2023/03/06/how-the-biggest-fraud-in-german-history-unravelling>.

<sup>26</sup> Fabian Schmid, “Die andere Seite der BMI-Affäre: Verfassungsschützer außer Kontrolle” [The other side of the BMI affair: agents out of control] *DerStandard*, February 2022.

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<sup>27</sup> Jörg Schmitt, Florian Flade. “Der Spion der Spione, [The spy of spies]”, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, May 2022. <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/oesterreich-spionage-wirecard-geheimdienste-1.5592760?reduced=true>.

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<sup>29</sup> Paul Murphy, Dan McCrum, Helen Warrell. “Wirecard executive Jan Marsalek touted Russian nerve gas documents”, *Financial Times*, July 2020.

<https://www.ft.com/content/941a9a2e-88df-4a66-9b3c-670bb7eb4d87>.

<sup>30</sup> After the Novichok-attack on former Russian spy Sergey Skripal in Salisbury, the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons provided a report of the events. In this report, the chemical formula for the Novichok-variant used in the Salisbury attacks was analysed. All of OPCW’s 193 member states received this report, in Austria it was sent to the foreign ministry and two other ministries. Investigators allege that Peterlik, then general-secretary there, requested the document and then leaked it.

<sup>31</sup> Anna Thalhammer, “Wie die Nervengiftformel Österreich verließ”, [How the nerve agent formula left Austria], *Die Presse*, October 2021. <https://www.diepresse.com/6053772/wie-die-nervengiftformel-oesterreich-verliess>.

<sup>32</sup> Anna Thalhammer, “BVT-Affäre: Geheime Zeugen nun bekannt, [BVT affair: secret witnesses now known]”, *Die Presse*, May 2018. <https://www.diepresse.com/5413021/bvt-affaere-geheime-zeugen-nun-bekannt>.

<sup>33</sup> Fabian Schmid and Renate Graber. “Wirecard-Finanzchef flüsterte FPÖ offenbar geheime BVT-Infos, [Wirecard CFO apparently whispered secret BVT information to FPÖ]”, *derStandard.at*, July 2020. <https://www.derstandard.at/story/2000118611265/untergetauchter-wirecard-manager-soll-fpoe-informant-gewesen-sein>.

<sup>34</sup> APA, “Putin bei Kneissl-Hochzeit: Hunderte österreichische Beamte im Einsatz, [Putin at Kneissl wedding: hundreds of Austrian officials on duty]”, *DerStandard.at*, August 2018. <https://www.derstandard.at/story/2000085444795/massive-kritik-putin-besuch-bei-kneissl-hochzeitaus-der-ukraine>.

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<sup>36</sup> Non-public files from the investigator’s office, seen by the author.

<sup>37</sup> APA, “Universität in St. Petersburg richtet Thinktank für Karin Kneissl ein”, [University in St. Petersburg sets up think tank for Karin Kneissl], *Die Presse*, June 2023. <https://www.diepresse.com/13431170/universitaet-in-st-petersburg-richtet-thinktank-fuer-karin-kneissl-ein>.

<sup>38</sup> Stefan Brändle, “Ex-Spion Schirnow: KGB hatte Karin Kneissl früh im Visier”, [Former spy Shirnov: KGB had Karin Kneissl in its sights early on], *DerStandard*, June 2022. <https://www.derstandard.at/story/2000136226988/ex-spion-schirnow-kgb-hatte-karin-kneissl-frueh-im-visier>.

<sup>39</sup> Stephan Löwenstein. “Ponys statt Panzer”, [Ponies instead of tanks]”, *FAZ*, September 2023. <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/gesellschaft/karin-kneissl-russland-half-beim-umzug-von-oesterreichs-ex-aussenministerin-19171571.html>.

<sup>40</sup> Wolfgang Pöschl. “Verfahrensrichter: Bericht des Ibiza-U-Ausschusses, [Judge’s Report of the Ibiza- Committee]”, *Parlament*, 2021, [https://www.parlament.gv.at/dokument/XXVII/I/1040/imfname\\_997220.pdf](https://www.parlament.gv.at/dokument/XXVII/I/1040/imfname_997220.pdf).

<sup>41</sup> Max Miller. “Die Ibiza-Timeline” [The Ibiza timeline], *Profil*, October 2023. <https://www.profil.at/oesterreich/die-ibiza-timeline-was-seit-straches-video-und-dem-ruecktritt-von-sebastian-kurz-geschah/402455439>.

<sup>42</sup> Leila Al-Serori, Oliver Das Gupta, Peter Münch, Frederik Obermaier, and Bastian Obermayer. “Wie die FPÖ Russland lieben lernte, [How the FPÖ learned to love Russia]”,

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<sup>43</sup> Konstantin Auer. “FPÖ, Raiffeisen und Russland: “Distanzieren, wenn man nicht völlig verrückt ist”, [FPÖ, Raiffeisen and Russia: ‘Keep your distance if you’re not completely crazy’], *Puls24*, March 2023. <https://www.puls24.at/news/politik/fpoe-raiffeisen-und-russland-distanzieren-wenn-man-nicht-voellig-verrueckt-ist/292095>.

<sup>44</sup> *Kurier*, “FPÖ macht Kadyrow den Hof, [FPÖ courts Kadyrov]” *Kurier.at*, February 2012. <https://kurier.at/politik/fpoe-macht-kadyrow-den-hof/767.442>.

<sup>45</sup> Fidelus Schmid and Roman Lehberger. “Flüchtiger Ex-Wirecard-Vorstand soll in russische Spionageoperation verwickelt sein” [Fugitive ex-Wirecard board member allegedly involved in Russian espionage operation], *Spiegel*, September 2023.

<sup>46</sup> Grozev has, among many other things, written about the alleged location of former Wirecard manager Jan Marsalek in Moscow and identified the perpetrators of the Novichok attack in Salisbury. Until February 2023 he was the lead investigator for Bellingcat, he has also written for other outlets such as German Der Spiegel. <https://www.bellingcat.com/author/christo-grozev/>.

<sup>47</sup> Martin Staudinger. “Der Mann, der Putins Killer jagt,” [The man who hunts Putin’s killers], *Falter*, January 2023. <https://www.falter.at/zeitung/20230131/der-mann-der-putins-killer-jagt>.

<sup>48</sup> Petja Mladenova. “Kaum Distanz: Freiheitliche in der Russland-Ecke,” [Hardly any distance: FPÖ-officials in the Russia corner] *Krone*, February 2023. <https://www.krone.at/2927097>.

<sup>49</sup> Conrad Seidl. “Österreichs Bevölkerung setzt weiter auf Neutralität,” [Austria’s population continues to back neutrality], *DerStandard*, February 2022.

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<sup>50</sup> APA, “Lipizzaner, Mozartkugeln und Neutralität sind passé,” [Lipizzaner horses, Mozartkugeln and neutrality are passé], *DerStandard*, October 2001. <https://www.derstandard.at/story/757663/lipizzaner-mozartkugeln-und-neutralitaet-sind-passe>.

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<sup>53</sup> FPÖ-Vilimsky zu Ukraine-Konflikt, “Frieden in Europa muss gewahrt werden!” [FPÖ-Vilimsky on Ukraine conflict: ‘Peace in Europe must be preserved!’], *FPÖ Klub*, February 2022. [https://www.ots.at/presseaussendung/OTS\\_20220222\\_OTS0108/fpoe-vilimsky-zu-ukraine-konflikt-frieden-in-europa-muss-gewahrt-werden](https://www.ots.at/presseaussendung/OTS_20220222_OTS0108/fpoe-vilimsky-zu-ukraine-konflikt-frieden-in-europa-muss-gewahrt-werden).

<sup>54</sup> FPÖ-Kassegger zu Ukraine Konflikt, “Österreich muss auf der Basis von Äquidistanz vermitteln!” [FPÖ-Kassegger on Ukraine conflict: “Austria must mediate on the basis of equidistance”], *FPÖ Klub*, February 2022. [https://www.ots.at/presseaussendung/OTS\\_20220224\\_OTS0129/fpoe-kassegger-zu-ukraine-konflikt-oesterreich-muss-auf-der-basis-von-aequidistanz-vermitteln](https://www.ots.at/presseaussendung/OTS_20220224_OTS0129/fpoe-kassegger-zu-ukraine-konflikt-oesterreich-muss-auf-der-basis-von-aequidistanz-vermitteln).

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<sup>57</sup> Official association registry.

<sup>58</sup> Suworow Institute, *Facebook*, August 2023.

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<sup>62</sup> Alexander Markovics. *Facebook*, January 2021.

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### 3

## Germany: The Far-Right Plot and Russian Malign Inspiration

Anton Shekhovtsov

Rather than have our women and children overrun by the Russians [...],  
it would be better to post ourselves as traffic policemen,  
spreading our arms so that the Russians  
can find their way through Germany as quickly as possible.<sup>1</sup>

*Otto Ernst Remer, a former Wehrmacht officer,  
co-founder of the Socialist Reich Party (1949–1952) in West Germany*

### Case Study 1: Patriotic Union

The anti-terrorist operation carried out by Germany’s Federal Criminal Police Office and other federal and regional agencies in the first half of December 2022 became the largest operation of this kind against what German prosecutors described as the “most brazen” plot in the country’s post-war history.<sup>2</sup> Between 3,000 and 5,000 security forces and police officers arrested 23 presumed co-conspirators in a massive raid across the country, and two more alleged plotters were arrested in Austria and Italy.<sup>3</sup> During their raid, officers also seized legally and illegally owned firearms, stun guns, thousands of rounds of ammunition, night vision devices, bullet vests, and combat helmets in the homes of the arrested and other related suspects.<sup>4</sup> German police believed that, under the leadership of the German far-right activist Heinrich XIII Prinz Reuß, the group of plotters who referred to themselves as the Patriotic Union planned to overthrow the German government, dismantle the country’s constitutional order, and establish a new form of a German state.<sup>5</sup>



To this end, the conspirators – who were also named the Reuß Group in the German media – “created organisational, hierarchical, and administrative structures with a ‘council’ as the central body and a ‘military arm’”.<sup>6</sup> The plan was to have sixteen recruits with military, police, and security services background storm the Reichstag building during a plenary session of the Bundestag (German Parliament), arrest all the present members of the federal government, including Chancellor Olaf Scholz, tie them up, and show them to the German public on TV – that would allegedly convince other critics of the federal government across the offices and agencies to join the coup d’état.<sup>7</sup> The group anticipated that the success of their plot would only be possible through violence, and they were prepared to kill people to achieve their goals.

In its preparations for the uprising, the Patriotic Union also sought foreign cooperation; moreover, foreign agency was one of the ideological foundations of the group that combined central myths of Reichsbürger and QAnon ideologies.<sup>8</sup> Following those myths, the Reuß Group believed that the last time Germany was truly sovereign – and thus, genuinely legitimate in their eyes – was the German Reich (1871–1945). As the Allies defeated Nazi Germany in 1945, the Reich ceased to exist, and Germany’s territory came under the control of the Allies-administered trading construct called the Federal Republic of Germany. Presumably, as time passed, Germany became increasingly influenced by members of a so-called deep state, and the Patriotic Union imagined that the Alliance, “a technically superior secret society of governments, intelligence services, and military of various states, including the Russian Federation and the United States of America”, would imminently attack the deep state.<sup>9</sup> The uprising that the Reuß Group planned to carry out was then seen as an act *accompanying* the attack of the Alliance against the deep state, and the leadership of the group confided that they had no influence on the “upcoming events”.<sup>10</sup> What they, nevertheless, hoped for was that after the group helped the Alliance to take control over the German territory using a country-wide network of homeland security companies that would operate as police forces for the Alliance, they would establish a transitional government that would negotiate “a peace treaty” with the Alliance and finally restore the sovereignty of the German Reich.<sup>11</sup>

While the imaginary Alliance included representatives of several countries, there was apparently no consensus in the Reuß Group as to the exact national composition of the “superior secret society of governments”. In 2019, before the creation of the Patriotic Union, Reuß appealed for a “peace treaty” to the US

president, and also noted that it had tried, unsuccessfully, to contact Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov.<sup>12</sup> In May 2021, Reuß wrote a letter in Russian to Vladimir Putin in which he introduced himself as the ambassador of the German Reich and asked for cooperation; it is currently unknown whether the letter was delivered to the Kremlin.<sup>13</sup>

Russia played an increasingly important external role in the ideology of the group after its creation approximately in November 2021. The Patriotische Union was certain that Russia was definitely part of the Alliance, although they still envisaged that the Russian army would act together with the US Army in the “allied” attack against the “deep state”.<sup>14</sup> Some in the group believed that the “Alliance” was not limited to the Russians and Americans and involved seventeen nations, including India, Iraq, and African countries, which had prepared more than a million soldiers to march on the “Federal Republic of Germany”.<sup>15</sup> The Reuß Group had bizarre views on the “Alliance”, and, in one instance, Rüdiger von Pescatore, a former Bundeswehr officer and the military leader of the Patriotische Union, confided to his daughter in late September 2022 that several European countries declared martial law and that two million soldiers, including Russian army personnel, were standing on the border ready to invade Germany.<sup>16</sup> However, despite variations in interpretations of the composition of the Alliance, the three separate charges brought by the German Federal Public Prosecutor General against 27 members of the Reuß Group on 12 December 2023 identified Russia as the sole central point of reference for the organisation.<sup>17</sup>

Pursuing his objectives to garner support from Russia, Reuß – together with Rüdiger von Pescatore – tried to meet Russian representatives in the Slovak capital Bratislava in February 2022,<sup>18</sup> but the outcome of those attempts is unknown. Later that year, Reuß would apparently rely for Russian contacts on Vitalia Bondarenko, who was reported to be his life partner or assistant.<sup>19</sup> Identified as simply Vitalia B. in the charges of the German Federal Public Prosecutor General, the Russian citizen Vitalia Bondarenko was the only foreign national who was arrested in the December 2022 raid and charged with “supporting the terrorist group and providing aid in the preparation of a highly treacherous enterprise”.<sup>20</sup> In particular, she helped Reuß, who had been mandated by the group to establish contacts with representatives of the Alliance, to get in touch with Russian diplomats.<sup>21</sup> On 13 June 2022, Reuß visited the Russian Consulate General in Leipzig together with Bondarenko – apparently to celebrate the Russian National Day.<sup>22</sup> Later, Bondarenko visited the same Consulate again,

but already without Reuß.<sup>23</sup> Although the details of Reuß and Bondarenko's talks with Russian diplomats are unknown, it is viable to suggest that Reuß wanted either to secure Russia's support for the planned uprising or, narrowly following the ideological line, find out the date of the attack of the Alliance against the Federal Republic of Germany. However, the German Federal Public Prosecutor General claimed they did not know how the Russian contact persons reacted to Reuß's requests.<sup>24</sup>

Other members of the Reuß Group tried to establish contacts with Russian diplomats too. During their investigation, German officers found a printed email exchange between three members of the group and the Russian Consulate General in Leipzig that began on 28 November 2022. The three Germans, including Christian Wendler and Frank R.,<sup>25</sup> introduced themselves as medium-sized entrepreneurs who were concerned about so-called one-sided media reporting on the Russian-Ukrainian war – reporting that “harmed the Russian Federation” as the country was “presented in the wrong light”.<sup>26</sup> The Germans wanted to discuss these issues personally with the Russian diplomats in Leipzig, and “an apparently high-ranking” Russian diplomat invited them for a brief personal meeting at the consulate on 8 December 2022. Their visit never happened as they were among those arrested by the German agencies the day before.<sup>27</sup>

In November and December 2022, another member of the Patriotische Union, Johanna Findeisen-Juskowiak, who was a candidate of the minor Basisdemokratische Partei Deutschland (Grassroots Democratic Party of Germany, also known as Die Basis) in the 2021 Bodensee constituency elections, met with the representatives of the Russian Consulate General in Frankfurt and Baden-Baden “to promote the aims of the association”.<sup>28</sup> The outcome of those meetings is unknown. On 30 November 2022, Findeisen-Juskowiak reportedly called a member of the Reichsbürger movement and her fellow Die Basis party member Ralph Thomas Niemeyer and asked him whether he could establish contact with Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov or President Putin. Responding to her question, Niemeyer said that “he was one of a group of 9999 selected people who had received a tap-proof satellite phone with a four-digit number that could be used to contact Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov and Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova directly”, but he, however, needed to have a “really very good reason” to use that special phone.<sup>29</sup> There were no reports on the existence of such a phone after the German police raided his residence in Munich in March 2023. Niemeyer, however, appears to be the main

source of our knowledge of the above-mentioned letter written by Reuß to Putin in May 2021. According to Niemeyer himself, he was approached on 5 December 2022 by a woman named “Svetlana” who handed him Reuß’s letter and asked to deliver it to the Kremlin. A few days later, Niemeyer reported the letter to the German domestic intelligence agency, known as the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution.<sup>30</sup>

Available information on the Reuß Group suggests that Russia – as part of the fantasy about the all-powerful Alliance – constituted not only an important ideological reference for the group; the Russian military intervention was also a central practical component of the strategic planning of the coup. Since the uprising against the Federal Republic of Germany was seen only as an act complementing the expected attack on the *deep state* on the German territory, the uprising alone seemed to make little sense – at least for some members of the Patriotische Union. This assumption may help explain why the apparent lack of cooperation on the Russian part led to disputes within the Reuß Group.<sup>31</sup> According to the German Federal Court of Justice, by the time of the arrests in December 2022, the group had already made all preparations for the actions that would lead, as the conspirators hoped, to the coup d’état. What was missing was a “trumpet call” from the Alliance, and the Patriotische Union tried to figure out what exactly they could, indeed, consider as such; “a possible stock market crash, the death of Queen Elizabeth II, an electromagnetic impulse from Vladimir Putin, natural disasters, or a large-scale power failure” were discussed within the group as potential signals from the Alliance.<sup>32</sup>

There is currently no publicly available evidence that any Russian agency or stakeholder ordered or directed the Reuß Group’s practical preparations for the overthrow of the German constitutional order. However, this chapter argues that particular activities and phenomena that are directly linked or perceived to be linked to Russia functioned as external stimuli that inspired the actions of the Patriotische Union. This argument is theoretically based on the studies of inspiration as a psychological construct that involves both human agency and stimulus milieu. As Todd M. Thrash et al. argued:

First, inspiration is characterised by epistemic transcendence, meaning that the individual has gained an awareness of new or better possibilities. This aspect of inspiration is experienced vividly, as reflected in vision metaphors such as illumination, revelation, insight, and “seeing” possibilities one had not seen before. Second, inspiration is characterised

by evocation or receptivity; one is inspired by something in particular, and therefore, one does not attribute to oneself responsibility for becoming inspired, at least not full or direct responsibility. [...] Finally, inspiration involves approach motivation, such that one feels compelled to bring one's new idea or vision to fruition.<sup>33</sup>

Employing the above-mentioned terminology, we assert the following:

- The Reuß Group was formed around a novel idea of overthrowing the German government for the benefit of the “Alliance” involving the Russian Federation.
- This idea was stimulated and sustained by external environment including, but not limited to, two types of developments:
  - (1) Russian activities in and around Ukraine since 2014: Moscow's support for pro-Russian politicians, the Kremlin's military backing of pro-Russian separatists, the direct Russian invasion of Ukraine, and Russia's corresponding sabre-rattling on the international arena;
  - (2) Russian cooperation with German anti-establishment movements and organisations, Russian information strategies in the German-language media space, and violent clandestine operations involving German pro-Russian activists.
- On the part of the leadership of the Reuß Group, these developments evoked the belief that Moscow was not only willing but actually preparing to act against official Berlin and that it was interested in having domestic German allies on the ground.
- The combination of the Reuß Group's agency (the radical anti-establishment thrust) and the stimulus milieu (Russia's real or perceived actions) compelled the group to move forward with the implementation of their idea of a coup d'état.

Before discussing the external environment that evoked the Reuß Group's Russia-related perceptions, beliefs, and actions, three important caveats must be taken into consideration. First, this chapter discusses only the second type of developments in the external environment that stimulated and sustained the efforts of the Patriotische Union, namely the developments that have a direct relationship to Germany. Second, in the absence (at the time of the writing) of facts indicating any degree of Russia's operational authority over Vitalia Bondarenko, this chapter considers her Russian origin and citizenship to be, at

the most, a factor influencing Reuß's personal attitudes towards Russia and a factor potentially facilitating communications with Russian diplomats. Should the relevant facts emerge in the future, Bondarenko's role in the plot needs to be reconsidered.

Third, the question of inspiration coming from external environments other than those linked to Russia remains outside of the research scope of this chapter. The existence of the other external environments is, however, obvious: as argued above, the Reuß Group's ideology included central myths of the QAnon conspiracy theory that originated in the US. Moreover, towards the end of the Trump presidency in the US, some activists of the German Reichsbürger movement, from which the Patriotische Union would later emerge, came to believe that the Defender Europe 2020 NATO military exercise was a covert Trump-led military operation aiming "to liberate Germany from Chancellor Angela Merkel's government", and that Merkel had to use "a fake COVID-19 pandemic" to thwart the operation<sup>34</sup>. This belief clearly contributed to the development of the Reuß Group's idea of the Alliance gearing up for striking against the Federal Republic of Germany. However, with Donald Trump's failure to get re-elected and the arrival of the Biden Administration that was sceptical of Russia, the prominence of the US in the ideology of the Patriotische Union seemed to wane, and there is no publicly available evidence that the Reuß Group made attempts to establish contacts with American representatives of the Alliance. Nevertheless, the question of the US-linked developments stimulating and sustaining the actions of the German Reichsbürger movement, in general, and the Patriotische Union, in particular, merits further academic inquiry.

### **Case Study 2: Alternative for Germany - from Soft Euroscepticism to the pro-Russian Radical Right**

One of the high-ranking members of the Reuß Group arrested in December 2022 was Birgit Malsack-Winkemann. At the time of the arrest, she worked as a judge at the Berlin District Court—a job she had started in 1993 and interrupted between 2017–2021 while she was a member of the Bundestag representing the far-right party Alternative for Germany (AfD). After losing the re-election to the German Parliament, Malsack-Winkemann remained a member of the AfD's Federal Court of Arbitration.<sup>35</sup>

As a former politician in the Bundestag, Malsack-Winkemann had a pass card allowing her to access the parliamentary building and take up to six guests with her. In September 2022, she took several members of the Patriotische Union for a tour in the Bundestag where they, as part of their preparations for the coup, took photos and recorded videos of the halls of offices and boardrooms, underground passages to other buildings, and the interior of the plenary hall of the parliament.<sup>36</sup> In the transitional government that the Reuß Group planned to establish after the coup, Malsack-Winkemann would hold the post of justice minister.<sup>37</sup>

At least two other persons connected to the Patriotische Union and arrested in December 2022 had relationships with the AfD – Ruth Hildegard Leiding, who was employed by Malsack-Winkemann during her Bundestag term as a personal astrologist,<sup>38</sup> and Christian Wendler, a former Olbernhau city councillor for the AfD.<sup>39</sup> After the arrests, the AfD promptly distanced from the Reuß Group and the entire Reichsbürger movement, and the party leader Tino Chrupalla declared that anyone who was “committed to the Reichsbürger scene” had no place in the AfD.<sup>40</sup>

It is, indeed, highly unlikely that the AfD, as a party, was involved in the Reuß Group’s conspiracy to overthrow the German government. However, the AfD’s well-known amicable relations with Russia appear to represent a potent, albeit hardly singular, source of the conspirators’ idea about the Alliance and expectations of Russia’s involvement in German domestic politics. The AfD was founded by a group of disaffected members of the centre-right Christian Democratic Union of Germany (CDU) Alexander Gauland, Bernd Lucke, and Konrad Adam in 2013 as a moderately Eurosceptic party that opposed Germany’s participation in the Eurozone and its role in bailing out European countries, especially Greece, that were hit hard by the 2007/2008 financial crisis.<sup>41</sup> In its early years (2013–2015), the AfD primarily consisted of two ideological groups: the economically liberal bloc led by Lucke and the national-conservative bloc led by Gauland. In terms of foreign policy orientations, the economically liberal bloc expressed pro-Atlanticist positions, while the national-conservatives showed a certain degree of sympathy towards Russia – sympathy that was apparently shared by the majority of the AfD’s rank and file.<sup>42</sup>

As early as April 2014, Gauland suggested separating eastern Ukraine, which he believed was predominantly Russian-influenced, from the rest of the country<sup>43</sup> – a position that echoed Moscow’s justifications of its aggression against Ukraine that started with Russia’s illegal annexation of Crimea in March 2014 and

invasion of Ukraine's eastern regions later in spring that year. Also in 2014, Gauland also took part in a meeting called *Freedom with Russia – for a sovereign Europe* organised by the German far-right magazine *Compact*.<sup>44</sup> Although the event was dominated by German participants, it also had a prominent Russian element, as it was attended by Vladimir Yakunin, a former KGB officer and then the CEO of Russian Railways who was close to Putin since the early 1990s and who was active in advancing Russian foreign policy interests internationally through the workings of the Dialogue of Civilisations Forum.<sup>45</sup>

The differences in foreign policy orientations between the two blocs of the AfD were also reflected in voting behaviour of the AfD's Members of the European Parliament (MEPs). For example, Lucke's group largely abstained on European Parliament's resolutions that criticised Russia's aggression against Ukraine, while the AfD's national-conservative MEPs voted against them.<sup>46</sup> However, even if they voted differently on Russia-related resolutions, Lucke's opinions on Ukraine sometimes correlated with those of Gauland. For example, during the debates in the European Parliament in September 2014, Lucke condemned "the illegal annexation of Crimea and any covert or overt support for violent attempts at secession". And yet – echoing Gauland's suggestions about partition of Ukraine – argued that Ukraine's borders were "inviolable" but not "immutable", and that "ethnic groups should be able to decide on their citizenship in fair, free, democratic self-determination".<sup>47</sup>

Nevertheless, in 2015, Lucke eventually lost the internal struggle in the party to the national conservatives and was displaced as the leader of the party by Frauke Petry. Lucke and several other prominent members of the AfD left the party, and Lucke referred to rising xenophobic, anti-Western, and pro-Russian leanings in the party as the reason for his departure.<sup>48</sup> Indeed, under Petry, the AfD "quickly radicalised. Xenophobic and populist positions that had before been at least controversial within the party became mainstream. [...] Even openly racist statements and attempts to minimise the Holocaust by party leaders were no longer beyond the pale".<sup>49</sup>

According to the hacked and leaked emails belonging to Sargis Mirzakhianian, a minor official at the Central Office of the State Duma and one of many Russian operatives who advanced Russian foreign policy interests in Europe,<sup>50</sup> his group started cooperating with members and activists of the AfD in January 2016.<sup>51</sup> Moreover, Mirzakhianian's group claimed that it had spearheaded Frauke Petry's letter addressed to Putin, in which she – if the letter existed – allegedly expressed



her criticism of “the Berlin sanctions policies [sic] towards Moscow” and asked for a personal meeting with the Russian leader to discuss how the AfD could “contribute to the normalisation of the Russian-German relations”.<sup>52</sup> In June 2016, Russian operatives from Mirzakhania’s group also discussed Petry’s visit to Moscow, and a note coming from their internal communications claimed that the AfD leader wanted to meet the Russian president and the State Duma Chairman Sergey Naryshkin, and to hold talks with Russian officials who dealt with foreign policy issues.<sup>53</sup>

Whether Mirzakhania’s group played a decisive role in its preparations or not, Petry’s visit to Moscow took place in February 2017. During her Russian trip, Petry was accompanied by AfD’s members Marcus Pretzell and Julian Flak, and she met with Naryshkin’s successor as the State Duma chairman, Vyacheslav Volodin, his deputy Pyotr Tolstoy, the now late leader of the far-right, misleadingly named Liberal-Democratic Party of Russia, Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, the head of the State Duma foreign affairs committee, Leonid Slutsky, and the head of the State Duma committee on energy, Pavel Zavalny.<sup>54</sup> According to the official Russian report, Petry and Volodin discussed “cooperation between regional parliaments, cross-party cooperation, and developing contacts between youth organisations”.<sup>55</sup> While the contents of other discussions are unknown, particular details about the logistics of the AfD’s Moscow trip imply that Russians valued the visit of Petry and her fellow party members: according to one investigative report, Russian stakeholders booked a private jet for the AfD delegation and paid €25,000 for their trip.<sup>56</sup>

Shortly after Petry’s visit to Moscow, in April 2017, the AfD published its manifesto in the run-up to the 2017 federal elections to the Bundestag. The manifesto, which appeared in three languages (German, English, and Russian) declared that “a détente in relations with Russia [was] a prerequisite for a lasting peace in Europe”, and that “it [was] in Germany’s interests to integrate Russia into an overall security policy structure”.<sup>57</sup> The manifesto also advocated lifting of the sanctions imposed by the EU on Russia for its aggression against Ukraine and called for the intensification of economic cooperation with Moscow.<sup>58</sup> Individual members of the AfD had been involved in various pro-Russian activities as early as in 2015 and 2016, but Petry’s visit to Moscow in early 2017 marked the beginning of extensive, multidirectional cooperation between AfD party members and Russian stakeholders. By November 2021, when the Reiß

Group was formed, AfD members had been involved in a wide range of pro-Kremlin efforts that could be categorised as follows:

- pushing resolutions criticising “anti-Russian sanctions” in regional parliaments;
- participating in conferences, roundtables, meetings, and other events aimed at advancing Russian foreign policy interests;
- taking part in politically biased international election observation missions in Russia and Russia-occupied territories of Ukraine;
- providing pro-Kremlin commentary to the Russian media; and
- voting against parliamentary resolutions criticising and/or condemning the Kremlin domestic or international actions.<sup>59</sup>

### ***Manuel Ochsenreiter: from AfD-Russia Networking to False Flag Terrorism***

One of the figures who played an important role in advancing and strengthening the pro-Kremlin stances of the AfD was late German far-right journalist Manuel Ochsenreiter.<sup>60</sup> He had been active in German far-right circles since the 1990s. In 2011, he became an editor-in-chief of the German far-right magazine *Zuerst!*, which – in the words of its editorial staff (probably Ochsenreiter himself) – was “committed only to the life and survival interests of the German people and the precious heritage of our European culture”.<sup>61</sup> Ochsenreiter reportedly expressed no pro-Kremlin views until 2012,<sup>62</sup> but it was probably his journalistic interest in the Syrian civil war, in which he supported Bashar al-Assad’s forces, that led him to the encounter with the works of the Russian fascist ideologue Alexander Dugin.<sup>63</sup> Dugin, following the official Russian line, also supported Assad. Ochsenreiter and Dugin met in 2012, and their meeting most likely shaped not only Ochsenreiter’s long-standing infatuation for Dugin’s ideology, but also his pro-Kremlin orientations. It was likely through Dugin that Ochsenreiter got in contact with Mateusz Piskorski, arguably the most active agent of Russian malign influence in Poland at that time.<sup>64</sup> Piskorski organised an international monitoring mission at the illegitimate referendum in Russia-occupied Crimea in March 2014, and Ochsenreiter was the only Western journalist present at that referendum.

As Ochsenreiter deepened his relations with Dugin and Piskorski, he became involved in a wide range of pro-Russian activities, some of which were coordinated by one of his Russian handlers, Sargis Mirzakhian. Malign influence operations that Ochsenreiter was involved in ranged from participating in fake election observation missions and providing anti-US and anti-NATO

commentary for Russian state-controlled media through coordinating pro-Kremlin resolutions and statements of European far-right politicians to organising pro-Russian events in Germany.

In particular, in May 2016, Ochsenreiter – in cooperation with a regional AfD politician Udo Stein, and in coordination with Mirzakhania's group – authored a so-called small question (*kleine Anfrage*) of the AfD faction in the Baden-Württemberg regional parliament to the state authorities, in which the party criticised the anti-Russian sanctions for the alleged damage to the regional economy. Moreover, in July 2017, Ochsenreiter published a special issue of *Zuerst!* specifically attacking anti-Russian sanctions, and Mirzakhania's leaked communications suggest that his team was involved in Ochsenreiter's efforts. A Russian account on the issue found in the communications of Mirzakhania's group described *Zuerst!* as a magazine “popular among European German-speaking opposition politicians and public figures” and claimed that copies of the printed version of the magazine were sent to all members of the Bundestag, to all offices of the AfD, and to the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ). The Russian account on the special issue also highlighted three particular features, namely interviews with the AfD MEP Marcus Pretzell,<sup>65</sup> the AfD member of the Saxony state parliament Jörg Urban,<sup>66</sup> and the FPÖ member Johann Gudenus<sup>67</sup> – all criticising anti-Russian sanctions.

Ochsenreiter was evidently well-networked in the AfD milieu, and, in particular, was close to Markus Frohnmaier who founded the AfD's youth wing in Baden-Württemberg. In March 2016, Ochsenreiter and Piskorski introduced Frohnmaier to Mirzakhania, as they wanted to advance his career in Germany and introduce even more pro-Russian influence in the AfD. After his introduction to the Russian operatives, Frohnmaier was immediately invited to take part in the Second Yalta International Economic Forum that took place in Russia-annexed Crimea and was run by Mirzakhania's boss Andrey Nazarov. In Yalta, Frohnmaier was joined by several other European politicians invited by Mirzakhania's team: Pretzell, the FPÖ MPs Axel Kassegger and Barbara Rosenkranz, Czech far-left MEP Jaromir Kohlíček, and Italian regional far-right politician Stefano Valdegamberi.<sup>68</sup>

In April 2017, as Germany was heading to the Bundestag elections in September that year, Ochsenreiter and Mirzakhania's group came up with an initiative to ask Russian officials for support for Frohnmaier's election campaign, as his membership of the Bundestag would presumably benefit Russian foreign policy interests in Germany. As the authors of the conceptual paper on Frohnmaier's

candidacy put it, the aim of the endeavour was simple: “We will have our own [i.e. Russian] absolutely controlled MP in the Bundestag”.<sup>69</sup> While it is currently unknown whether Frohnmaier received any support from Russia, he was elected a member of the Bundestag in September 2017. Ochsenreiter would later start working for Frohnmaier in the Bundestag.

In early 2018, Ochsenreiter instructed members of the Polish neo-fascist Falanga group – he knew their representatives through Piskorski since at least 2015 – to carry out an attack against the Hungarian Cultural Centre in the Ukrainian city of Uzhhorod.<sup>70</sup> The objective was to present the action as an attack of Ukrainian neo-Nazis in order to sour relations between Hungary and Ukraine.<sup>71</sup> Ukrainian law enforcement identified the Polish perpetrators,<sup>72</sup> and the Polish security services arrested them on 22 February 2018. During the investigation, the Polish organiser of the attack, Michał Prokopowicz, confessed that Ochsenreiter paid him €500 in advance, while the rest was paid after the execution of the operation at a restaurant in the Tegel airport area where the two met on 7 February 2018.<sup>73</sup>

The story about Ochsenreiter’s involvement in the false flag operation in Ukraine became known to the German media in January 2019. He expectedly denied his involvement in the arson attack in Ukraine, but, due to the scandal, Frohnmaier was compelled to terminate the employment contract with Ochsenreiter, who had worked for Frohnmaier in his Bundestag office since early September 2018.<sup>74</sup> In January 2019, the Berlin Public Prosecutor’s Office opened an investigation into incitement to serious arson against Ochsenreiter. The latter, however, managed to flee Germany, and since then lived mostly in Moscow.<sup>75</sup> In August 2020, the German Federal Prosecutor’s Office took over the investigation from Berlin and issued an arrest warrant; the investigation suspected Ochsenreiter of terrorist financing in combination with incitement to arson.<sup>76</sup> On 19 August 2021, the Russian authorities informed the German Embassy in Moscow that Ochsenreiter had died the day before.<sup>77</sup> *Zuerst!* confirmed Ochsenreiter’s death on 21 August 2021.<sup>78</sup> In December of that year, the Federal Prosecutor’s Office stopped the proceedings against Ochsenreiter.

### **Russian Anti-Establishment Eco-System in Germany**

As demonstrated in the two previous sections, many in the German far-right milieu expressed interest in cooperating with the Kremlin and other Russian stakeholders and were actively engaged in facilitating Russian malign influence

in Germany and other European countries. In some cases, in exchange for their services, representatives of the German far-right received political support from, and were encouraged by, their Russian contacts.

However, beyond this cooperation, a complex combination of developments, activities, efforts, perceptions, and events, which were directly and indirectly linked to Russian structures, companies, and individuals, has evoked a special image of Russia in the anti-establishment circles in Germany over the recent years. That special image of Russia is that of a state that openly and persistently challenged the established liberal-democratic order of the West – an image of the leader of the populist resistance against the mainstream political, media, and IT elites. In this section, we will review three major elements of the Russian anti-establishment ecosystem in Germany: (1) Russian state-controlled media targeting German speakers, (2) Russian messaging platform Telegram, and (3) Russian-speaking groups in Germany.

### ***Russian State-Controlled Media in Germany***

In its 2018 annual report, the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution, wrote:

In the interests of exerting influence, the Russian state is expanding its media presence in Germany. State-owned companies are disguised as independent media in order to conceal their affiliation with the Russian state and to subtly influence the public. The most important players here are the internet broadcaster RT Deutsch and the news agency Sputnik.<sup>79</sup>

The Russian state-funded RT project was originally founded as Russia Today in 2005 and was renamed into RT in 2009;<sup>80</sup> the German edition of RT (RT Deutsch/RT DE) was launched in 2014. In its turn, the Russian state-funded Sputnik website succeeded the Russian international radio broadcasting service Voice of Russia which operated between 1993 and 2014 and had had the German version since its foundation.

RT DE and Sputnik DE (rebranded as SNA News in 2020) first rose to distinctive notoriety in summer 2017, in the run-up to the 2017 Bundestag elections. Following Chancellor Angela Merkel's controversial approach to allow more than one million refugees to enter Germany during the 2015/2016 refugee crisis,<sup>81</sup> RT DE and Sputnik DE:

were consistently negative in their coverage of German officials and institutions; the AfD was the only exception. Sputnik regularly presented the AfD as a mainstream party that has been treated badly by the current establishment due to its opposition to Merkel's migration policy. [...] There was almost no coverage of the scandals surrounding Frauke Petry. The channel argued that if AfD were to win, it would lift the Russian sanctions and recognize the annexation of Crimea.<sup>82</sup>

Moreover, during the same campaign, German-language editions of the Russian media and pro-Kremlin bots pushed a message that the AfD would become a victim of electoral fraud.<sup>83</sup> The initial wave of these allegations emerged in May 2017 when the AfD reported on the alleged electoral misconduct during the North Rhine-Westphalia state elections, in which the centre-right CDU significantly triumphed over its competitors. The second wave of controversy came just two days before the elections when a Twitter account, supposedly run by a young left-wing woman, claimed that "she" would be working at a polling station and intended to discard votes for the AfD. Both Russian and Western far-right social media users widely shared, and commented on, those claims creating a Twitter storm using a hashtag #Wahlbetrug, i.e. electoral fraud, implying that the upcoming elections would be manipulated by the German political establishment.<sup>84</sup>

In 2020 and 2021 during the COVID-19 pandemic, RT DE, Sputnik and Ruptly (the Berlin-based Russian state-owned video news agency) reported widely on the protests of a network of groups and individuals who called themselves the Querdenker (lateral thinking) and mobilised against the German government's policies on COVID-19 safety measures and coronavirus vaccinations.<sup>85</sup> As Alexandra Yatsyk put it, "RT DE presented the issue of mass vaccination as impinging on basic human rights. This was done by the promotion of the Querdenken agenda, including anti-vaccine sentiments, and undergirding them conspiracy theories".<sup>86</sup> Moreover, to strengthen the appeal of the Querdenken, "RT DE gave the floor to politicians from both left and right who refused to vaccinate and justified doing so by their 'personal right to freedom'".<sup>87</sup> In its turn, as Silvia Stöber observed, Ruptly often edited video clips showing the Querdenken protests "to highlight footage of police violence against protesters" and produce a perception of the "lack of democracy in Germany and other EU countries".<sup>88</sup>

The fact that the Russian state-funded media advanced the Querdenken agenda in the German information space contributed to the perceptions of the Russian state

as a foreign actor working directly to undermine the German liberal-democratic order. It is even more important against the background of our discussion because the German anti-government protests, which were predominantly organised by the Querdenken, gave a strong boost to the development of the Reichsbürger movement, with which the Querdenken partly overlapped in terms of ideology, organisation, and membership. As Florian Hartleb et al. argued,

certain influencers that shaped the Querdenker acted as a catalyst for [the transition from beliefs in conspiracy theories to forms of nonnormative political engagement or even criminal behaviour] and built bridges to the Reichsbürger milieu, which in turn was especially well-suited to absorb the anger that built up during the pandemic.<sup>89</sup>

### ***Telegram, the Anti-Establishment “Safe Space” on the Internet***

The Telegram Messenger app was first launched in 2013 by the Russian businessman Pavel Durov, the founder and, until 2014, the director of the popular Russian social networking site VK. In 2014, as the Kremlin tightened its grip over the internet, it took over VK,<sup>90</sup> and shortly afterwards Durov fled Russia in fear of repressions against him.<sup>91</sup> Durov’s troubles in Russia, and, especially, his privacy concerns about online communications, led him to focus on making Telegram a secure messenger that also developed into an original social network. In 2018, as the Telegram management refused to provide encryption keys from user correspondence to the Russian Federal Security Service, the Russian communications regulator Roskomnadzor tried to block Telegram in Russia, but to no avail.<sup>92</sup> Since its victory against the Russian government, Telegram came to be increasingly associated with successful resistance against state pressure and political censorship. After both democratic and authoritarian governments obliged major social networking websites (Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, VK) and photo/video-sharing services (YouTube, Instagram, TikTok) to crack down on content they deemed harmful, Telegram – with its loose moderation policy – became a safe space for political, often deplatformed activism of all ideological persuasions, ranging from Belarusian antiauthoritarian pro-democratic opposition groups<sup>93</sup> to American violent right-wing extremists.<sup>94</sup>

In Germany, Telegram emerged as an infrastructure for the Querdenken protest movement, “as the central space for unifying activism, protest, conspiracy theories, far-right ideology, and COVID-19 scepticism”.<sup>95</sup> A study by Maximilian Zehring and Emese Domahidi that analysed more than six million messages from

578 public Telegram channels that belong or are related to the Querdenken sphere demonstrates a significant overlap between COVID-19 denial and anti-vaccination content, QAnon topics, and far-right discourses.<sup>96</sup> Moreover, in their study based on the analysis of 4,500 messages posted to nine Telegram channels related to QAnon, Identitarian movement, and the Querdenken in the period between March 2020 and February 2021, Heidi Schulze et al. found that communications within the Querdenken channels “presented the steepest increase in the prevalence of conspiracy narratives, anti-elitism and calls for activism. [...] Particularly noteworthy, the prevalence of support for violence increased over the study period”.<sup>97</sup>

Despite its international standing and the fact that the Telegram company has been based in Dubai since 2017, it is still generally considered – because of its history and ownership – a Russian company. Thus, it seems viable to suggest that the highly questionable association of Telegram with Russia, on the one hand, and, on the other, Telegram’s relaxed moderation strategies that often tolerate content that is perceived as dangerous and harmful by the authorities in Western democracies produce an impression that Russia openly challenges the liberal-democratic order by offering to anti-establishment and anti-government activists technological capabilities to bend the rules imposed by Western elites.

### ***Russian-Speaking Groups in Germany***

Germany’s “Russian world” is a disparate Russian-speaking community consisting primarily of three major groups of people:

- (1) The so-called Russian-Germans (Russlanddeutsche). These are ethnic Germans who were born in the Soviet Union or its successor states but later moved, as so-called re-settlers, to Germany. Since the mid-1980s, approximately 2.3 million Russlanddeutsche have entered Germany where they were granted German citizenship.<sup>98</sup>
- (2) Russian citizens residing in Germany. Out of all EU member states, Germany is home to the largest number of people holding Russian citizenship—in 2020, their number amounted to 233,918 people.<sup>99</sup>
- (3) Russian-speaking German citizens with immigrant, non-German ethnic background – their number is unknown, but, to a certain degree, this group slightly overlaps with the second group because of the people holding dual (German and Russian) citizenship.



In her study of right-wing populist narratives among Russian-speaking internet users in Germany, Liliia Sablina observed that Russian-speakers often referred to Germans as “weak,” “incapable of making decisions,” and “torturing themselves with the sense of guilt” for the crimes of the Third Reich.<sup>100</sup> At the same time, however, those “weak Germans” needed support, and Russian speakers “put themselves in a position of ‘defenders’ of the German culture who [could] clearly see the ‘real picture’ and ‘[were] not infected with multiculturalism’”.<sup>101</sup>

In political terms, this defence of German culture has been often expressed through support for the AfD, and voting preferences of the German Russian world became a topic of hot discussion after the 2017 elections to the Bundestag when the AfD secured 12.64 percent of the vote – its best electoral result since the party’s first participation in the federal elections.<sup>102</sup> As seen from observations of Russian-speaking internet fora in Germany, their users tend to consider the AfD as “the only political alternative to the ‘mass disorder’ that is happening in Germany”.<sup>103</sup> In its turn, the AfD not only welcomes the support coming from the German Russian world, but actively fosters it as well. As Sablina argues, “the AfD became the first political party in Germany that incorporated mobilizing practices toward the Russian-speaking communities”.<sup>104</sup> Moreover, as Dennis Christopher Spies et al. noted, while stressing the significance of *Germanness* and advocating “a pronounced anti-immigration and highly assimilationist integration policy approach”, the AfD espouses the Russian element of Germany’s Russian world through efforts such as “the founding of a specific network for Russian-Germans in the AfD, making use of Russian-language party programs as well as offering policy positions that appeal to Russian-German voters”.<sup>105</sup>

These and other interactions between particular Germany-based Russian speakers and the AfD has generated a sense of synergy between the Russian world and antiestablishment movements in Germany. Public perceptions of such a synergy – strengthened by the German mainstream media – likely constituted yet another external stimulus that contributed to the Reuß Group’s beliefs that Russia was willing to act against the German establishment or the Federal Republic of Germany.

## Conclusion

The classical image of poetic inspiration portrays a scene in which the muse – typically a beautiful and ethereal female figure – is leaning close to the poet or whispering into his ear, while the poet himself is either deep in thought or writing. Referring to the psychological studies of inspiration,<sup>106</sup> this portrayal features three distinct elements: (1) the poet is aware of a new idea, (2) something in the external environment awoke him to that idea, and (3) the combination of the two compels him to put the idea into writing. There is hardly any doubt that German activists who formed the Patriotische Union (Reuß Group) held antiestablishment views and were disaffected with the sociopolitical order in Germany. Their disaffection led them to embrace a theory that Germany was not truly sovereign and, instead, was just a trading construct founded by the Allies who defeated the Third Reich in 1945 called Federal Republic of Germany (or BRD GmbH, as some in the Reichsbürger movement call it).

It is also hardly a coincidence that the formation of the Reuß Group took place during the COVID-19 pandemic – a period that saw the radicalisation of German anti-establishment groups against the background of the government introducing strict measures to contain the virus. The proliferation of different conspiracy theories that accompanied the radicalisation of those groups led to the emergence of their extravagant combinations. But would the Reuß Group risk taking on the German government alone? Judging from what we have learnt about the group so far, the answer is negative. As conspiracy theories multiplied, mutated, and conjugated, the Patriotische Union was awoken to the idea of the Alliance, a secret political-military society that included Russian armed forces and was poised to attack the deep state in Germany. The Reuß Group would then carry out a coup d'état simultaneously with the Allied attack.

What *muse* evoked the idea of the Alliance involving Russian troops and gearing up to take control over the Federal Republic of Germany? Or, in other words, what developments in the external environment stimulated and sustained that idea and compelled the far-right activists to act upon it? This chapter argued that a significant part of those developments was directly associated or perceived to be associated with Russia. In particular, those developments included:

- Russian support for pro-Kremlin politicians in Ukraine;

- Russian military support for pro-Russian separatists and anti-government elements in Ukraine;
- Russian occupation of Crimea and Sevastopol, as well as parts of eastern Ukraine;
- Russian aggressive rhetoric towards Western allies of Ukraine, including Germany;
- pro-Kremlin stances of Germany's most successful far-right party, the AfD;
- involvement of particular German far-right activists in violent pro-Russian operations;
- Russian media support for the AfD;
- secure and censorship-free technological capabilities associated with Russia; and
- support for the AfD from certain Russian-speaking groups in Germany.

These developments constituted Russian malign inspiration for the conspirators of the far-right Reuß Group, who believed that the Russian army, possibly with the assistance of troops from other countries, would invade Germany and – after the Reuß Group formed a transitional government – would negotiate the restoration of the sovereignty of the German Reich

## **Recommendations**

### ***For German and European Policymakers***

**1. Create rapid-response strategic communication units.** Policymakers are advised to establish dedicated rapid-response Strategic Communication units tasked with promptly disseminating accurate information to the public during medical, economic, political, and other crises. The swift relay of facts is critical to pre-empt the spread of disinformation by conspiracy theorists and other malign actors who may exploit such situations to further their illiberal agendas. The strategy of pre-bunking, which entails anticipating and counteracting disinformation before it takes hold, should be an integral part of these units' methodology.

**2. Demand regulation of social media algorithms.** European governments should assertively require social media platforms, including Facebook and X (former Twitter), to modify algorithms that disproportionately amplify divisive

content, foster social polarisation, and exploit user emotions for financial gain. It is crucial for regulations to mandate transparency in algorithmic processes and ensure that these algorithms do not incentivise or reward content that undermines social cohesion. Measures may include the implementation of oversight mechanisms to monitor and evaluate the ethical implications of algorithmic decision-making, the establishment of clear standards for responsible content amplification, and the requirement for platforms to demonstrate efforts to promote unity and constructive discourse.

**3. Establish a dialogue with Telegram.** Policymakers should actively seek to establish a dialogue with the management of platforms like Telegram, which advocate for nearly absolute freedom of speech. Given the complex challenges associated with censorship and the platform's significant role in the free flow of information, it is essential for German authorities to engage constructively with Telegram to address concerns specific to disinformation that targets German society. This engagement should aim to foster a collaborative environment where mutual understanding and respect for Telegram's ethos can coexist with the imperative to protect the public from harmful disinformation campaigns.

**4. Tackle illegal migration.** The German government should prioritise addressing illegal migration as it reflects one of the major concerns of German society. It is imperative to recognise the multifaceted impact of this issue, including its detrimental effects on local communities and the obstruction it poses to the resettlement opportunities for the most vulnerable refugees. Efforts to combat this challenge must be strategic, compassionate, and aligned with the country's commitment to justice and human rights.

**5. Empower civil society.** Policymakers should invest in comprehensive education and training programs to equip civil society members with the skills to effectively detect, expose, and counteract malign influence operations orchestrated by Russian entities and other adversarial actors.

### *For Media*

**1. Adopt a balanced approach in reporting on Russian malign influence.** When reporting on the activities of Russian malign actors in Europe, instead of predominantly highlighting their successes, which may inadvertently amplify their perceived influence and power, media should also focus on the many instances where Russian attempts to sway decision-making have failed. By

reporting on the effective countermeasures and the resilience of European countries, media can help demystify the might of the Russian state and diminish its potential to inspire illiberal actors within Europe to act against the liberal-democratic order.

**2. Expose journalistic corruption.** Media organisations should enforce rigorous internal oversight and support investigative journalism to uncover and bring to light any corruption among journalists who may be collaborating with, or are incentivised by, pro-Kremlin stakeholders to present a distorted portrayal of Russian policies and actions.

### *For Civil Society*

**1. Promote media literacy.** Civil society organisations should prioritise the promotion of media literacy and critical thinking among the public to combat polarisation incited by old and new media. They can do this by developing educational programs, creating accessible materials that explain media's role in social polarisation, and fostering public dialogues. Collaborations with educational institutions for curriculum integration, research publications, and advocacy for ethical media standards are also key.

**2. Foster a culture of active citizenship.** Civil society organisations should cultivate empowerment within local communities by promoting activities that underscore the value of civic participation: platforms for community decision-making, volunteer programs tailored to diverse interests, support for local entrepreneurs, networking events, public recognition of community efforts, etc. These activities shall reinforce the message that the state and individual involvement are both pivotal in fostering thriving communities.

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Tete H. Tetens, *The New Germany and the Old Nazis* (New York: Random House, 1961), 78.

<sup>2</sup> Katrin Bennhold, “Germany Arrests 25 Suspected of Planning to Overthrow Government,” *New York Times*, 7 December 2022.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/07/world/europe/germany-coup-arrests.html>.

<sup>3</sup> “Festnahmen von 25 mutmaßlichen Mitgliedern und Unterstützern einer terroristischen Vereinigung sowie Durchsuchungsmaßnahmen in elf Bundesländern bei insgesamt 52 Beschuldigten” [Arrests of 25 suspected members and supporters of a terrorist organisation and search measures in eleven federal states for a total of 52 suspects], Der Gener<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Tete H. Tetens, *The New Germany and the Old Nazis* (New York: Random House, 1961), 78.

<sup>3</sup> Katrin Bennhold, “Germany Arrests 25 Suspected of Planning to Overthrow Government,” *New York Times*, 7 December 2022.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/07/world/europe/germany-coup-arrests.html>.

<sup>3</sup> “Festnahmen von 25 mutmaßlichen Mitgliedern und Unterstützern einer terroristischen Vereinigung sowie Durchsuchungsmaßnahmen in elf Bundesländern bei insgesamt 52 Beschuldigten” [Arrests of 25 suspected members and supporters of a terrorist organisation and search measures in eleven federal states for a total of 52 suspects], 7 December 2022. <https://www.generalbundesanwalt.de/SharedDocs/Pressemitteilungen/DE/2022/Pressemitteilung-vom-07-12-2022.html>; “Italien liefert bei ‘Reichsbürger’-Razzia verhafteten Deutschen aus” [Italy extradites German arrested in ‘Reichsbürger’ raid], *Spiegel*, 19 December 2022. <https://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/italien-liefert-bei-reichsbuerger-razzia-verhafteten-deutschen-aus-a-6506a060-fc3a-4e7d-ad90-234ed40e4051>.

<sup>4</sup> “‘Reichsbürger’-Szene stark gewachsen: 19 Personen nach bundesweiter Razzia in U-Haft” [‘Reichsbürger’ scene has grown strongly: 19 people in custody after nationwide raid], *Tagesspiegel*, 7 December 2022. <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/politik/reichsbuerger-szene-stark-gewachsen-19-personen-nach-bundesweiter-razzia-in-u-haft-8985781.html>; Maik Baumgärtner, Jörg Diehl, Roman Höfner, Martin Knobbe, Matthias Gebauer, Tobias Großekemper, Roman Lehberger, Ann-Katrin Müller, Sven Röbel, Fidelius Schmid, and Wolf Wiedmann-Schmidt, “Die Putschfantasien der ‘Reichsbürger’-Truppe” [The coup fantasies of the ‘Reichsbürger’ group], *Spiegel*, 9 December 2022.

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<sup>5</sup> “Festnahmen von 25 mutmaßlichen Mitgliedern und Unterstützern.”

<sup>6</sup> Beschluss StB 58/22, Der Bundesgerichtshof, March 30, 2023.

[http://juris.bundesgerichtshof.de/cgi-](http://juris.bundesgerichtshof.de/cgi-bin/rechtsprechung/document.py?Gericht=bgh&Art=en&nr=133324&pos=0&anz=1)

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<sup>7</sup> Jörg Völkerling and Burkhard Uhlenbroich, “‘Reichsbürger’ wollten Scholz fesseln und ins TV zerrren” [‘Reichsbürger’ wanted to tie up Scholz and drag him onto TV], *Bild*, 13 August 2023. <https://www.bild.de/news/inland/news-inland/reichsbuerger-wollten-kanzler-scholz-fesseln-und-ins-tv-zerren-85023082.bild.html>; “Geplanter Sturm auf Bundestag” [Planned storming of the Bundestag], *Tagesspiegel*, 13 August 2022.

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<sup>9</sup> “Festnahmen von 25 mutmaßlichen Mitgliedern und Unterstützern.”

<sup>10</sup> Yassin Musharbash and Holger Stark, “Die Reichsbürger und ihre unsichtbaren Freunde” [The Reichsbürger and their invisible friends], *Zeit Online*, 22 December 2022.

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<sup>11</sup> “Festnahmen von 25 mutmaßlichen Mitgliedern und Unterstützern”; Beschluss StB 58/22; “Heinrich XIII. Prinz Reuss bestätigt Verschwörungstheoretiker” [Henry XIII Prince Reuss confirms conspiracy theorists], YouTube, September 8, 2021.

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<sup>15</sup> Fischermann et al., “Countdown zum Umsturz.”

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<sup>17</sup> “Anklage gegen zehn Personen u.a. wegen Mitgliedschaft in oder Unterstützung einer terroristischen Vereinigung und Vorbereitung eines hochverräterischen Unternehmens vor dem Oberlandesgericht Frankfurt erhoben [Charges brought against ten persons before the Frankfurt Higher Regional Court for membership in or support of a terrorist organisation and preparation of a treasonable enterprise, among other things],” Der Generalbundesanwalt beim Bundesgerichtshof, 12 December 2023.

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<sup>20</sup> “Anklage gegen zehn Personen.”

<sup>21</sup> Musharbash and Stark, “Die Reichsbürger.”

<sup>22</sup> Maik Baumgärtner, Jörg Diehl, Matthias Gebauer, Sven Röbel, and Wolf Wiedmann-Schmidt, “Das Innenleben der ‘Reichsbürger’-Truppe” [The inner workings of the ‘Reichsbürger’ group], *Spiegel*, 15 December 2022.

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<sup>23</sup> Kendzia and Wierzioch, “Die möglichen Russland-Verbindungen.”

<sup>24</sup> “Anklage gegen zehn Personen.”

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Kendzia and Wierzioch, “Die möglichen Russland-Verbindungen.”

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> “Anklage gegen zehn Personen.”

<sup>29</sup> Timo Lehmann and Sven Röbel, “Behörden durchsuchen Haus von Wagenknechts Ex-Ehemann” [Authorities search Wagenknecht’s ex-husband’s house], *Spiegel*, 23 March 2023. <https://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/reichsbuerger-behoerden-durchsuchten-haus-von-sahra-wagenknechts-ex-ehemann-a-7b53880e-bbd4-4dfa-b7e9-459b01a4b352/>

<sup>30</sup> Lehmann and Röbel, “Behörden durchsuchen Haus.”

<sup>31</sup> Kendzia and Wierzioch, “Die möglichen Russland-Verbindungen.”

<sup>32</sup> Beschluss StB 58/22.

<sup>33</sup> Todd M. Thrash, Emil G. Moldovan, Victoria C. Oleynick, and Laura A. Maruskin, “The Psychology of Inspiration”, *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* 8, no. 9 (2014): 496–497 (495–510). <https://doi.org/10.1111/spc3.12127>. See also Todd M. Thrash and Andrew J. Elliot, “Inspiration as a Psychological Construct”, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 84, no. 4 (2003): 871–889. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.84.4.871>.

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## **Serbia: Government and the Scarecrow**

**Predrag Petrović**

Although the contemporary Russian influence on political parties and the far-right in Serbia has been present since the violent disintegration of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) in the 1990s, it intensified with the rise of the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) to power in 2012. Not only did the last decade see the party's cooperation with United Russia (UR), that country's ruling party, but also the strengthening of ties between Serbian and Russian defence, intelligence, and security institutions. Shared features of the Serbian and Russian regimes, their ideological proximity, and the legacy of the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s, during which Moscow effectively rooted for Serbia and vehemently opposed NATO's war on Belgrade in 1999, stood behind this burgeoning cooperation between the two capitals. In post-war conditions, the SNS skilfully exploited the rising anti-Western sentiment in Serbia, which helped sustain its unparalleled dominance over the political scene.<sup>1</sup> The same period also saw the pro-SNS government media, including the highly partisan public broadcasters,<sup>2</sup> have also started propagating pro-Russian and anti-Western narratives.<sup>3</sup> With the SNS in power, there has also been a resurgence of old and the emergence of new far-right organisations, with most of them holding pro-Russian views. However, among the more recent groups, there are those with vocal anti-government stances, accusing the ruling SNS of pursuing a false patriotic and pro-Russian policy. These groups also seek to distance themselves from what they perceive as a fake (extreme) right, believing it to be loyal to the ruling party's interests rather than to nationalist and pro-Russian ideals.<sup>4</sup> The distinction will be explained in more detail below.

The consequences of the Serbian nationalists' activities are grave and in line with Russian policy goals of sowing distrust in democracy, the EU, and the West.

Public opinion surveys indicate far-right attitudes and values are normalised among Serbian citizens. There is also further growth of anti-Western sentiment, a decline in trust in democratic values, and the strengthening of pro-Russian views, with many citizens believing that NATO and the US are to blame for the Russo-Ukrainian war.<sup>5</sup> It is particularly concerning that most young people hold negative attitudes towards the EU and democracy, support the rule of a strong leader, and justify violence as a legitimate socio-political tactic.<sup>6</sup>

Therefore, it is important to investigate further the reasons for and instruments of Russia's influence in Serbia, which will be presented through two case studies. In the first case, the Serbian ruling party was analysed as it holds unchecked power in Serbia and has expanded cooperation with UR and between Serbian and Russian state institutions. It has also been using nationalistic, pro-Russian and anti-Western rhetoric in maintaining, expanding, and strengthening its electorate. The level of cooperation between the two states and the fact that at the same time, Serbia officially would not abandon its goal of an EU makes this a unique case of attempting to "have one's cake and eat it." The second case analyses the Serbian anti-government far-right group, People's Patrol, which has quickly emerged as the most vocal violent far-right agent of Russian influence in Serbia. Analysing this group is also important for two more reasons. Firstly, available research indicates that People's Patrol is an authentic far-right entity, meaning that it is not a fake entity controlled by the SNS government and pursues true nationalistic and pro-Russian policies. Secondly, the group has been cooperating with violent Russian far-right and paramilitary groups, including the infamous Wagner Group.

These studies also explored whether the ruling party's pro-Russian policy is deeply rooted or merely a tool to control pro-Russian influences and sentiments, which are present among Serbian citizens regardless of the activities of the SNS. In that respect, the chapter will explore whether Russia seeks to influence the anti-government far-right to pressure the ruling party not to abandon its pro-Russian policy. However, to better understand the cases analysed, the roots of contemporary Russian influence on political parties and far-right groups in Serbia were first outlined. These research tasks were achieved by reviewing publicly available research and media reports. Key findings were then checked against fourteen interviews with journalists, politicians, and experts on this topic. The research was conducted between May and November 2023.

## **Roots of the Contemporary Russian Influence on the Serbian Far-Right**

The origins of the Serbian far-right and the contemporary Russian influence in Serbia can be traced back to the dissolution of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) in the 1990s. Unable to respond to the challenges of socioeconomic and political crises through democratisation like other former socialist states, the leaderships of the republics of the SFRY, particularly Serbia and Croatia, resorted to nationalism and the creation of national, unitary states instead of civic ones, which resulted in a series of ethnic conflicts.<sup>7</sup> Under the leadership of Slobodan Milosevic, the leader of the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS), Serbia sought to create a “little Yugoslavia” that would unify the ethnic Serbian territories in Croatia, Bosnia, and Montenegro, effectively forming Greater Serbia. Although the ruling SPS had pursued a nationalist policy, the ethnic conflicts led to the emergence of various far-right movements and political parties in Serbia, which organised volunteers and even had paramilitary formations. One of the most significant was the Serbian Radical Party (SRS) headed by Vojislav Šešelj, which, at the height of its power, managed to win one-third of the seats in parliament and even entered the Government.<sup>8</sup> It was also one of the key proponents of Kremlin influence in Serbia, cultivating relationships first with Vladimir Zhirinovskiy’s Liberal Democratic Party<sup>9</sup> and later with United Russia. When visiting Serbia or the Republika Srpska in Bosnia,<sup>10</sup> Zhirinovskiy promised that Russia would supply the Serbs with a ‘red mercury’ super-secret weapon with which they would defeat Muslims (i.e. Bosniaks), and the West.<sup>11</sup>

During the wars of the 1990s, connections between Serbian and Russian far-right extremists were also established through paramilitary formations as Russian volunteers joined their ranks. Among them was Igor Girkin-Strelkov, who later became the armed forces commander of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People’s Republic in 2014 and is likely to run for Russian president in 2024. Bosnian media accuse him of being involved in the massacre of at least 3,000 Bosnian Muslims in the Bosnian town of Višegrad in 1992.<sup>12</sup> After the Yugoslav wars, these connections were maintained through various joint associations and organisations and served as a channel for Serbian volunteers and mercenaries from Serbia, Bosnia, and Montenegro to join the ranks of the Russian separatist forces in Ukraine.<sup>13</sup>

Apart from the structural or personal connections, the reasons for the entrenched Russian influence in Serbia can also be found in the fact that Western countries



opposed Serbia's nationalist policies, leading to the United Nations' political and economic sanctions that resulted in Serbia's socioeconomic decline. NATO also militarily intervened first in Bosnia in 1995 and later in Serbia in 1999, leading to Kosovo's secession from Serbia.<sup>14</sup> Prevalent opinion at that time was that Serbia had always been on "the right side of history" as it was fighting the imperialistic ambitions of the powerful states in two Balkans and two world wars and, consequently, suffered terribly at the hands of victors-oppressors.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, for the majority of Serbs, it was hard to understand why Western countries, Serbia's allies in previous wars, supported Croats, Albanians, and other nations in their quest to secede from SFRY while directly refusing to assist the Serbs. This created a significant anti-Western and victimhood sentiment among many Serbian citizens who believed the West wanted to destroy Orthodox and Slavic Serbia. As a result of this, it seemed that the only ally of Serbia left standing was the Orthodox and Slavic Russia.<sup>16</sup>

After the downfall of Milošević in 2000, Serbia started the transition from an authoritarian to a democratic regime. During the democratic transition, new topics and discourses emerged on the policy agenda—Europeanisation, human rights, transitional justice, neoliberal discourse, etc. Although the hegemonic position of nationalist discourse was challenged, new elites never made a radical break with nationalism and the far right.<sup>17</sup> Russian influence in Serbia also remained present in society via the political parties (mainly Šešelj's SRS), the orthodox church, far-right groups, and intellectuals. The main reason for this was that Russia supported Serbia's position on the Kosovo issue, which became even more important after the latter declared independence from Serbia in 2008, and most of the Western countries recognised it. As a permanent member of the UN's Security Council, Russia had blocked Kosovo from joining the UN and its agencies and supported Serbia on this topic in the international arena.<sup>18</sup> In the same year, the Serbian government sold the Petroleum Industry of Serbia (NIS) to the Russian Gazprom Neft for €400 million, well below the estimated market value. The inclusion of Serbia in the Russian South Stream gas pipeline project and the construction of an underground gas storage facility were also agreed upon. In this way, Serbia gave Russia almost all its energy security. Selling NIS to Gazprom and putting energy security in Russia's hands led many experts to conclude that this is the economic, security, and political price for Russia's backing of Serbia on the Kosovo issue.<sup>19</sup> It is also important to note that a few months before the declaration of Kosovo's independence, anticipating this event, the Serbian parliament passed the resolution on the protection of sovereignty,

territorial integrity, and constitutional order,<sup>20</sup> which also defined Serbia as a military-neutral country. Since then, Serbia's commitment to military neutrality became an important Russian instrument for obstructing not only Serbia's cooperation with NATO and its potential membership in the Alliance but also its accession to the EU, as this concept was soon broadened in public discourse covering not just military but also political neutrality.

Furthermore, if one were to add Alexander Dugin to the mix, the Russian far-right philosopher and geopolitician who is considered a great influence on Putin<sup>21</sup> and enjoys huge popularity among the Serbian far-right, then Russia's designs vis-à-vis Serbia's geopolitical position and its military neutrality become even more clear. Dugin contends that the responsibility for global conflicts lies with the "global liberal elite," attributing it to their frequent attempts to enforce the principles of liberal democracy, centred on individual rights and inviolable human rights, worldwide. According to Dugin, liberals often overlook the fundamental tenet of democracy, which emphasises the people's right to choose, encompassing the freedom to either embrace or reject the democratic system. To oppose this alleged liberal totalitarianism and counterbalance to the West, Dugin advocates for restoring traditional values (e.g. human dignity, family, chivalry) which are preserved in Eurasia, where East and West meet and where Russia occupies the central place.<sup>22</sup> In this geopolitical concept, Serbia holds a special place for Dugin because, as a small country, it has opposed the "global elite" for a long time, and it is a bulwark for the Eurasian pole in the Balkans. If the Serbs had not opposed the West, the political and security elite of the Kremlin would not have awakened in time, and Putin's Russia would have been too late to arrive on the scene of the great geopolitical rivalry.

Therefore, according to Dugin, Russia's debt to Serbia is enormous, and Russia's historical and moral duty is to return Kosovo to Serbia.<sup>23</sup> Serbia fully aligning itself with the West would signify a profound transformation, potentially leading to the dissolution of its existing identity. This shift could entail the impossibility of reclaiming Kosovo for Belgrade and the inability to maintain territorial integrity within current borders. According to Dugin, such preservation would only be feasible in the multipolar world he advocates for, a vision that Putin appears to be working towards in reality. Dugin believes Russia will not leave the Balkans to the West or abandon other Russian friends in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Macedonia, especially since the West is on the verge of collapse. In his opinion, Serbia should take "responsibility" for the Balkans—for the entire

South Slavic (and partly Albanian) region through active policy in organising a pan-Balkan Defence and Security System. His opinion is that the Balkan countries will soon become disillusioned with liberal democracy and NATO, and this pan-Balkan System would become one of the pillars of a broader Russian-European strategic partnership, which Putin is striving for. This concept, however, currently presumes two fundamental conditions: preserving neutrality and strengthening Serbia's defence capabilities.<sup>24</sup>

### **Case Study 1: Pro-Russian Nationalists in Power**

The SNS was established in 2008 by Tomislav Nikolić and Aleksandar Vučić, former high-ranking officials of the Serbian Radical Party (SRS), the ultra-nationalist party and the most important pro-Kremlin political actor in Serbia for two decades.<sup>25</sup> From 1998 to 1999, during the armed conflict in Kosovo and the NATO bombing of Serbia, Vučić served as the Information Minister, during which he signed the Law on Public Information.<sup>26</sup> The law is remembered for its draconian penalties for media and the closure of media critical to Milosević's autocratic regime.<sup>27</sup> Nikolić and Vučić left the SRS to form the SNS because they realised that the existing overtly nationalistic policy could not garner enough voter support and be well accepted by the Western countries. They decided to adopt a much more pragmatic approach focused on combating crime and corruption, for which they blamed the democratic authorities who governed Serbia between 2000 and 2012. Unlike the SRS, the SNS also embraced the policy of Serbia's accession to the EU. The SNS also seemed more inclined to compromise in resolving the Kosovo issue than the previous Serbian government, as evident by the acceptance of the Brussels Agreement in 2013.<sup>28</sup> These moves were meant to signal to Western countries that the SNS was pursuing favourable policy towards the West. However, after the early parliamentary elections in 2014, in which the SNS secured an absolute majority in the parliament, democratic reforms stagnated, and Vučić's style of governance increasingly resembled Putin's Russia. By 2017, SNS seized key levers of state power, using them for private gains and stifling critical voices and political opposition. Media was subjected to complete government control.<sup>29</sup> Government loyalists run Serbia's six TV channels (RTS 1, RTS 2, TV Pink, Happy TV, TV B92, TV Prva), all with national coverage. There are only two television outlets in Serbia critical to Vučić's government (N1 and Nova S), but they do not enjoy nationwide coverage.<sup>30</sup> Instead, they broadcast their programs only through one cable TV

company (SBB), reaching one-third of the Serbian citizens.<sup>31</sup> On the foreign policy front, Serbia refused to align itself with the EU's key positions regarding Russia—such as its full-scale aggression on Ukraine and sanctions towards Russia.<sup>32</sup> While the EU Commission, international research institutes, and think tanks have documented Serbia's steep democracy decline in the past five years,<sup>33</sup> the West chose not to antagonise the government in Belgrade. In effect, it chose stability over democracy as it preferred not to alienate Serbia and proverbially push it into Russia's arms.<sup>34</sup>

At the same time, Vučić's government<sup>35</sup> has never officially rejected the policy of EU accession, knowing that it would lead to an open conflict with the West. Instead, it formally still adheres to the goal of EU membership and the values of liberal democracy, but in practice, it does the opposite and associates itself with authoritarian regimes such as those of Russia and China.<sup>36</sup> Similarly, Vučić strives to create the impression that he is still very cooperative regarding Kosovo as it seemingly evident by his acceptance of the Washington Agreement in 2021<sup>37</sup> and the EU plan for the normalisation of Serbia-Kosovo relations in 2022. However, by creating controlled crises and incidents in Kosovo, he seeks to delay their implementation. For example, in November 2022, at the initiative of the Serbian List, which is under the control of the SNS, Serbs left the institutions of Kosovo and boycotted local elections. This later led to violent incidents in northern Kosovo between Serbs and international and Kosovar security forces.<sup>38</sup>

Dragan Šormaz, former SNS party official, who was a member of parliament and a member of several parliamentary committees as the SNS representative (foreign policy, security services oversight, EU integration), recently pointed out that the authorities in Serbia are not pursuing a sincere policy of EU accession and military neutrality. He also stated that Serbia has aligned itself with Russia for a considerable time due to Vučić's disdain for the West and its values. Also, Vučić's years-old narrative about Serbia's independent and neutral policy is actually Russian trickery used in Ukraine and Moldova, as well to mask a seemingly deniable Russian influence.<sup>39</sup> Other experts are convinced Vučić's pro-EU and pro-West stances were just a manoeuvre designed to mantle his anti-EU and anti-West activities.<sup>40</sup>

Vučić's pro-Russian leanings should not come as a surprise. Since its inception, the SNS has actually been strengthening its relations and collaboration with Russia while officially pursuing Serbia's EU accession policy. The cooperation has deepened at the party level between SNS and United Russia but also among

state institutions of two countries, including those in the security and defence sectors. SNS and United Russia signed cooperation agreements in 2010, 2016, and 2018 that went beyond symbolic gestures, clearly defining various areas of collaboration such as exchanging experiences in party and youth cooperation, organisational work, information sharing, and preparing party members for state posts.<sup>41</sup> One of the stated goals of these agreements is to enhance interstate relations through improved party ties,<sup>42</sup> which have been achieved through numerous intergovernmental agreements, memoranda, and protocols. In 2012, the Russian-Serbian Humanitarian Centre was opened, and the following year, Serbia became an observer in The Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO).<sup>43</sup> Thus, Serbia is the only Balkan state with signed security cooperation agreements, joint military exercises with Russia, and modernising its armed forces with Russian weaponry.<sup>44</sup> These agreements have been accompanied by visits from high-level officials of Serbia and Russia, including Vladimir Putin, the President of Russia, Sergei Shoigu, the Minister of Defence, Nikolai Patrushev, the Secretary of the Security Council, and Sergei Lavrov, the Minister of External Affairs. During his visit to Serbia in 2019, Putin awarded the Order of Alexander Nevsky to Aleksandar Vučić for his significant personal contribution to multilateral cooperation with Russia.<sup>45</sup> The practical implications of this cooperation and its potential consequences for regional stability can be observed in several cases that have occurred in the past three years. These cases will be discussed below.

### ***The Serbian World – Putin’s Tool for Destabilising Western Balkans***

The foundation of cooperation between Putin’s and Vučić led governments is not only instrumental but is also rooted in ideological proximity, manifested in the concepts of the Russian and Serbian worlds. The Serbian world is a concept that has been present within political and cultural elites as well as nationalist circles in Serbia since the mid-19th century.<sup>46</sup> However, this term only started to draw attention from the domestic and regional public in 2020 when Aleksandar Vulin, the then-Minister of Defence, began using it regularly in public appearances. Thus, Vulin stated that he hopes that the President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić, is creating the Serbian world and that Serbs have the right to be a politically unified nation, that Vučić is the president of all Serbs, with Belgrade being the centre of their gathering. Later, he clarified that the Serbian world resolves the national question of the Serbs, prevents the creation of a Greater Albania, and

safeguards against the genocide of the Serbian people. Vulin emphasised that the unification process had started thanks to Vučić, and it was unstoppable.<sup>47</sup>

The Serbian state official's public usage of the Serbian world has raised concerns in neighbouring countries that it could signify a revival of Greater Serbia but now with strong support from Russia.<sup>48</sup> Serbian and Russian worlds are two nearly identical projects built upon the frustrations of nationalists in Russia and Serbia due to the loss of influence and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and in the case of Serbia, the breakup of Yugoslavia.<sup>49</sup> Both concepts imply the unification of the Serbs/Russians within the same cultural, media, and political space under one strong leader.<sup>50</sup> Furthermore, the public promotion of this concept comes at a time of heightened political tension between the West and Russia and worsening political and ethnic relations within and between Serbia, Kosovo, and Bosnia.<sup>51</sup> By loudly promoting the Serbian world, Russia is essentially sending a message through Belgrade that it can potentially and seemingly at a whim destabilise the situation in the Western Balkans.

It is important to note that Aleksandar Vulin is the one who is the most vocal advocate of this idea. In the past ten years of the SNS rule, Vulin has held important state positions. He was initially the director of the Government Office for Kosovo; then, he held roles as the Minister of Labor, Defence, and Internal Affairs, and in the end of 2022, he was appointed as the director of the Security-Information Agency.<sup>52</sup> It was during his tenure in the Defence and Interior Ministry and when the military was being rearmed and reequipped<sup>53</sup> that Vulin was publicly advocating for the Serbian world. Vulin is the leader of the Movement of Socialists, a micro-political party with no significant voter support in Serbia.<sup>54</sup> He has held important state positions due to his loyalty to Aleksandar Vučić and Russia. Some experts consider Vulin to be one of the most important figures of Putin's regime in Serbia, tasked with placing pro-Russian personnel in key state institutions, which he has indeed accomplished within the military, police, and counter-intelligence service.<sup>55</sup> The seriousness of Vulin's messages about the Serbian world is highlighted by the fact that, following Moscow's orders, he initiated the persecution of Russian opposition figures in Serbia, as well as Russian refugees critical of Putin, which is described in the next section.

### ***Serbian Security Institutions Persecuting Russian Liberals***

In December 2021, Alexander Vulin, then–Interior Minister, met with Nikolai Patrushev, Secretary of the Security Council of the Russian Federation (SCRF) in

Moscow, when they agreed to form a joint working group to combat the coloured revolutions.<sup>56</sup> The Serbian MoI's press statement stressed that these revolutions "are a traditional political instrument used by certain power centres and countries to undermine statehood and take away sovereignty under the guise of democratisation."<sup>57</sup> The joint working group is tasked with preventing mass demonstrations and constantly monitoring opposition activists, NGOs, and independent journalists.<sup>58</sup>

The group's establishment formalised the already-good cooperation between Serbian and Russian security apparatus. Namely, in May 2021, a group of Russian municipal lawmakers and democracy activists attended an educational seminar in Belgrade which was chaired by Andrei Pivovarov and Vladimir Kara-Murza, prominent opposition leaders. The Serbian intelligence closely followed the seminar and recorded all participants' activities and conversations. Very soon, Vulin flew to Moscow to personally hand over the surveillance material to Patrushev, which was then used by Russian authorities to sentence Pivovarov to four and later Kara-Murza to 25 years in prison for "carrying out activities of an undesirable organization"<sup>59</sup> and "high treason,"<sup>60</sup> respectively.<sup>61</sup>

Serbian state institutions persecuted liberal Russians who have resided in Serbia as well. In this respect, without any justification, in mid-June 2023, Serbian authorities banned entry into Serbia to Peter Nikitin upon his return from a trip abroad. The ban was issued by the Serbian police at the request of the Security Intelligence Agency (BIA), headed by Alexander Vulin. After 40 hours in the airport transit zone, he was allowed to enter Serbia without any explanation. Nikitin holds both Russian and Dutch citizenship and has a Serbian residence permit, where he and his family have lived for seven years. According to Serbian legislation, a ban on entry into Serbia cannot be issued without previously revoking permanent residence. Therefore, this ban is related to Nikitin's pro-democracy activism. He is a leader of the Russian Democratic Society (RDS), which politically organises Russians in Serbia and has grown to tens of thousands since Russia invaded Ukraine. The organisation fiercely criticises Putin's Russia and regularly holds rallies in Serbia supporting Ukraine. Nikitin said the entry ban had to do "solely with Russian interests" and that the Security Information Agency "is obviously following Russia's orders," as the RDS has never interfered with internal Serbian affairs.<sup>62</sup>

Soon after, the Serbian authorities denied an extension of the temporary residence permit to Vladimir Volokhonsky, one of the founders of the RDS and close

associate of Peter Nikitin. The decision was based on the BIA's assessment that Volokhonsky presents a threat to the security of Serbia but without further explanation. Nikitin and Volokhonsky are the RDS's leaders, and therefore, their cases attracted media attention, while other persecutions of liberal Russians went unnoticed by a broader public. Nikitin stated that even before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, security officers attended their rallies, asking for IDs and interviewing their members, while after the invasion, harassment intensified.<sup>63</sup> In this respect, RDS followers were questioned by BIA, while others were denied residence permits and Serbian citizenship even though they met all criteria. Dragan Šormaz, a former SNS official, and some political analysts are confident that Vulin is just carrying out Vučić's decisions.<sup>64</sup>

### *The Absurd Level of pro-Putin Propaganda*

Strong pro-Russian messaging in Serbia has long been present, but it further strengthened after the SNS had assumed power in 2012. Pro-government TV stations and newspapers not only ran pro-Russian propaganda such as Informer, Politika, Večernje novosti, Kurir, and Blic, but their messaging was much more emotionally charged than Russian media.<sup>65</sup> This propaganda went even further with the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, reaching absurd levels. Pro-government media were reporting that Ukraine attacked Russia and that Western countries, chiefly the US and Great Britain, were responsible for the war while Putin did everything to prevent the outbreak of the armed conflict. For instance, the daily Informer whose chief editor, Dragan Vučićević, is one of the strongest propagandists of Vučić's rule, published as front-page titles: "Americans push the whole World into chaos: Ukraine attacked Russia", "Warr [sic] horror: artillery shells randomly kindergartens, schools, hospitals." Other pro-government media had similar front pages: "World on the edge of catastrophe: Ukraine attacked Russia!" (Alo), "Putin: Russia has done everything for peace in Ukraine" (The Courier), "Blood has been spilt on the Russian border" (The Evening News).<sup>66</sup>

The pro-government media went even further, reporting that the Russian military would not stop in Ukraine, but it would then intervene in the Balkans, liberating its allies from the imposed liberal rule and correcting historical injustices incurred by the West: "Brits in a big panic. Putin sends Army to unite Serbia and Republic of Srpska" (Serbian Telegraph).<sup>67</sup> Other pro-government print media reported less emotionally charged language utilising (quasi)analytical style but with similar messages and points on the decline of the Western hard and soft power, the rise



of the BRICS, which would amount to an emergence of a truly multi-polar world.<sup>68</sup> The Serbian pro-government TV stations with national coverage (Pink and Happy) have also taken pro-Putin and anti-Western stands.<sup>69</sup> In their top-rated talk shows, pro-Western analysts are present, but they are regularly outnumbered by pro-Putin analysts (many of whom are former military and intelligence officers). Even though the Serbian pro-government media alleviated pro-Putin narratives when it was obvious that the Russian invasion of Ukraine would not be swift and easy, they are still very present.<sup>70</sup>

### **Case Study 2: People's Patrol - Kremlin's Scarecrow**

People's Patrol is an extreme right-wing organisation founded in 2020 by Damjan Knežević. The group centres its efforts on anti-migrant initiatives, with its members assuming a quasi-police role. They engage in activities such as halting migrants in public spaces, limiting their freedom to move, and executing citizen arrests. For instance, in one case, they knocked down and detained a migrant by firmly holding around his neck, suspecting him of pickpocketing a girl. Proof of this alleged pickpocketing could not be seen in the video.<sup>71</sup> Other cases are very similar; in recordings, it can only be seen that migrants are detained without any evidence of their alleged crime.<sup>72</sup> One of the extreme examples of violent behaviour of People's Patrol was when one of its sympathisers was throwing refugees and migrants off the bus, with comments such as "M70 and a bullet to the head", "Yes, yes... All of you should be killed. You will only learn Serbian once I put a bullet into that black head of yours."<sup>73</sup> They record and disseminate all these and other activities via their social platforms, and other communication apps, spreading fear, xenophobia, and Islamophobia. In fact, anti-migrant actions are essential for this organisation as these practices allow them to attract the attention of a broad audience and present themselves as a 'saviour of the nation' from the enemy 'other'. The People's Patrol was established by the same people who founded People's Initiative No Surrender of Kosovo and Metohija,<sup>74</sup> but a new name was chosen when the focus shifted to anti-migrant activities.<sup>75</sup>

The thematic focus on migrants was a training ground for the group to master manipulation and communication techniques on social networks as well as to learn to conduct violent activities at the edge of legality. The People's Patrol used anti-migration activities to propagate (bigger) messages aligning with core far-

right themes and Kremlin propaganda. At the basis of their anti-migrant narratives lie civilizational conflicts (East versus West, traditional versus liberal values), conspiracy theories (global liberal elites from the West secretly reaching agreements with authorities in Serbia about migrant settlement), victimhood nationalism (Serbs are once again victims of Western elites due to their financial interests and hatred towards Orthodox Christianity), dehumanisation of others (Muslims, liberals), and the heroisation of a group (People's Patrol, sacrificing greatly for Serbianhood in the fight against terrorists, the West).<sup>76</sup> Anti-migrant activities allowed the group to expand its network by forming branches mainly in towns where migrants are present (e.g. Sombor, Backi Petrovac, Subotica), and to gain greater popularity among members of the far-right.<sup>77</sup>

Several key indicators highlight the effectiveness of the People's Patrol. Firstly, when only this group actively conducted anti-migrant activities, public opinion surveys recorded a significant rise in anti-migrant sentiments among Serbian citizens. Thus, surveys in 2020<sup>78</sup> and 2021<sup>79</sup> showed an increase in citizens' opinions that migrants increase crime (58 percent, 70 percent), pose a health risk (49 percent, 69 percent), endanger Serbian values and customs (37 percent, 68 percent), are terrorists (41 percent, 54 percent), and were actually sent into Islamise Serbia (38 percent, 60 percent). An increased number of people also believe that there is a secret plan for the mass settlement of migrants in Serbia (36 percent, 54 percent). In the same period, in pro-government media, migrants were not a prominent topic, and reporting on the issue was neutral, meaning that the group managed to reach out to the broader public solely through intense presence on social networks.<sup>80</sup> Secondly, the People's Patrol managed to expand its network and to organise relatively well-attended gatherings despite having limited resources. Thirdly, the group attracted the attention of Russian right-wing organisations and media outlets like Russia Today. It stands out as one of the few far-right organisations from Serbia to have visited Russia three times since the Russian invasion of Ukraine.<sup>81</sup> Following the war in Ukraine, People's Patrol has quickly emerged as the most vocal pro-Russian far-right group in Serbia. Below is an explanation of how and why the People's Patrol has acted as an agent of Russian influence in Serbia and the Western Balkans.

### ***Welcoming Russian Invasion and Better Ties with Russia***

The Russian invasion of Ukraine was a strong impetus for People's Patrol and a majority of Serbian far-right groups and political parties, which welcomed and

celebrated this Russian move through rallies and social networks, seeing the invasion as the beginning of the liberation of Serbian historical territories that the enemies currently occupy. The first mass meeting in support of Russia was held in Belgrade on 4 March 2022, and, to the surprise of those unfamiliar with current trends in the Western Balkans, attracted several thousand people. Messages that could be heard at the rally included: “Serbs and Russians are brothers forever,” “Crimea is Russia, Kosovo is Serbia,” and “Serbia, Russia, we do not need [the European] Union.” The rallies were held in Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and cities throughout Serbia.<sup>82</sup>

It should be noted that Denis Gariyev, leader of the Russian Imperial Movement, uploaded a video message asking Serbians to support “the renewal of Russia within its historical borders,” which was then distributed at rallies and through far-right accounts and profiles.<sup>83</sup> The movement is known for its paramilitary Imperial Legion wing, which has fought against Ukraine since 2014 and has conducted training in urban warfare for European, e.g. Swedish (see: Swedish chapter of this volume) extreme right-wingers in Russia, and some of whose members have been convicted of terrorism. In mid-2020, the US administration added the movement to the Specially Designated Global Terrorist list.<sup>84</sup>

With the war in Ukraine, People’s Patrol also started establishing better connections with the Russian extreme right and communicating this clearly to the public. Thus, Knežević spent some time in Moscow at the end of April and the beginning of May 2023 as guests of some of the largest Russian media, e.g. Russia Today. During this visit, Knežević told the Russian public that Aleksandar Vučić is not a friend of Russia but a mercenary of the West, but that, despite this, the Serbian people will stand with their Slavic brothers, the Russians.<sup>85</sup> One of the hosts of the visit was Alexander Lysov, leader of the Russian-Serbian Centre – Eagles (Rusko-srpski centar Orlovi).<sup>86</sup> Knežević’s activities in Russia were reported in detail via the internet portal Srbin.info and various extreme right-wing channels on the Telegram social networks.<sup>87</sup>

Serbian and Russian extreme right-wingers have also become better connected on the Telegram social network, where they quickly transmit and spread propaganda messages and disinformation.<sup>88</sup> Since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, they have been sending messages throughout their social network channels that the Russian Army will not stop on the western Ukrainian border but

will go further to the West to help Serbia liberate its historical lands. Also, during the heightened tensions in Kosovo at the end of July of 2023, the network of these channels transmitted coordinated disinformation that an armed conflict had occurred between Serbs and Albanians, that one Serb was wounded, and that the Serbian Army was ready to intervene on the border between Serbia and Kosovo.<sup>89</sup> This disinformation also attracted the attention of the mainstream media, which could have led to an escalation of the conflict in a situation of heightened tensions. Lisov's Z-Orlovi (with whom Knežević established contacts during his visit to Russia) took an important role in spreading this disinformation.<sup>90</sup>

Amid escalating crises between Kosovo and Serbia and the West's efforts to calm down this situation, Knežević visited Wagner's centre in St. Petersburg at the end of November 2022. He stated that he hoped his visit might guarantee Russian support in the decades-long feud with Serbia's former province of Kosovo, and particularly the assistance of Russia and its army in the event of a conflict in Kosovo.<sup>91</sup> Soon after, it was published that Wagner had opened its cultural and information office called Z-Orlovi in Belgrade, which proved to be fake news. The Russian-Serbian Centre Z-Orlovi does exist, but it operates mainly on Telegram, where its members spread disinformation and post threats to Russian liberals currently residing in Serbia.<sup>92</sup> The fact is that after Knežević visited Wagner, some Serbian far-righters started wearing Wagner patches at the later protests in Serbia and at the barricades in Kosovo, spreading fear that members of this paramilitary might escalate crises in Kosovo to armed conflict.<sup>93</sup>

### ***Threats to Vučić's Regime and Russian Liberals in Serbia***

To prevent Russia from destabilising the Western Balkans and thus diverting the attention of the West from the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Western countries decided to try to revive Kosovo/Serbia dialogue and solve their dispute. In this regard, the EU made a plan for the normalisation of the relationship between Kosovo and Serbia, which the US backed. However, after Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić announced in January 2023<sup>94</sup> that he would accept the proposal, far-right groups and political parties initiated a series of activities to undermine the acceptance of this plan. In this respect, the People's Patrol, together with other far-right groups and individuals, organised protests in front of the presidency building on February 15, the Serbian Statehood Day. Chanting "No surrender!", "Treason!", "Betrayal of Kosovo is a betrayal of Russia!" they threatened to riot if Vučić backed the EU plan. At the gathering, Knežević said,

“You are afraid of riots. I swear to you that we are ready for more than this.”<sup>95</sup> Also, Dejan Zlatanović, editor of the online portal Srbin.info, said in his speech that “the one who signs will be killed,” alluding that the Serbian president will be murdered if he signs the normalisation agreement.<sup>96</sup>

At one point, the protesters tried to break through the protective fence and enter the presidential building, but the police prevented the attempt.<sup>97</sup> In the end, Knežević and Zlatanović were arrested and charged with instigation for a violent change of the constitutional order but were released to defend themselves while not in detention. Russian foreign ministry and the Russian ambassador to Serbia condemned the threats sent from the rally and stressed that Russia does not interfere in the internal affairs of friendly Serbia.<sup>98</sup> Knežević’s arrests did not prevent People’s Patrol sympathisers from actively calling citizens to participate in another two protests on the same issue. The rallies were held on 17 March 2023, the day when Kosovo extremists conducted a pogrom against Kosovo Serbs in 2004,<sup>99</sup> and on 24 March 2023, the day when the NATO bombing campaign against Serbia began in 1999. Protesters with Wagner Group patches were spotted at all rallies.<sup>100</sup>

After visiting the Wagner Centre, the People’s Patrol began openly threatening Russian liberals currently residing in Serbia. In a post on their Telegram channel, the group stated that Russians and Ukrainians who came to Serbia had not been a problem initially, but many of them had abused the hospitality and started to influence and change the opinion of the Serbian people. The Russians also organised public demonstrations showing support for Ukraine. “Well, gentlemen, you waved your liberal flags unhindered until yesterday. Now, you won’t do that anymore; we will trample on them. And you and everyone else will watch ours. Maybe we’re occupied, but we’re proud and defiant. Welcome to Serbia,” the group announced. The immediate reason for these threats was that Russian liberals defaced the Wagner mural in Belgrade.<sup>101</sup>

Russian liberals and anti-war activists had received threats before from the far-right group Russian-Serbian Centre - The Eagles through their Telegram channel (Z-Orlovi) but not openly by People’s Patrol. However, members and sympathisers of Russian and Serbian far-right groups closely cooperate, and the leader of Z-Orlovi, Lisov, hosted Knežević during his visit to the Wagner Centre in St. Petersburg. Serbian far-right extremists seem to gather information about Russian liberals in Serbia and then send it to Z-Orlovi, which is surprisingly well-

informed of the latter's actions and movements. One case of physical violence has also been documented, where Ilya Zernov was beaten when he tried to repaint the mural dedicated to Wagner in Belgrade.<sup>102</sup>

### **Relationship of State Authorities towards the Far-Right**

Even though the existence of extremist groups in Serbia is not explicitly forbidden by law, the authorities have sufficient legal instruments to address the threat emanating from groups, as many of their activities are illegal. The Serbian Constitution prescribes that any encouragement of racial, ethnic, religious, or other inequality or hatred shall be prohibited and punishable. Serbia is also a signatory of many international conventions prohibiting discrimination which are transposed into the Serbian legal system (Constitution, Public Information Law, and Anti-Discrimination Law).<sup>103</sup> Experts agree that the current legal framework is sufficient for addressing (violent) extremism, but the problem is the state's benevolent relationship with the far-right.<sup>104</sup>

The relationship between the Serbian authorities and the far-right groups has always been pragmatic and tolerant. Even during the rule of democratic governments (2000–2012) no real effort to address the extreme right was made. The Constitutional Court banned two extreme-right groups, National Alignment and Honour, but declined to do the same for similar organisations, SNP 1389, and SNP Naši.<sup>105</sup> The same court had earlier rejected the Chief Public Prosecutor's initiative to ban dozens of football hooligan groups even though they acted more as a hate and crime group than mere football fans.<sup>106</sup>

With the SNS in power in 2012, nationalism has been resurrecting, and far-right groups, both fake and authentic, have become political instruments in the hands of the ruling party.<sup>107</sup> Both groups contribute to the spread of values that align with the government's vision of the Serbian identity, securitising some topics and groups (migrants, minorities), diverting voters' attention away from genuine issues, and serving as examples of huge Russian hybrid influence in Serbia providing an excuse for SNS government not to distance Serbia from Russia. Fake far-right groups also serve the SNS for siphoning support and votes away from genuine extreme-right groups and political parties, carrying out smear campaigns and violent acts instead of government officials, and establishing links with extreme-right groups in other countries. That is why Serbian authorities do little to prevent and punish hate speech and violent activities of far-righters. Even

if the perpetrators are arrested, they are soon freed, continuing their actions. Legal proceedings against far-righters rarely end with verdicts. Furthermore, Serbian officials rarely publicly condemn the activities of the extreme-right groups, and pro-government private media give space to far-right activists and war-crime convicts. No wonder that in 2019 the Courts of Appeal annulled the verdict to Goran Dividović Fuhrer, the leader of the banned neo-Nazi group National Alignment for violence against participants of the anti-fascist gathering.

The People's Patrol, although authentic far-right, has also experienced tolerant treatment by the authorities as its violent activities against migrants, professional media, nongovernmental organisations, and citizens go unpunished. One of the drastic examples of said actions was when the prosecution did not initiate proceedings against members of the People's Patrol when they plastered the city centre of Sombor with posters containing images and personal information of residents who were renting their accommodation to migrants, effectively inciting their lynching.<sup>108</sup> Serbian authorities undertook sharper measures towards the activities of the People's Patrol only in response to their protests against the acceptance of the EU plan for Kosovo in February 2023 and threats of violence. Thus, state authorities arrested Damnjan Knežević, leader of the People's Patrol, and Dejan Zlatanović, editor-in-chief of the far-right internet portal Srbin.info, charging them for calling for a violent change of the constitutional order.<sup>109</sup> Another man, allegedly a People's Patrol member, was arrested on his way to the February protest after a scoped rifle was found in his car.<sup>110</sup> Knežević and Zlatanović were released to defend themselves in freedom, and they soon continued with their activities calling again Vučić traitor and fake pro-Russian.<sup>111</sup>

The possible reason why authorities responded, in this case, more decisively to the violent activities of the People's Patrol and their collaborators is that they want to show the West how determined they are to combat extreme right-wing groups and the destabilising efforts of Russia to sabotage the implementation of the Brussels Agreement—a process of paramount importance for Western states. Consequently, through these arrests, authorities are also sending a message that this is a very serious violent group, and the West should understand that the extreme right can potentially destabilise Serbia and the region.<sup>112</sup>

## **Consequences: Citizens' Enormous Support for Putin's Russia and Undemocratic Values**

The long-term exposure of Serbian citizens to unhindered propaganda from the ruling SNS and extreme right-wing groups, such as the People's Patrol, has resulted in the normalisation of pro-Russian, ultra-conservative, and nationalist values, as well as the strengthening of anti-democratic, anti-European, and anti-Western attitudes. The Belgrade Centre for Security Policy's (BCSP) research from the autumn of 2022 shows that the majority of Serbian citizens blame NATO and the USA for the outbreak of the full-scale war between Russia and Ukraine, and no less than 80 percent of respondents are against imposing sanctions on Russia.<sup>113</sup> Moreover, 45 percent of citizens believe that Serbia should remain neutral in the Ukrainian conflict, while 36 percent think Serbia should take Russia's side. The constant bombardment of Serbian citizens with messages that Russia is becoming an unstoppable political, economic, and especially military force has led to nearly half of the citizens seeing Russia as the dominant power in the 21st century. At the same time, less than one-fifth of them believe it to be the US.

Shortly after the SNS came to power in 2014, the support of Serbian citizens for EU membership dropped below 50 percent. From 2017 the percentage of respondents opposing EU membership started to increase, and by 2022, the percentage of both groups of citizens (supporters and opponents of EU membership) had equalised at 46 percent. The public opinion towards Serbia's membership in NATO is even more negative, with only 5 percent of respondents in favour of joining NATO, while two-thirds of them are against it. Furthermore, citizens perceive NATO and the USA to be the biggest enemies of Serbia.<sup>114</sup>

Public opinion polls also indicate that nearly half of the citizens support activities and/or values promoted by extreme right-wing groups, such as the People's Patrol. A similar percentage of them support the idea of the "Serbian world" and the holding of religious rallies to preserve Christian, traditional, and family values, as well as public morality. In these conditions, it is no surprise that they consider ethnic minorities seeking to secede (41 percent), globalist elites (36 percent), and migrants (35 percent) as the top threats to their personal security and safety, while extreme-right groups (24 percent) and hooligans (22 percent) receive more favourable treatment.<sup>115</sup>



The citizens' nationalist and pro-Russian stance is evident in their opinions on Serbia's foreign policy priorities, with the highest ranked being the protection of Serbs in the region (82 percent), the fight for Kosovo (77 percent) and strengthening cooperation with Russia (72 percent). In contrast, EU membership (41 percent) and improving ties with the USA (37 percent) are ranked lower on their list of priorities. Anti-Western attitudes of citizens are mirrored in their views towards democracy. Only 40 percent of respondents think that democracy is the form of government that suits Serbia best, while one-third are for democracy in principle but believe that the current state of affairs in the country requires a "firm hand." The rest of the citizens are indifferent to the form of government or are openly for autocracy.<sup>116</sup> It is particularly concerning that most young people hold negative attitudes towards the EU and democracy, support the rule of a strong leader, and justify violence in society.<sup>117</sup>

Two Russian media, Sputnik Serbia and Russia Today, are present in Serbia from 2015 and 2022, respectively, but both are only internet portals. Therefore, the pro-Russian stances of Serbian citizens cannot be ascribed to Sputnik and RT but to Serbian pro-government media with national coverage. BCSP's public opinion polls have shown a significant overlap between people who expressed pro-Russian attitudes with those who get their information from pro-government TV stations and those who fully support President Aleksandar Vučić.<sup>118</sup>

### **Concluding Remarks: The SNS and People's Patrol - Two Sides of the Same (Russian) Coin?**

It is easy to conclude that the ruling SNS, while formally still leading Serbia into the EU and cooperative towards the West, is the most significant agent of Russian influence in Serbia. This influence is primarily manifested in the political and informational sphere, though other areas like security policy or economy should not be neglected. Through the media it controls, which constitutes 85 percent of the overall media space, the SNS spreads pro-Russian propaganda with a much greater emotional charge than the two Russian media outlets in Serbia, Sputnik, and Russia Today. This raises the question of why Russian influence is also present within far-right groups, particularly those critically and even hostile-oriented towards Vučić's regime, such as the People's Patrol. Is not it sufficient for Russia to exert its influence in Serbia through the ruling SNS which holds absolute power in the state? There are three possible answers to these questions.

The first explanation is that Putin does not fully trust President Vučić. In this scenario, Russia utilises the People's Patrol to send a message to the authorities not to make a U-turn away from Russia. Grounds for this assertion can be found in the fact that Vučić has not completely closed the door to the West as Serbia has not (officially) abandoned its EU integration path and Vučić appears cooperative in normalising relations with Kosovo. Moreover, a vocal pro-Russian figure in Serbia is Aleksandar Vulin, a politician with no significant voter base in Serbia, solely occupying critical state posts thanks to Vučić. If Vučić turns towards the West, he can easily, without domestic political repercussions, distance himself from Vulin and shift blame for pro-Russian influence onto Vulin. Finally, Russian media in Serbia, Sputnik, and Russia Today are only internet portals, meaning that Serbian pro-government media with national coverage are responsible for boosting pro-Russian sentiment among Serbian citizens. Given that Vučić's government channels Russian influence, he can also curtail and divert it in other directions, if he wishes. Therefore, through the People's Patrol's (violent) activities, Russia is informally conveying to both the authorities in Serbia and the West that it has ways to further generate discontent among citizens on national and other issues and can exploit it to destabilise Serbia and the region. According to this hypothesis, the People's Patrol is the Kremlin's informal messenger in Serbia.

The second explanation is that the actions of both actors are well coordinated and planned in Moscow. The strong pro-Russian far-right in Serbia serves Vučić to demonstrate to the West that the extreme-right can genuinely destabilise the situation in Serbia and the region should he decide to swiftly resolve the Kosovo issue, thereby eliminating the political basis of Russian influence in Serbia. The violent activities of the People's Patrol provide Vučić with a convenient excuse to delay the practical normalisation of relations with Kosovo, preserving a frozen conflict—a situation that aligns with Russia's goals in the region. Vučić's refusal to impose sanctions on Russia could be justified on the same grounds. The People's Patrol has operated unhindered for years, and the arrest of its leader serves the purpose of simulating a fight against the pro-Russian far-right in Serbia. Vučić's official cooperation with the West on the Kosovo issue and regular years-long hints of moving away from Moscow correspond to Russia's interests, prolonging the West's false hope of Serbia's foreign policy shift. Supporting this second explanation is the fact that Vučić's regime has done little to diminish pro-Russian stances among citizens. Instead, it has reinforced them through its media, creating and projecting the image to the West of strong Russian influence in

Serbia and portraying that Vučić cannot swiftly shift towards the West. Finally, the Serbian and Russian governments share a similar ideological background manifested in the Russian and Serbian world concepts, seemingly turning them into good allies.

The third possible explanation is that Vučić does not intend to bring Serbia closer to the EU and the West or Russia. Instead, he aims to maintain absolute power in the country for as long as possible until the geopolitical situation becomes clearer. In pursuit of this goal, he amplifies the fears of both the West and Russia, positioning himself in between so that if he is not in power, these fears would then materialise – Russia destabilising the region or the West pushing Russia out of the Western Balkans. Officially, this is a policy of (military) neutrality, but a more suitable term, coined by President Vučić himself, is “politics of wriggling,”<sup>119</sup> which implies lying to both the West and Russia while masking it by making some concessions and decisions that align with their interests.

Whichever explanation is true, it is certain that the consequences of these actions of SNS and extreme right-wing organisations like the People’s Patrol are dire and long-lasting for Serbia while simultaneously fitting the goals of Putin’s Russia. The public opinion in Serbia is pro-Russian, ultra-conservative, and anti-Western, with citizens seeking the rule of a strong leader. Particularly concerning is that a majority of young people hold these views. Citizens’ attitudes can change, but it is always a slow and difficult process, especially in societies lacking consensus on fundamental societal values and at the crossroads of different geopolitical interests. Hence, the belief that Serbian authorities can easily change public opinion in case of a shift towards the West is unfounded. The responsibility for this situation in Serbia also lies with the West, which has tolerated the erosion of democratic institutions, the marginalisation of political opposition and critical media, and the concentration of power in the hands of Vučić for years, all in pursuit of achieving a final agreement between Serbia and Kosovo and maintaining fake stability in the Western Balkans. This has led many pro-Western citizens in Serbia to become disappointed and sceptical of the EU and the West, as well as democracy, which they perceive now only as an instrument in geopolitical competition. Therefore, even if Vučić were deposed soon, it would be hard to believe that current voters would support a sharp turn from Russia.

Therefore, it is crucial for the EU and other Western countries to promptly prevent Serbia’s further drift towards Russia through a combination of incentive measures and sanctions. In this regard, the New Growth Plan for the Western Balkans by

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the EU Commission is significant, envisioning €6 billion in financial aid and investments for Western Balkan countries implementing substantial reforms.<sup>120</sup> Additionally, Serbia will have access to €1.4 billion through IPA3 funds by 2027.<sup>121</sup> The EU should adopt a firmer stance towards Vučić's government and withhold these funds if the authorities do not genuinely strengthen democracy and the rule of law and do not align Serbia's foreign policy with the EU. The EU should also impose restrictive measures on representatives and associates of the government. The US has already taken such steps for some of them.<sup>122</sup> Still, by expanding the circle of sanctioned individuals and coordinating the simultaneous imposition of sanctions by the EU and Western states, Vučić's government would be significantly more affected.

Finally, one of Serbia's obligations on the path to the EU is adopting a new strategy against violent extremism. The EU should insist that the key priority of the strategy be the fight against extreme right-wing and malign foreign influence. One of the most important measures in combating the far right should be a change in the narrative in the public sphere, with public officials and the media as the main actors. Necessary measures should also include strengthening media pluralism and critical thinking. Through an accompanying action plan, the EU should monitor the implementation of the strategy, and if it proves weak, the EU, along with partner countries, should immediately apply restrictive measures towards the authorities.

<sup>1</sup> Izabela Kisić, ed., *Desni ekstremizam u Srbiji* [Right-wing Extremism in Serbia] (Beograd: Helsinški odbor za ljudska prava, 2020).

<sup>2</sup> Bojan Rabrenovic, “Vučićevi mediji u Srbiji u kandžama ruske propaganda” [The media loyal to Vučić in Serbia in the clutches of Russian propaganda], *Deutsche Welle*, 3 August 2023, <https://www.dw.com/bs/mediji-u-srbiji-koje-kontroli%C5%A1e-vu%C4%8Di%C4%87-u-kand%C5%BEama-ruske-propagande/a-66430595>.

<sup>3</sup> Vuk Velebit, “Proruski narativ u srpskim medijima (2) – Zašto su domaći mediji emotivniji od ruskih?” [Pro-Russian narrative in Serbian media (2) – Why are domestic media more emotional than Russian?] *Talas*, 22 May 2019. <https://talas.rs/2019/05/22/pro-ruski-narativ-drugi-deo/>.

<sup>4</sup> Predrag Petrović and Marija Ignjatijević, *Violent Extremism in Serbia: Islamist and Far-right* (Belgrade: Belgrade Centre for Security Policy, 2023), 12–13.

<sup>5</sup> Vuk Vuksanovic, Luka Steric, and Maja Bjelos, *Public perception of Serbian foreign policy in the midst of the war in Ukraine* (Pristina: BCSP & KCSS, 2022); Predrag Petrović and Srdjan Hercigonja, *There is No Democracy in Serbia, nor is it Desirable* (Belgrade: BCSP and KCSS, 2022).

<sup>6</sup> Boban Stojanović, Aleksandar Ivković, and Boris Kaličanin, *Alternative Report on the Position and Needs of Youth in The Republic of Serbia – 2023* (Belgrade: National Youth Council of Serbia - KOMS, 2023).

<sup>7</sup> Petrović and Ignjatijević, *Violent Extremism in Serbia: Islamist and Far-right*, 9.

<sup>8</sup> Vojislav Šešelj is the founder and president of the far-right Serbian Radical Party which has been advocating for the establishment of Greater Serbia. During the violent dissolution of Yugoslavia in 1990s, he organised the Serbian paramilitary unit Beli Orlovi (White Eagles). In 1998, as violence in the Serbian province of Kosovo increased, Šešelj joined Milošević's national unity government, where he was vice president. International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia convicted Šešelj on a 10-year sentence for crimes against humanity. He was also suspected of being a member of the Zemun organized crime clan and one of the principal instigators of the assassination of the democratic prime minister of Serbia, Zoran Djindjić. For more on this, see Admir Muslimovic, "Vojislav Seselj: Nationalist Whose Dream Didn't Come True," *BalkanInsight*, April 9, 2018. <https://balkaninsight.com/2018/04/09/vojislav-seselj-nationalist-whose-dream-didn-t-come-true-04-04-2018/>.

<sup>9</sup> Vladimir Zhirinovskiy is the founder of the Russian ultranationalist Liberal Democratic Party of Russia, which has been advocating for the establishment of the Russian Empire. Zhirinovskiy and LDPR achieved remarkable popularity and electoral success in the first five years after the collapse of the Soviet Union by pursuing (seemingly) absurd and contradictory policies and engaging in eccentric and inappropriate behaviours. Zhirinovskiy was active in establishing and maintaining contacts with radical right political parties throughout Europe. For more on this, see Anton Shekhovtsov, *Russia and the Western far right: Tango Noir* (New York: Routledge, 2017).

<sup>10</sup> Republika Srpska is a political entity that grew out of the Bosnian War (1992–1995) where Bosnian Serbs were opposing the establishment of independent and unitary Bosnia and Herzegovina. The Dayton Peace Agreement ended the war by establishing B&H as a very complex state consisting of Republika Srpska and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, comprising ten autonomous cantons with their own governments and legislatures. Serbs populate Republika Srpska, while borders of cantons in the Federation follow the ethnic division between Bosniaks and Croats. For more on this, see Damir Banović, Saša Gavrić,

and Mariña Barreiro Mariño, *The Political System of Bosnia and Herzegovina* (Berlin: Springer, 2021).

<sup>11</sup> Miloš Vasić, “Privatnici i prevaranti, [Private and Fraudster]”, *Vreme*, 19 January 2006, <https://www.vreme.com/vreme/privatnici-i-prevaranti/>.

<sup>12</sup> Gianluca Mezzofiore, “Igor Strelkov’s Bosnian Diary: Ukraine Separatist Leader’s 1992 Bloody War,” *International Business Times UK*, 29 July 2014, <https://www.ibtimes.co.uk/igor-strelkovs-bosnian-diary-ukraine-separatist-leaders-1992-bloody-war-1458897>.

<sup>13</sup> Semir Mujkić, “Srpsko-ruski “zavet” dobrovoljaca Višegrada i Donbasa” [Serbian-Russian ‘oath’ of volunteers from Višegrad and Donbas], *Detektor*, 22 May 2019, <https://detektor.ba/2019/05/22/srpsko-ruski-zavet-dobrovoljaca-visegrada-i-donbasa/>.

<sup>14</sup> Florian Bieber and Židas Daskalovski, *Understanding the war in Kosovo* (London: Frank Cass, 2003).

<sup>15</sup> Bojana Oprijan Ilic, “Upotreba i zloupotreba istorije” [Use and abuse of history] *Helsinška povelja XVI*, no. 147–148 (2011), 35.

<sup>16</sup> Petrović and Ignjatijević, *Violent Extremism in Serbia: Islamist and Far-right*, 9–11.

<sup>17</sup> Isidora Stakić, “Serbian Nationalism and Right-Wing Extremism,” in *Violent Extremism in the Western Balkans*, ed. Filip Ejodus and Predrag Jureković (Vienna: Federal Ministry of Defence, Republic of Austria, 2016).

<sup>18</sup> “Russia To Block Kosovo At UN,” *BIRN*, 2 April 2008, <https://balkaninsight.com/2008/04/02/russia-to-block-kosovo-at-un/>.

<sup>19</sup> Peter Cassata, “Pipeline Politics: Gazprom Seals Serbia Deal,” *New Atlanticist*, 29 December 2008.

<sup>20</sup> English version is available in: “Resolution on protection of sovereignty, territorial integrity and constitutional order of Serbia adopted,” *ReliefWeb*, 26 December 2007, <https://reliefweb.int/report/serbia/resolution-protection-sovereignty-territorial-integrity-and-constitutional-order>.

<sup>21</sup> Some authors dispute that Dugin has influenced Putin, instead suggesting that Putin found inspiration and concepts for political action in Ivan Ilyin, a political philosopher from the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This would mean that Dugin is the Kremlin’s unofficial spokesperson. However, even if we accept this interpretation, it does not diminish the significance of Dugin for the subject of our work because he actively and loudly promotes geopolitical ideas that suit Kremlin beyond the borders of Russia. In comparison to Ilyin, Dugin is far more well-known and influential today among pro-Russian far-right political parties and informal groups. Ilyin’s work outside Russia is familiar to a very narrow circle of pro-Russian right-wing intellectuals. For more on Ilyin’s influence on Putin, see: Timothy Snyder, *The Road to Unfreedom: Russia, Europe, America* (New York: Crown, 2018). For more on Dugin’s influence on Putin, see: Anton Barbashin and Hannah Thoburn, “Putin’s brain: Alexander Dugin and the philosophy behind Putin’s invasion of Crimea,” *Foreign Affairs*, March 31, 2014.

<sup>22</sup> RTS, “Aleksandar Geljević Dugin: Mislim da živimo esencijalno na kraju vremena” [I think we are essentially living at the end of times], *RTS*, 22 June 2022.

<sup>23</sup> “Aleksandar Dugin: Košare su Termopili Evroazije, Srbi su prvi primili udarce namenjene Rusima!” [Košare are the Thermopylae of Eurasia: The Serbs were the First to Receive Blows Intended for the Russians!], *Serbian Times*, 22 March 2022.

<sup>24</sup> Dušan Glišić, “Srbija ima odgovornost za Balkan” [Serbia has a responsibility for the Balkans], *Odbrana*, no. 332, February 2020.

- <sup>25</sup> Jovo Bakić, “Politički ekstremizam u savremenoj Srbiji” [Political extremism in contemporary Serbia], *HERETICUS* V, no. 2, 2007.
- <sup>26</sup> The law in English language is available at: *The Serbian Public Information Law 1998*, (New York: Committee to Protect Journalists, 2023). <https://cpj.org/reports/2000/08/serb-info-law/>.
- <sup>27</sup> Srđan Mladenov-Jovanović, “Confronting Recent History: Media in Serbia During Aleksandar Vučić’s Ministry of Information in the Milošević Era (1998–1999),” *Hiperboreea. Journal of History* 6, no. 1, 2019. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.3406/hiper.2019.969>.
- <sup>28</sup> Shpetim Gashi and Igor Novaković, *Brussels Agreements between Kosovo and Serbia* (Belgrade: FES Serbia, 2020).
- <sup>29</sup> Aleksandra Srećković, *Mapping the Media Landscape in Serbia* (Belgrade: CRTA, 2022).
- <sup>30</sup> Andrew Higgins, “Eastern Europe Tests New Forms of Media Censorship,” *The New York Times*, 17 January 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/17/world/europe/serbia-media-censorship.html>.
- <sup>31</sup> Nemanja Rujević, “Igor Božić: Svaki slobodan ekran je problem za ovu vlast” [Every free TV screen is a problem for this government], *Deutsche Welle*, 27 October 2023, <https://www.dw.com/sr/igor-bo%C5%BEi%C4%87-svaki-slobodan-ekran-je-problem-za-ovu-vlast/a-67221600>.
- <sup>32</sup> Igor Novaković and Tanja Plavšić, *An analysis of Serbia’s alignment with the EU’s foreign policy declarations and measures in 2022* (Belgrade: ISAC Fund, 2023).
- <sup>33</sup> For reports on Serbia’s democracy decline see: *Serbia Report 2022*, DG NEAR, European Commission (Brussels: European Commission, 12 October 2022), [https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/serbia-report-2022\\_en](https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/serbia-report-2022_en); “Freedom House: Democratic institutions in the Western Balkans continued to falter in 2022,” *European Western Balkans*, 24 May 2023, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2023/05/24/freedom-house-democratic-institutions-in-the-western-balkans-continued-to-falter-in-2022/>; Natalia Natsika et al., *Defiance in the Face of Autocratization*, Democracy Report 2023, (Gothenburg: V-Dem Institute, 2023).
- <sup>34</sup> For more on this topic, see Wouter Zweers and Giulia Cretti, *The EU as a promoter of democracy or “stabilitocracy” in the Western Balkans?*, Clingendael Report, (The Hague: Clingendael, 2022); Srđa Pavlović, “West is best: How ‘stabilitocracy’ undermines democracy building in the Balkans,” *LSE European Politics and Policy Blog*, LSE, 5 May 2017.
- <sup>35</sup> When SNS came to power in 2012, Vučić became: the first Deputy Prime Minister in charge of defence, security, and the fight against organised crime and corruption; the Minister of Defence; and the Secretary of the National Security Council. At the same time, Vučić also became president of the SNS, as Nikolić resigned from his party functions to fulfil his promise of becoming a “president for all.” After the snap parliamentary elections in 2014, when SNS won the absolute majority, Vučić became prime minister until 2017, when he was elected as a President of the Republic by popular vote. For more on Vučić’s misuse of security institutions for his rise to power, see: Predrag Petrović and Jelena Nikić Pejić, “Security Sector Capture in Serbia—An Early Study,” (Belgrade: Belgrade Centre for Security Policy, 2020).
- <sup>36</sup> In the past decade, Serbia has significantly deepened ties with China, emerging as its primary Balkan partner. Bilateral trade has surged, making China Serbia’s largest trading partner after Germany. China invests in Serbian industry and transportation, while Serbia sources military equipment and advanced security cameras. During the COVID-19 pandemic,

China supplied vaccines to Serbia ahead of the EU, leading to Vučić highlighting the “steel friendship” and expressing concerns about EU solidarity. China’s support for Serbia regarding Kosovo in the UN Security Council positions it as one of Serbia’s four key strategic pillars. For more on this, see: Mladen Lišanin, “Prospects of European-Chinese Contest for Influence in the Western Balkans: The Case of Serbia,” in *China and World Politics in Transition: How China Transforms the World Political Order*, ed. Fulvio Attinà and Yi Feng (Springer, 2023).

<sup>37</sup> The Kosovo-Serbia Economic Normalisation Agreements, commonly called the Washington Agreement, consist of two formal documents through which Kosovo and Serbia committed to promoting economic reconciliation between them. Avdullah Hoti, the then–Prime Minister of Kosovo, and Aleksandar Vučić, the President of Serbia, officially signed these agreements on 4 September 2020, at the White House in the presence of the then–US President, Donald Trump. However, both sides have implemented very little from the agreement, and it is almost forgotten today. “Three years since the Washington Agreement: Why was a good opportunity for normalization missed?,” *Kosovo Online*, 4 September 2023, <https://www.kosovo-online.com/en/news/analysis/three-years-washington-agreement-why-was-good-opportunity-normalization-missed-4-9>.

<sup>38</sup> The latest incident in September 2023 (Banjska incident) could have led to bigger armed conflict between Serbia and Kosovo. At that time, around 30 armed and uniformed Serbs from northern Kosovo set up barricades in an attempt to launch an armed uprising. A conflict soon ensued between the group and the Kosovo police, resulting in the death of one Kosovar police officer and three Serbs. Kosovo authorities claimed that this was an attempt by Serbia, backed by Russia, to destabilise the region by trying to annex North Kosovo, similar to Russia’s actions in Crimea. Jamie Dettmer, “Kosovo attack: Who benefits?” *Politico*, October 2, 2023.

<sup>39</sup> Goran Misić, “Hilova ljubav prema Srbiji i ljubav Srba prema Americi” [Hill’s love for Serbia and the love of Serbs for America], *AlJazeera*, 11 August 2023, <https://balkans.aljazeera.net/opinions/2023/8/11/hilova-ljubav-prema-srbiji-i-ljubav-srba-prema-americi>.

<sup>40</sup> Lidija Valtner, “Šta je pozadina zahteva da se promeni zapadna politika prema Srbiji?” [What is the background of the demand to change Western policy towards Serbia?], *Danas*, 7 August 2023, <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/zapadna-politika-prema-srbiji-pismo-zvanicnicima-eu-sad-vb/>.

<sup>41</sup> “Jedinstvena Rusija i SNS potpisale sporazum o saradnji” [United Russia and the SNS signed a cooperation agreement], *RTV*, 27 October 2010, [https://rtv.rs/sk/politika/jedinstvena-rusija-i-sns-potpisale-sporazum-o-saradnji\\_219466.html](https://rtv.rs/sk/politika/jedinstvena-rusija-i-sns-potpisale-sporazum-o-saradnji_219466.html); Svetlana Božić Krainčanić, “Srpski saveznici Putinove politike” [Serbian allies of Putin’s politics], *Radio Slobodna Evropa*, 3 December 2018, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/29634674.html>.

<sup>42</sup> “Sporazum o saradnji SNS-a i Jedinstvene Rusije” [Cooperation Agreement between the SNS and United Russia], *RTS*, 25 October 2018, <https://www.rts.rs/lat/vesti/politika/3301256/sporazum-o-saradnji-sns-a-i-jedinstvene-rusije.html>.

<sup>43</sup> The CSTO is a Russia-led military alliance of seven former Soviet states that was created in 2002. Its initial declared purpose was to counter external aggression against members and to harmonise their foreign policy stances. The organisation has since addressed sub-conventional challenges (cyber threats, terrorism, ethnic unrest, humanitarian emergencies, peacekeeping, etc.). It also supports arms sales, manufacturing, and military training and exercises among its members. Russia is the CSTO’s dominant member, using the organisation



to support and enhance its influence abroad. Many experts consider the CSTO a Euro-Asian counterweight to NATO. Serbia and Afghanistan have enjoyed non-member observer status since 2013. Richard Weitz, *Assessing the collective security treaty organization: Capabilities and vulnerabilities* (Carlisle: US Army War College Press, 2018).

<sup>44</sup> “Ministarstvo odbrane SAD: Ruski uticaj u Srbiji porastao dolaskom Vučića na vlast” [US Department of Defense: Russian influence in Serbia increased with Vučić coming to power], *Radio Slobodna Evropa*, 26 November 2019, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/ministarstvo-odbrane-sad-o-ruskom-uticaju-na-zapadnom-balkanu/30293758.html>.

<sup>45</sup> Tomislav Marković, “Zašto je Vučić dobio orden od Putina” [Why did Vučić receive an order from Putin], *Al Jazeera Balkans*, 19 January 2019, <https://balkans.aljazeera.net/opinions/2019/1/19/zasto-je-vucic-dobio-orden-od-putina>.

<sup>46</sup> Aleksandar Ljubomirović, “Srpski svet: Načertanije 21. veka?” [The Serbian World: The Program of the 21st Century?] *Novi standard*, 14 April 2023, <https://standard.rs/2023/04/14/srpski-svet-nacertanije-21-veka/>.

<sup>47</sup> “Vulin: Stvaranje srpskog sveta rešava nacionalno pitanje, ujedinjenje već počelo” [Vulin: Creating the Serbian World Solves the National Question, Unification Already Underway], *NI info*, 1 May 2021, <https://n1info.rs/vesti/vulin-stvaranje-srpskog-sveta-resava-nacionalno-pitanje-ujedinjenje-vec-pocelo/>.

<sup>48</sup> Aneta Durović, “Pozivi da se Vučić ogradi od Vulinovog ‘srpskog sveta’” [Calls for Vučić to Distance Himself from Vulin’s Serbian World], *RSE*, 19 July 2021, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/most-beograd-ukrajina-srpski-svet/31772171.html>.

<sup>49</sup> Elma Ljubičić, “‘Ruski’ i ‘srpski svet’ su projekti izgrađeni na sličnim frustracijama” [The ‘Russian’ and ‘Serbian Worlds’ are projects built on similar frustrations], *Al Jazeera Balkans*, 29 March 2022, <https://balkans.aljazeera.net teme/2022/3/29/srbija-kao-plodno-tlo-za-rusku-propagandu>.

<sup>50</sup> For more on the concept of the Serbian World and its similarities with the Russian world, see Aleksandar Ljubomirovic, *The Concept of the Serbian World: A Copy of the Russian World or a Unique Idea for the Multidimensional Cohesion of the Serbian People?* (Berlin: Free University Berlin, 2022). [https://mpr.aub.uni-muenchen.de/116274/1/MPRA\\_paper\\_116274.pdf](https://mpr.aub.uni-muenchen.de/116274/1/MPRA_paper_116274.pdf).

<sup>51</sup> In the last few years, the political situation in Bosnia has been deteriorating, as the leader of the Bosnian Serbs, Milorad Dodik, openly advocates for secession with the support of Russia. At the same time, the Bosnian Croats seek greater ethnic autonomy, aiming to establish a Croatian federal unit within Bosnia. This contrasts with the Bosniaks’ efforts to centralise the state. Because of this, this situation reminds many of the time before the outbreak of the War in Bosnia (1992–1995), when Serbs and Croats opposed the formation of a unified state, wanting to secede parts of Bosnia where they constituted the majority and join them to their respective home countries, forming Greater Serbia and Greater Croatia. During the Bosnian War, around 100 thousand people lost their lives, and 2.2 million were displaced. For more on the political and security situation in Bosnia, see Frans van Nijnatten, “The situation in Bosnia is getting worse by the day,” interview by Militaire Spectator, 17 February 2023.

<sup>52</sup> Vulin resigned from the position of the BIA's director at the beginning of November 2023. Still, the Serbian government cannot dismiss him from the post because parliamentary elections are scheduled for 17 December, so the government is in a technical mandate. Also, the deputy director post has been vacant since Vulin’s appointment, so Vulin still runs BIA effectively. Commenting on the resignation, Vučić said he looks forward to a new collaboration with Vulin and future joint successes. “Aleksandar Vulin podneo ostavku na

mesto šefa BIA Srbije” [Aleksandar Vulin Resigns from the Position of the BIA's Chief], *Radio Free Europe*, 3 November 2023.

<sup>53</sup> The Serbian Armed Forces have been equipped with modernized tanks and armoured vehicles, artillery, and missile systems, as well as aircraft and helicopters. Marija Ignjatijević, ed., *Balkans Defence Monitor* (Belgrade: BCSP, 2022).

<sup>54</sup> Rade Ranković, “Đukić: Postavljenjem Vulina na čelo BIA Vučić otvara još jedan front sa Zapadom” [Đukić: By appointing Vulin at the helm of BIA, Vučić opens another front with the West], *Voice of America Balkan Service*, 2 December 2022.

<sup>55</sup> Stojković, Čedomir, “Vučićev režim kao kancer, sve što je dobro iskoristi za sebe!” [Vučić's regime like cancer, he exploits everything good for himself!]. Interview by Aleksandar Dikić. Bez ustručavanja. KTV. 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VIBZjGd7o3o>.

<sup>56</sup> The term “colour revolution” emerged in the early 2000s and was primarily used to describe a series of often-tumultuous protests that led to (attempted or successful) changes in government in countries such as Serbia and post-Soviet states, notably Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan. The primary objective of these colour revolutions was to establish liberal democracies, combat corruption, and foster closer integration with Western countries. They were typically triggered by widely perceived fraudulent election results. Russian leadership views these revolutions as a novel approach by the United States and Europe, focusing on fomenting destabilising uprisings in other nations to advance their security interests at a relatively low cost and with minimal casualties. The Russian National Security Strategy identifies foreign-backed regime change as one of the main public and national security threats. The deposition of the Serbian president Slobodan Milošević is considered the first colour revolution. For more on this, see: Anthony Cordesman, *Russia and the “Color Revolution”*, vol. 28, Center for Strategic and International Studies, (Washington: CSIS, 2014); Paul Bolt and Sharyl Cross, “China, Russia, and twenty-first century global geopolitics,” in *Emerging Non-traditional Security Challenges: Color Revolutions, Cyber and Information Security, Terrorism, and Violent Extremism Get access Arrow*, ed. Paul Bolt and Sharyl Cross (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

<sup>57</sup> MUP, “Ministar Vulin: Odnosi Srbije i Ruske Federacije na najvišem nivou” [Minister Vulin: Relations between Serbia and the Russian Federation at the highest level], Press release, 3 December 2021, [bit.ly/3Qg6lIt](http://bit.ly/3Qg6lIt).

<sup>58</sup> “Serbian, Russian officials agree to combat “colored revolutions”,” *NI info*, 3 December 2021, <https://n1info.rs/english/news/serbian-russian-officials-agree-to-combat-colored-revolutions/>.

<sup>59</sup> “Russian Federation: Activist sentenced to four years in prison: Andrei Pivovarov,” *Amnesty International*, 29 July 2022, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur46/5906/2022/en/>.

<sup>60</sup> “Russia: Anti-war political activist and prisoner of conscience Vladimir Kara-Murza sentenced to 25 years in jail,” *Amnesty International*, 17 April 2023, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/04/anti-war-political-activist-and-prisoner-of-conscience-vladimir-kara-murza-sentenced-to-25-in-jail/>.

<sup>61</sup> For more about the case of surveillance of the Russian opposition politicians and activists, see Vladimir Kara-Murza, “Putin already has at least one client regime in Central Europe,” *The Washington Post*, 18 January 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2022/01/18/putin-already-has-least-one-client-regime-central-europe/>.

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- <sup>63</sup> Tanja Milovanović, “Ruski aktivisti u nemilosti direktora BIA” [Russian Activists in Disfavor of the BIA Director], *Nova*, 27 July 2023.
- <sup>64</sup> Milan Milenković, “Progon Rusa u Srbiji demaskira Vučićev režim” [The Persecution of Russians in Serbia Exposes Vučić's Regime], *Danas*, 17 August 2023, <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/rusi-srbija-figaro-aleksandar-vucic/>.
- <sup>65</sup> Vuk Velebit, “Proruski narativ u srpskim medijima (2) – Zašto su domaći mediji emotivniji od ruskih?” [Pro-Russian Narrative in Serbian Media (2) – Why are Domestic Media more Emotional than Russian ones], *Talas*, 22 May 2019, <https://talas.rs/2019/05/22/pro-ruski-narativ-drugi-deo/>.
- <sup>66</sup> Izabela Kisić, “The pro-Russian media campaign in Serbia,” *The Atlantiv Initiatives*, 23 March 2022, <https://atlanticinitiative.org/the-pro-russian-media-campaign-in-serbia/>.
- <sup>67</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>68</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>69</sup> Mihaela Šljukić Bandović, “Rat u Ukrajini: Za režimske medije Rusija je žrtva, a ne agresor” [War in Ukraine: According to Regime-controlled Media, Russia is the Victim, not the Aggressor], *Istinomer*, 25 February 2022, <https://www.istinomer.rs/analize/rat-u-ukrajini-za-rezimske-medije-rusija-je-zrtva-a-ne-agresor/>.
- <sup>70</sup> “Serbian media reporting on Ukraine crisis” (Belgrade: CRTA, 2022).
- <sup>71</sup> Nedim Sejdinovic, “Ekstremisti ‘šuruju’ sa vlastima i progone migrante” [Extremists 'Colluding' with Authorities and Hunting Migrants] *AlJazeera*, 17 October 2021, <https://balkans.aljazeera.net teme/2021/10/17/ekstremisti-i-antimigranti-u-sluzbi-vlasti-srbije>.
- <sup>72</sup> “Pogledajte - Narodne patrole razoružale migrante i sprovele civilno hapšenje!” [Watch: People's Patrols Disarmed Migrants and Carried Out Civil Arrest!], *Srbin.info*, 8 September 2022, <https://srbin.info/drustvo/pogledajte-narodne-patrole-razoruzale-migrante-i-sprovele-civilno-hapsenje-video/?lang=lat>.
- <sup>73</sup> Sejdinovic, “Ekstremisti ‘šuruju’ sa vlastima i progone migrante” [Extremists 'Colluding' with Authorities and Hunting Migrants].
- <sup>74</sup> Damjan Knežević founded the People's Initiative No Surrender for Kosovo and Metohija in 2017. This initiative emerged after several years of Knežević's activism in northern Kosovo, including participation in (violent) demonstrations and road blockades. Knežević is also one of the founders of the far-right movement, now a parliamentary party, the Serbian Party Oathkeepers, from which he departed in 2014, accusing its leadership of becoming collaborators with Aleksandar Vučić. Nemanja Mitrović, “Narodne patrole: Ko patrolira Beogradom u potrazi za migrantima” [People's Patrols: Who Patrols Belgrade in Search of Migrants?], *BBC News na Srpskom*, 9 March 2020.
- <sup>75</sup> Predrag Petrović and Marija Ignjatijević, *Migrants are Leaving, But Hatred Remains The Anti-Migrant Extreme Right in Serbia* (Belgrade: Belgrade Centre for Security Policy, 2022), 7–8.
- <sup>76</sup> Ibid, 30–39.
- <sup>77</sup> Ibid, 48.
- <sup>78</sup> Jovana Bjekić, Marko Živanović, and Maša Vukčević Marković, *Attitudes Towards Migrants and Refugees in Serbia* (Belgrade: Psychosocial Innovation Network, 2020), [https://psychosocialinnovation.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Stavovi-prema-izbeglicama-i-migrantima\\_ENGL.pdf](https://psychosocialinnovation.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Stavovi-prema-izbeglicama-i-migrantima_ENGL.pdf), 12–13.

<sup>79</sup> Petrović and Ignjatijević, *Migrants are Leaving, But Hatred Remains The Anti-Migrant Extreme Right in Serbia*, 44–46.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid, 36–39 and 46–48.

<sup>81</sup> Petrović and Ignjatijević, *Violent Extremism in Serbia: Islamist and Far-right*, 16; Jelena Pejić Nikić, ed., *Alarm Report on Progress of Serbia in Cluster 1 - November 2023* (Belgrade: BCSP, 2023).

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<sup>83</sup> “U petak veliki protest u Beogradu, stigla podrška od ruske braće!” [On Friday, a Large Protest in Belgrade, Support Arrived from Russian Brothers!], *Srbin.info*, 1 March 2022, <https://srbin.info/politika/za-rusiju-u-petak-veliki-protest-u-beogradu-stigla-podrska-od-ruske-brace-video/?lang=lat>.

<sup>84</sup> More about the Russian Imperial Movement: Jason Blazakis and Colin Clarke, *Inside the Russian Imperial Movement* (New York: The Soufan Center, 2020).

<sup>85</sup> “Damnjan u studiju RT televizije: Srbi i Rusi su i braća i strateški partneri” [Damnjan in the RT TV studio: Serbs and Russians are both brothers and strategic partners], *Srbin.info*, 3 May 2022, <https://srbin.info/drustvo/damnjan-u-studiju-rt-televizije-srbi-i-rusi-su-i-braca-i-strateski-partneri-video/?lang=lat>.

<sup>86</sup> The Eagles were registered in 2017 as a nonprofit organisation based in St. Petersburg. They launched a Telegram channel named Z-Eagles five days after the Russian attack on Ukraine, garnering more than eight thousand followers. Lisov has strong connections with the French far-right group Generation Identitaire, which French authorities declared illegal in 2021. “‘We know who did it’: Russian anti-war exiles targeted in Serbia,” *France 24*, 26 January 2023.

<sup>87</sup> Petrović and Ignjatijević, *Violent Extremism in Serbia: Islamist and Far-right*, 24.

<sup>88</sup> “‘Telegrams’ with fake news on Western Balkans”, *RSE*, 20 April 2022, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/rusija-telegram-kanali/31808637.html>.

<sup>89</sup> Jelena Pejić Nikić, ed., *Alarm Report on Progress of Serbia in Cluster 1 - November 2022* (Belgrade: Belgrade Centre for Security Policy, 2022), 116.

<sup>90</sup> “How pro-Russian and Russian Telegram channels spread misinformation about Kosovo”, *RSE*, 1 August 2022, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/kosovo-rusija-telegram-proruski-drustvene-mreze-dezinformacije/31969041.html>.

<sup>91</sup> “Serbian right-winger says Wagner ties could help if there is a ‘conflict In Kosovo’”, *RFE*, 6 December 2022, <https://www.rferl.org/a/serbia-russia-wagner-kosovo-ultranationalists-/32164146.html>.

<sup>92</sup> “Nakon objave Vagnera da je registrovao udruženje u Srbiji, ruski antiratni aktivisti negiraju, eksperti upozoravaju” [After Wagner’s announcement of registering an association in Serbia, Russian anti-war activists deny, experts issue warnings], *VOA*, 9 December 2022, <https://www.glasamerike.net/a/balkan-srbija-rat-u-ukrajini-ukrajina-rusija-grupa-vagner-delovanje-analiticari-nikitin-varga-radic/6868391.html>.

<sup>93</sup> “Obeležja ruske jedinice Vagner na desničarskom protestu u Beogradu” [Markings of the Russian Wagner unit observed at a right-wing protest in Belgrade], *RSE*, 17 March 2023, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/beograd-protesti-desnica-kosovo/32323225.html>.

<sup>94</sup> “Vučić posle sastanka sa petorkom: Srbija je spremna da prihvati francusko-nemački plan uz jednu rezervu” [Vučić, after the meeting with the five: Serbia is ready to accept the Franco-German plan, with one reservation], 20 January 2023, *Danas*,

<https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/srbija-je-spremna-da-prihvati-francusko-nemacki-plan-uz-jednu-rezervu-vucic-posle-sastanka-sa-petorkom/>.

<sup>95</sup> Sonja Biserko, ed., *Serbia: Captured Society*, Helsinki Committee Report (Belgrade: Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia, 2023), 145.

<sup>96</sup> “Serbia nationalist protests spike tensions over Russia”, *BBC*, 18 February 2023, [https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-64674\\_133](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-64674_133).

<sup>97</sup> “Desničari srušili ogradu pored Predsedništva, ulaz u zgradu gađali jajima” [Right-wing protesters tore down the fence near the Presidency, throwing eggs at the entrance of the building.], *NI*, 15 February 2023, <https://n1info.rs/vesti/desnicari-srusili-ogradu-pored-predsednistva-dosli-do-ulaza-u-zgradu/>.

<sup>98</sup> “Bocan-Harčenko: Osuđujemo pretnje upućene sa skupa kod Predsedništva” [We condemn the threats made at the gathering near the Presidency], *Danas*, 16 February 2023, <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/bocan-harcenko-osudjujemo-pretnje-upucene-sa-skupa-kod-predsednistva/>.

<sup>99</sup> From 17 to 18 March 2004, Kosovo extremists conducted large-scale violence against Serbs living in Kosovo. The violence was precipitated by false reports in the Kosovo Albanian media, which claimed that three Kosovo Albanian boys had drowned after being chased into the Ibar River by a group of Kosovo Serbs. The March Pogrom took the lives of eight Serbs; in two days, hundreds of people were wounded, more than 4,000 people were expelled, more than 800 homes were set on fire, and 35 Orthodox temples and cultural monuments were destroyed or severely damaged. Milica Stojanovic, “‘We Don’t Forget’: Serbs Commemorate Deadly 2004 Unrest in Kosovo,” *Balkan Insight*, 17 March 2023.

<sup>100</sup> “Desničarski protest protiv evropskog plana za Kosovo u Beogradu” [Right-wing protest against the European plan for Kosovo in Belgrade], *RSE*, 17 March 2023, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/protest-beograd-eu-plan-kosovo/32323350.html>.

<sup>101</sup> “Narodna patrola preti ‘ruskim liberalima u Srbiji’” [People’s Patrol Threatens ‘Russian Liberals’ in Serbia], *Nova*, 20 January 2023, <https://nova.rs/vesti/drustvo/narodna-patrola-preti-ruskim-liberalima-u-srbiji-vase-zastave-cemo-gaziti-a-vi-cete-nase-gledati/>.

<sup>102</sup> “‘Graffiti battle on streets of Belgrade’ as Serbia tries to stifle anti-Putin Russian exiles,” *The Guardian* (London), 28 October 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/oct/28/serbia-graffiti-belgrade-anti-putin-russian-exiles>.

<sup>103</sup> Isidora Stakić, *Odnos Srbije prema ekstremno desničarskim organizacijama* [Serbia’s Authorities Treatment of Far-Right Organizations] (Beograd: Beogradski centar za bezbednosnu politiku, 2013), 4.

<sup>104</sup> Petrović and Ignjatijević, *Violent Extremism in Serbia: Islamist and Far-right*, 25–27.

<sup>105</sup> Stakić, *Odnos Srbije prema ekstremno desničarskim organizacijama*.

<sup>106</sup> Petrović and Ignjatijević, *Violent Extremism in Serbia: Islamist and Far-right*, 13.

<sup>107</sup> Examples of far-right under the government’s control and thus labelled as fake include Serbian Right (Srpska desnica), Leviathan (Levijatan), and Serbian Honour (Srpska čast). Examples of authentic far-right are People’s Patrol (Narodna patrola), Serbian action (Srpska akcija), and Kormilo (Helm). Predrag Petrović and Marija Ignjatijević, *Violent Extremism in Serbia: Islamist and Far-right* (Belgrade: Belgrade Centre for Security Policy, 2023), 12–14.

<sup>108</sup> Dušan Komarčević, “‘Zabrinut sam za porodicu’: Somborac kome prete zbog izdavanja smeštaja migrantima” [I am Worried about My Family: Resident of Sombor Faces Threats Due to Providing Accommodation for Migrants.], *RSE*, 21 October 2021, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/srbija-sombor-plakati-desnicari-migranti/31505608.html>.

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<sup>109</sup> Jelena Pejić Nikić, ed., *Alarm Report on Progress of Serbia in Cluster 1 - May 2023* (Belgrade: Belgrade Centre for Security Policy, 2023), 122.

<sup>110</sup> “Serbian Far-right Leader Arrested after Nationalists Try to Storm the Presidency Building in Belgrade”, *RFE*, 16 February 2023, <https://www.rferl.org/a/serbia-far-right-knezevic-arrested-vucic-kosovo/32274304.html>.

<sup>111</sup> “Dejan Petar i Damnjan nakon izlaska iz zatvora su poručili...” [Dejan Petar and Damnjan, After Release from Prison, Have Stated...], *Srbin.info*, 6 April 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fTuh4FISbas>.

<sup>112</sup> Pejić Nikić, *Alarm Report on Progress of Serbia in Cluster 1 - May 2023*, 123.

<sup>113</sup> Research results on citizens views of Serbian foreign policy are available in: Vuksanovic, Steric, and Bjelos, *Public perception of Serbian foreign policy in the midst of the war in Ukraine*.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid*, 3–5.

<sup>115</sup> Petrović and Ignjatijević, *Violent Extremism in Serbia: Islamist and Far-right*, 29.

<sup>116</sup> Petrović and Hercigonja, *There is No Democracy in Serbia, nor is it Desirable*.

<sup>117</sup> Stojanović, Ivković, and Kaličanin, *Alternative Report on the Position and Needs of Youth in The Republic of Serbia – 2023* (Belgrade: National Youth Council of Serbia, 2023).

<sup>118</sup> Vuksanovic, Steric, and Bjelos, *Public perception of Serbian foreign policy in the midst of the war in Ukraine*.

<sup>119</sup> “Vucic: I Made a Personal Decision not to Introduce Sanctions against Russia,” *Beta briefing*, 3 April 2023, <https://betabriefing.com/news/politics/22945-vucic-i-made-a-personal-decision-not-to-introduce-sanctions-against-russia>.

<sup>120</sup> “Commission presents a new Growth Plan for the Western Balkans including €6 billion in grants and loans to accelerate economic convergence with the EU,” *European Commission*, 8 November 2023.

<sup>121</sup> Tanjug, “Mišćević: Srbija za sedam godina dobija 1,4 milijarde iz IPA 3 fondova” [Mišćević: Serbia will receive 1.4 billion from IPA 3 funds in seven years], *Ministarstvo za evropske integracije*, 28 April 2023.

<sup>122</sup> The USA has imposed sanctions on Milan Radojičić, brothers Zvonko and Žarko Veselinović, controversial businesspeople from northern Kosovo and financiers of the SNS, Slobodan Tepšić, a weapons trader and SNS financier, along with their companies, individuals, and entities connected to them. Additionally, Aleksandar Vulin, a political associate of Vučić and the director of the Serbian intelligence agency, has also been sanctioned. “14 srpskih državljana pod sankcijama SAD, [14 Serbian citizens under US sanctions]”, *Nova*, 17 July 2023.



## **Hungary: The pro-Russian Far-Right is Reinforced by the Orbán Regime**

**Edit Zgut-Przybylska**

Russia's basis for seeking influence over the Hungarian public was weak at best after the democratic transition in 1989. Hungary is not a Slavic country; the population does not speak Russian, and the two nations do not share a common border. The two revolutions that happened in Hungary, in 1848 and 1956, respectively, were crushed by Russian troops. Consequently, the Hungarian far-right scene has had a long history of hostility, if not hatred, towards Russia.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, the Kremlin employed a threefold strategy. Primarily, it focused on influencing the mainstream political elite politically and economically.<sup>2</sup> As a result, Viktor Orbán's government has been strengthening ties with Russia and strained Hungary's relations with NATO and EU allies. Secondly, the case of Béla Kovács, a former MEP of the far-right Jobbik party, is also indicative of the totality of the Russian outreach to the Hungarian far-right. Having him spying and lobbying within the European Parliament for years, the Kremlin has managed to create a pro-Russian network of far-right actors in the heart of the EU.<sup>3</sup>

Thirdly, the Kremlin put great emphasis on exploiting historical grievances related to the lost territories of Hungary after WWI to win the hearts and minds of the Hungarian far-right scene.<sup>4</sup> Our Homeland is leading the charge in this regard as it is the most ardent supporter of territorial revisionism while spreading pro-Russian narratives. According to interviewed experts,<sup>5</sup> the uniqueness of the Hungarian scene stems from the fact that although paramilitary organisations like the Hungarian National Front (MNA) were aiming to strengthen cooperation with Russian secret services, the Kremlin was not taking them seriously and operated through other channels.



## Hungarian REMVE – Strategies and Ideological Tenets

The dominant strategy of the Hungarian far-right is that they traditionally mobilised against historical minorities, such as the Roma, the Jews, and national or ethnic minorities.<sup>6</sup> However, the scope has been largely extended towards external enemies.

Drawing on the Great Replacement theory, the Hungarian far-right claims that societies are facing a twofold threat: externally, it is represented by the Muslim immigrants who are allegedly threatening the ethical and cultural basis of the Christian civilisation. Internally, the threat is represented by what the scene terms *decadent* leftist-liberal forces that are pursuing feminist and gay rights. It fits the approach of the global far-right populism where gender serves as a symbolic glue<sup>78</sup> that holds the extreme right-wing scene to fight the onslaught of modernity both domestically and internationally. They perceive it as accelerating the collapse of the fundamental, God-given difference that makes society function in a *normal way*: that between men and women. The long list of components of gender includes the issue of divorce, gay marriage, social acceptance of promiscuity, abortion, and the demise of the traditional family, in which the main role of women is to have children.<sup>9</sup> In this context, Russia served as an example of *normality* where LGBTQ+ rights are not tolerated.

The Hungarian far-right also claims to defend common sense against the migration policy of the EU.<sup>10</sup> It is embedded into a very pessimistic and consistently anti-modernist narrative about the West's intellectual, cultural, and social history. In their narratives, the West is portrayed as being degenerated under the influence of Marx, Engels, Freud, the Frankfurt School, feminism, and postmodernism. In contrast, Russia has become a beacon of *normality* that “does not want to unleash aberration” by fighting off LGBTQ+ rights.<sup>11</sup> Their rejection of the EU and NATO is embedded into an antisemitic, xenophobic conspirator approach against George Soros, often copy-pasting Kremlin narratives.

The far-right scene in Hungary has its own identity stemming from historical grievances that are centred around the territorial losses of Hungary. Arguably, the biggest and most important yearly gathering of the Hungarian extreme right is the so-called Day of Honor to commemorate the alleged breakout of the German and Hungarian soldiers during the siege of Budapest on 8 February 1945.<sup>12</sup> The Hungarian far-right organisations have also traditionally supported the idea of a Greater Hungary, and advocated for reclaiming territories inhabited by Hungarians in Slovakia, Romania, Ukraine, Serbia, and Croatia.<sup>13</sup> These

grievances date back to the 1920 Treaty of Trianon, which reduced Hungarian land by two-thirds, leaving a quarter of the Hungarian population outside of the country's borders.<sup>14</sup> Far-right groups, therefore, fostered openly revisionist narratives while vocally supporting Hungarian minorities in other countries. Consequently, the past is always a reference point in terms of organisational meetings, commemorations, and political speeches.

This is an opportunity for the Kremlin to exploit historical grievances by supporting territorial claims. Part of its broader effort after 2014 was to undermine the region's stability in general and bilateral links with Ukraine in particular via supporting local enablers: secessionist, revisionist, and far-right organisations. With secret service and hybrid warfare tools, Russia was fuelling disputes between Central Eastern European countries and local extremist organisations.<sup>15</sup> The Hungarian extreme-right scene is particularly interesting to study and a fertile ground for the Russians because of the above-mentioned historical grievances, thanks to which the Kremlin has revitalised its traditionally limited linkages within these organisations as of 2010.<sup>16</sup> As a result, the most prominent extreme-right (paramilitary) groups operate under some form of Russian influence. These organisations are currently centred around Our Homeland, a far-right party openly supportive of Russian geopolitical efforts in the Hungarian National Assembly. Riding the wave of territorial revisionism has been further strengthened since Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022. Moreover, this is not happening in a domestic vacuum. The political and institutional framework provides an increasingly favourable environment for Pro-Russian activities in Hungary up until today. The pro-Kremlin efforts of the Hungarian far-right are being reinforced by Viktor Orbán.<sup>17</sup> The ruling party, Fidesz, deliberately disseminates anti-Ukrainian, anti-Western, and pro-Russian narratives in its top-down centralised, robust propaganda machinery both in mainstream and social media.<sup>18</sup> What is more, national security authorities lack the will to act against the local enablers of the Kremlin, which has increased national security threats in Hungary over the last decade.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, the central questions addressed in this chapter are: What are the structural and political contextual features of the Hungarian far-right scene that operates under Russian influence? What type of direct or indirect Russian influence can be observed in the selected case studies?

## Research Methodology and Case Selection

This chapter builds two cases: one representing a direct, and another an indirect instance of Russian influence within the broader Hungarian far-right scene. As for the direct case, the chapter explains how the MNA, became the venue point for the operation of Russia's military intelligence service, the GRU. The case of MNA is indicative of the pro-Kremlin environment provided by the Orbán government. It allowed MNA an undisturbed collaboration with Russian secret services. As a result, no other far-right organisation has been confirmed to be so directly linked to and influenced by the Russian secret services in Hungary. It directed public and scholarly attention to the efficiency of the Kremlin in influencing paramilitary and extremist organisations operating in Hungary. Another empirical case is the story of Béla Kovács (with a nickname KGBéla), a former MEP of Jobbik, a far-right Hungarian party that has been spying within the EU on behalf of Russia. Accounting for the indirect linkages, the chapter investigates the pro-Russian narratives of Our Homeland and the paramilitary organisations centred around it. Studying these latter cases is warranted on multiple grounds: one of them is that they co-jointly agree with Vladimir Putin's characterisation of the *nihilistic* and *decadent* West contrasted with Christian-conservative Russia. Another feature of these organisations is that they have the most ardent anti-Ukrainian approach in the Hungarian political scenes.

The empirical evidence for this study was collected from multiple sources. It combines extensive primary and secondary sources, a wealth of data provided by investigative journalists and policy reports, as well as expert interviews undertaken by the author. The desktop research will collect the necessary information and note the sequence of events and their evolution. In-depth interviews with experts of scientific life and the media allowed the analysis to move beyond reliance on open-source information and acquire a deeper understanding of the background of the Pro-Russian extreme-right scene and its events.

### Case Study 1: The MNA in Cahoots with the GRU

Before the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the Russian secret service's overarching goal in Hungary seemed to have been to obtain as many local potential enablers as possible: "They traditionally aimed at recruiting a huge

number of local contacts, regardless of their effectiveness and capabilities. In other words: the quality of these contact persons were less relevant and useful idiots also qualified as valuable ties just to fulfil a “yearly quota” – argued one of the interviewees, Andras Dezső, a Hungarian investigative journalist. Moreover, in his view, such outreach did not automatically equal an attempt to recruit a given individual to the ranks of the Russian secret service agents. This was allegedly more of an operation to build bridges with proverbial open-minded local actors.<sup>20</sup>

MNA, a small but violent outfit of the Hungarian far-right, seemed to have come into Russia’s orbit precisely through such connections. Officers of Russia’s military intelligence service, the GRU, have been in contact with the organisation; Russian “diplomats” have participated in airsoft exercises organised by the group. The organisation was led by István Györkös, one of the most well-known figureheads of the Hungarian neo-Nazi scene, who was sentenced to life imprisonment on a charge of murdering a Hungarian policeman in 2016.<sup>21</sup>

Known to be an extremist and dangerous figure of the neo-Nazi scene, Györkös has been on the radar of the Hungarian secret services since the beginning of the nineties. He established MNA first under the name of the Hungarian National Socialist Action Group in 1989. Györkös first drew the attention of the Hungarian police in 1991 when he distributed neo-Nazi leaflets with a swastika in the cities of Győr, Budapest, Devecser, and Székesfehérvár. The membership of the organisation mostly consisted of the Györkös family and their friends under the umbrella organisation called Peregrine Falcon Hiking Association – also founded by Györkös in 1990.<sup>22</sup> The total number of members of the MNA had grown to 250 by the end of the nineties. It centred its activities around self-defence and combat training with airsoft drills, paintball, and various legally available tools necessary for military training, such as: military maps, practicing with grenades, etc. Their camps operated across Hungary, the largest of which was located on private land in the outskirts of Bőny called Sashegy. Photography documented that on one occasion, the participants greeted each other with a fascist salute and studied neo-Fascist documents published in the US.<sup>23</sup> Having built a well-connected neo-Nazi network since the beginning of the 1990s, Györkös also established the Day of Honor commemoration in 1997, which became the most important yearly event of the neo-Nazi scene. It commemorates the purported breakout of German and Hungarian soldiers during the siege of Budapest on 8 February 1945.<sup>24</sup> Together with a number of European extreme-right and neo-

Nazi groups, the entire Hungarian right-wing extremist scene gathers every year to march and participate in memorial tours of the breakout all over the country.

Györkös also started the newspaper called New Order, which disseminated Nazi symbols as well as racist and anti-Semitic writings. He had been seeking the opportunity to establish a Nationalist-Socialist political system in Hungary by building a web of violent radicals.<sup>25</sup> In order to achieve his goal, he built relationships with the leader of the Austrian neo-Fascists and maintained contact with other foreign Nazi organisations. According to the investigative documents of the time, Györkös and his sympathisers received their inciting propaganda materials from the head of the Foreign Reconstruction Organization of the German National Socialist Workers' Party operating in the US. The New Order's newspapers were also financed by this organisation.<sup>26</sup>

The party, although far-right in content, also developed links with far-left and what is key to the analysis, the pro-Russian Hungarian Workers' Party (the ideological heir to the pre-1989 Communist Party), led by Gyula Thürmer. The party disseminates pro-Russian politics and seeks to strengthen diplomatic relations with Russia.<sup>27</sup> The marginalised organisation has held numerous public events with Györkös's organisation, although Thürmer refused to confirm their relationship in the past.<sup>28</sup> According to Index.hu, this collaboration eventually resulted in a split between Hungarian neo-Nazi groups.<sup>29</sup>

Russian diplomats and members of the Russian military intelligence have been around the and the Hungarian militant subculture for years. The situation started before Russia annexed Crimea, as the Russians were trying to do it in a smart, less ostentatious way.<sup>30</sup> The National Security Committee of the Hungarian Parliament confirmed that the Hungarian counter-intelligent services were aware of collaborative trainings between the MNA and the Russian services. In fact, the Committee revealed that MNA has been "begging for financial support"<sup>31</sup> for the GRU that was not taking the organisation seriously.<sup>32</sup> Russia was primarily interested in a website co-created by Györkös, called Hídfő.ru, that became most prominent Hungarian-language Russian propaganda portals around 2012.<sup>33</sup> It indicates that MNA was already under Russian influence and the portal became an instrument for active measures for the Kremlin. It manifested in August 2014, when the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs accused Hungary of shipping arms, including T-72 tanks, to Ukraine, referring to fake content on the website, Hídfő.ru. The website published three photos, allegedly taken by readers, showing T-72 tanks transported on a train in Nyíregyháza, a town in East

Hungary. The Hungarian government denied the existence of the tanks and called the “Kremlin’s accusation an unfriendly gesture.”<sup>34</sup>

Russian secret services are well-known for identifying the interests of potential contacts and using them as a venue point of communication.<sup>35</sup> In the case of MNA, it was the airsoft drill since it resonated well with the personal interest of Györkös. MNA openly organised its trainings on the internet. Activities like relic hunts for World War II weapons were also proven to be useful for strengthening bonds with MNA. Private hunters and collectors from both the radical right and left were frequent guests of these events, along with the agents of GRU.<sup>36</sup> According to Ferenc Katrein,<sup>37</sup> a high-ranking former counter-intelligence officer of Hungary’s Constitutional Protection Office (AH), the main goal was to “gain influence over an organization with a huge potential of violence that is suitable to facilitate subversive domestic and international activities.”<sup>38</sup> This refers to a wide range of activities, including fuelling ethnic tension, organising large-scale neo-Nazi events like the Day of Honor, and building an international network of like-minded organisations on the basis of the breakout by besieged Nazi forces in occupied Hungary during WWII. “They have had logistical importance in terms of destabilisation—as a potential tool to use when needs be to destabilize the country” explained Katrein.<sup>39</sup>

This had been ongoing for years before the National Bureau of Investigation (the Hungarian FBI) was supposed to search István Györkös’s house for illegal weapons in 2016. When the two officers showed up at his home, the leader of MNA opened fire and killed a 46-year-old police officer. According to Katrein, the GRU must have been careless; they contacted MNA despite the fact that it was already on the radar of the Hungarian intelligence services. “It means that they simply did not care about a potential breakdown of the organisation, which indicates huge arrogance, showing how much the Russians have looked down on their Hungarian counterparts”, argued the former intelligence officer.<sup>40</sup>

Dezső agreed that putting such effort into MNA was a strategic blunder for the GRU. The murder of a Hungarian police officer directed full attention to the organisation; law enforcement authorities together with the secret services put great efforts into demolishing MNA completely. Russian activities have been halted and Hidfo.ru ceased to operate as of 2018. After the police detained Györkös, the National Investigation Agency and the Anti-Terrorism Centre ousted twelve members of the Hungarian National Front in Bőny, Budakalász, Budapest, Jászberény, Mosonmagyaróvár, Rád, Sajókeresztúr, and Vác. Weapons

of Russian and Slovak manufacture and explosives were seized by the police. These twelve people were interrogated as suspects for violence and misuse of firearms,<sup>41</sup> out of which eight were arrested in 2022.<sup>42</sup>

There was no consensus among the interviewees as to whether the MNA were aware of being infiltrated by the GRU. In this regard, one argued that even if Gyórkös was not aware of the true identity of the GRU undercover officer, the younger generation of the organisation (e.g. his sons) must have known whom they were collaborating with. Katrein argued that “It is simply unrealistic that the leadership did not know what they got themselves into”. There is also no publicly available information about the former members of the MNA and if they joined other platforms after 2016. According to Katrein, “Most neo-Nazi, paramilitary people ‘grow out’ the membership above a certain age. Beyond 30, you do not want to put your family at risk, especially after such an institutional failure”.<sup>43</sup>

As a result of the aforementioned events, the MNA was banned in late 2016, and to date, no other organisation has been confirmed to be directly linked to and influenced by the Kremlin in Hungary. The fact that such common exercises with the GRU were happening under the watch of the Hungarian intelligence services, including military counter-intelligence, indicates the lack of political will to undercut Russian services operating in Hungary.<sup>44</sup> Alfahír (a website close to Jobbik) confirmed that former president János Áder and István Gyórkös Jr. are related, which was first reported by Hídfő.ru.<sup>45</sup> Accordingly, the second aunt of János Áder is the wife of Gyórkös Sr., and Áder’s second cousin is István Gyórkös Jr. Although President Áder’s office has denied this relationship before, Gyórkös often referred to the fact that thanks to their family relationship, the organisation enjoys a so-called “protection” in Hungary. The Russians also knew about this family relation, which was confirmed by several sources.<sup>46</sup>

## **Case Study 2: The Curious Case of KGBéla**

KGBéla’s case is indicative of the distinctive features of Russian influence in Hungary. He not only influenced the domestic far-right but also catered to an international network of like-minded actors within the European Parliament and spied and lobbied on behalf of Russia. He largely contributed to turning Jobbik into a pro-Kremlin party and became the party’s Russophile MEP in Brussels in 2009.<sup>47</sup> According to Dezső, he has been known to the KGB for a long time; the

organisation recruited him through his wife in the 1980s, and his political career started in the early 2000s.<sup>48</sup>

Kovács never denied his Russian ties and the frequent trips he took to Moscow. Gábor Vona, Jobbik's leader, accompanied him on at least one occasion in 2008. This trip happened before pro-Russian traces became very prevalent in the party's rhetoric.<sup>49</sup> He established his influence in the party by becoming a top financial supporter of Jobbik.<sup>50</sup> Although his Russian connections were well-known within the party, he could have achieved a career due to his generous "donations" to the party and often to its members in an individual manner. Another notorious example of his contribution was the Youth Section of Jobbik, which organised various events during the 2000s with the direct financial support of Kovács.<sup>51</sup>

Sources of his wealth remain a mystery. Béla Kovács started as a businessman living in Russia when he returned to Hungary in the 2000s to open a salad bar. On several occasions he claimed that he spent the period between 1988 and 2003 in Russia working in the leadership of diverse trading companies.<sup>52</sup> However, investigative journalists revealed that there is no trace in Russian company records in that either Kovács or his wife had owned Russian companies,<sup>53</sup> let alone obtained any (high-level) position in one.<sup>54</sup> He is famous for his high-level international connections; in 2007, he invited one of his party members to the inauguration of Ramzan Kadyrov Czechen president. He travelled on his own account, not using party finances.<sup>55</sup>

As a result of all this, he has been on the radar of the Hungarian counter-intelligence services (along with other European services) since 2009. Kovács rather acted as an agent of influence than a classic Russian spy, and he was quite efficient in this regard. He reported to Russian diplomats in a conspiratorial way and lobbied on behalf of Russia within the EU. According to the accusation, between 2012 and 2014, Kovács's task was to form groups in the EU to strengthen Russia's interests specifically and weaken EU policy.<sup>56</sup>

Kovács first convinced the formerly anti-Russian Jobbik<sup>57</sup> by invoking his fringe contacts in Polish politics. Since the Hungarian far-right is known to traditionally admire Poland for its strong nationalist scene, Kovács was putting emphasis on the pro-Russian Mateusz Piskorski,<sup>58</sup> the former leader of the far-right Zmiana party.<sup>59</sup> While the relationship has been established between the two parties, Piskorski was arrested on suspicion of spying for Russia ten years later.<sup>60</sup> Kovács started as an MEP only in 2010 only, when he took the seat of Zoltan Balczó,



another Jobbik member in the European Parliament. Despite that there have been numerous conflicts between him and the previous staff of Balczo, the party never withdrew him, most likely because of his financial power. As stated by Szabolcs Panyi, an investigative reporter at Direkt36, during an interview, “His real task was not to meddle in Hungarian politics but to organize a pro-Kremlin network of far-right MEPs and parties: the Alliance of European National Movements (AENM)”.<sup>61</sup> The group was established in 2009 with the declared aim of forming a faction in the European Parliament. Kovács first served the role of a treasurer and later as president of the organisation. As part of an international group observing the referendum held in the Crimea in 2014, he took a position on the Russian/Ukrainian conflict, arguing that “the vote would be absolutely free and fair”.<sup>62</sup> Panyi added that “it is indicative of the success of the AENM that it even included Marine Le Pen’s National Front<sup>63</sup> and members from Nick Griffin’s British National party in 2014.” Kovács’s activities in Brussels strongly indicate that he must have been working for Russia’s Foreign Intelligence Service, the SVR.<sup>64</sup> It seems that the alleged financial support from these services must have significantly increased his means of mobilisation, recruitment, and activity within the EU institutions.

Kovács’s moderate, bureaucratic image indicated that he was interested in building international relations on an intellectual level, rather than engaging with radical extremist paramilitary groups. However, Investigative VSquare has confirmed that Kovács was also in touch with István Györkös and the MNA. Not only did they reveal that their families once had a close relationship in the early 2010s, but also that Györkös’s wife was hired to do household work for the Kovacs family.<sup>65</sup>

Although the AH was secretly investigating Kovács, just before the European parliamentary elections in 2014, it terminated the ongoing investigation and subsequently initiated a criminal case against a far-right politician.<sup>66</sup> In the spring 2014, Kovács’s espionage story was leaked to Magyar Nemzet, a pro-government daily newspaper. In this way, it could be used against the far-right Jobbik party, which turned out to be the governing Fidesz main rival in the election campaign.<sup>67</sup> Serious accusations were put against him, such as spying against the bodies of the EU on behalf of a third country.<sup>68</sup> However, the AH did not have a chance to make sure he could not escape justice and that his web of contacts would be fully discovered. It could not finish the ongoing investigation and collect enough evidence against Kovács, allegedly because the government interfered in

revealing the story at an early stage for political reasons. Therefore, Kovács could escape to Russia after 2017 without any difficulties.<sup>69</sup>

Information about the financial linkages between Kovács and Russia were not disclosed in the official indictment, either. Currently, he lives in Moscow and teaches international relations at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations. The Hungarian Supreme Court ruled on 27 September 2022 that Béla Kovács had indeed spied for Russia and sentenced him to five years in prison in Hungary. He was also sentenced for budget fraud and falsification of documents.<sup>70</sup> Since June 2023, he has been the subject of an international arrest warrant, and since November 2022, he is also the subject of a Hungarian arrest warrant.

The story of KGBéla is indicative of the complicated nature of Russian influence in Hungary.<sup>71</sup> His connections and spy activities were revealed by a pro-Russian government for power political reasons, to undermine the credibility of Jobbik who turned out to be Fidesz's main rival in the election campaign. For almost 10 years, the same party in power provided smooth sailing for Kovács to avoid proper scrutiny and jail. According to Dezső, the "Hungarian authorities [let] him off the hook, which must have been a decision of the Hungarian Prime Minister himself, Viktor Orbán. What's more, no measures were taken against Kovács' Russian handlers or Russian diplomats; there is no word of [any] Russian diplomat being extradited from Hungary."<sup>72</sup> After his spy case was revealed, he quit the Jobbik party, which started to take a more moderate direction and eventually split. Currently, most of the former pro-Russian politicians of Jobbik belong to its splinter party, Our Homeland.

### ***The New Pro-Russians of Hungary***

Our Homeland Movement and its satellite organisations, Our Homeland (MHM) is a Splinter party of Jobbik, itself the formerly dominant far-right party. It was founded after the parliamentary elections in 2018 under the leadership of László Toroczkai, former mayor of the village of Ásotthalom in South Hungary and a current leaders, Dóra Dúró and Előd Novák, former members of Jobbik and an influential power couple of the Hungarian far-right scene.<sup>73</sup> Toroczkai became an inspirational figurehead of the Hungarian far-right scene over time. He co-created relevant paramilitary organisations and youth movements: the Sixty-Four Counties Youth Movement (HVIM), the Army of Outlaws, and the Wolves,

among others. It is mainly formed by ex-Jobbik members, who were disappointed with the party's drift to the centre, itself a reaction to a rightward shift in power of the Viktor Orbán's government since 2010. The splinters announced their desire "to go back to [...their] radical, anti-establishment roots",<sup>74</sup> which effectively meant they would be free to pursue a racist, antisemitic, anti-EU, anti-NATO, and openly pro-Russian narrative.<sup>75</sup> During the 2022 general elections, while the more moderate Jobbik suffered a significant loss in seats, from 26 in 2018 to nine, Our Homeland won six seats in the parliament.<sup>76</sup> Besides disseminating blatant irredentism and xenophobia against migrants, refugees, and "others", the party was successfully channelling public frustration over COVID-19 restrictions and anti-vaxxer sentiment.<sup>77</sup> It resonated well with the pro-Russian narratives that Western democracies are not capable of handling the crisis. Since no other party has been touching upon this issue, it significantly helped them to reach the parliamentary threshold in 2022.<sup>78</sup> It also nicely fits the global trend in which anti-vaxxer extremist organisations shifted their focus towards anti-Ukraine narratives, which provided a huge opportunity to exploit conspiracy theories.<sup>79</sup>

Most of KGBéla's former Jobbik party members split away and now belong to the Our Homeland party, pushing a pro-Kremlin and anti-Ukrainian position, in particular Novák and the deputy chair of the party, Dúró. When Kovács's ties to Russia were revealed in 2014, Novák defended himself against accusations of spying for a long time. Years later, the pro-Russian and radical wing (like Novák) left Jobbik to form the Our Homeland party.<sup>80</sup> The party espouses a vehemently anti-Ukrainian approach as it advocates for the suspension of all support towards Ukraine until the situation of the Hungarian minority inside the country is not handled.<sup>81</sup> The party also opposes Hungary's participation in NATO's Baltic Air Policing mission – currently, Hungary's JAS-39 Gripen fighter jets are patrolling there to intercept Russian military aircraft.

The Hungarian far-right contextualises the war in Ukraine in accordance with its antisemitic, anti-Western and in particular, anti-US and pro-Russian approach. Our Homeland, the HVIM and the Army of Outlaws are known to be very vocal about their anti-Ukrainian approach. They also contextualise the conflict with regard to the protection of Hungarian minorities in neighbouring countries, being the most ardent critics of Ukraine.<sup>82</sup> It strove to condemn President Zelenskyy, the US, and NATO for provoking the war which they see as an opportunity to reclaim Transcarpathian territories from weakened Ukraine. Our Homeland and

its partner organisations (closely collaborating and sharing agenda with the Army of Outlaws, HVIM) are the most vocal about it.<sup>83</sup> Toroczkai, who was once one of the most outspoken on demolishing the Soviet monument in Budapest, took a strong pro-Russian turn after 2014. As the former mayor of Ásotthalom, he inaugurated a Yuri Gagarin<sup>84</sup> statue and a renovated street named after the Russian astronaut in 2016. According to Péter Krekó, the director of Political Capital Research Institute, this symbolic act must have been pursued both by the Russian embassy and Toroczkai and indicates the presence of Russian soft power in the Hungarian countryside.<sup>85</sup>

Since Russia invaded Ukraine, Our Homeland has been condemning sanctions against Russia, rejecting support for Ukraine and its accession to NATO and the EU. After Putin indicated in 2022 that Hungary, Romania, and Poland might have territorial claims towards Ukraine,<sup>86</sup> Toroczkai claimed that Transcarpathia should belong to Hungary. He posted photos from 1938 and 1939 of Polish and Hungarian troops shaking hands on the common border. It clearly underscores the party's revisionist aim that sees Russia as a force thanks to which these territorial claims could be realised.<sup>87</sup> Another recurring argument is that Ukraine does not deserve Western support because of its “mistreatment<sup>88</sup> of minorities”.<sup>89</sup> Therefore, stakeholders within the Hungarian extreme right-wing milieu advocate that all support towards Ukraine should be suspended until the situation of the Hungarian minority inside the country is not addressed appropriately by the Ukrainian government.<sup>90</sup>

The vice president of the National Assembly and deputy chair of Our Homeland, Dóra Dúró underlined on state-owned *Russia Today* the Kremlin's propaganda and conspiracy theories about Ukraine. She argued that “Ukraine's accession to NATO poses a huge national security risk”, and that the Hungarian government would only approve it “if Putin did”. The party stipulates that “Ukraine hides in the shadow of the US and the West”, “cannot be seen as independent”, and is led by a leader who is “anti-peace and anti-democracy.” According to Dúró, Ukraine should “hand over all its occupied territories because it is the only way to achieve peace”.<sup>91</sup> Based upon the investigation of the Hungarian fact-checker website Lakmusz, these include the following disinformation and conspiracy theories:

- Ukraine has never existed; it has been “put together” in the 20th century by “territorial charities” provided by Poland and Hungary. The country has always been dominated by the Russian-speaking population and there has never been a Ukrainian majority. Furthermore, Crimea has been a personal

“donation” to Ukraine by Nikita Sergeyevich Khrushchev, the First Secretary of the Communist Party.<sup>92</sup>

- The war is not primarily about Ukraine; it serves the special interests of the US, which is mostly responsible for the war. According to this narrative, bioweapons are being developed in Ukrainian laboratories upon the request of the United States. It embeds into the alleged context that the American deep state is fighting to maintain the unipolar world order by weaponising Ukraine against its contender, Russia.<sup>93</sup>
- The Ukrainian Army has been committing genocide in Donbas since 2014 with the support of the West.<sup>94</sup>
- Ukraine deserved the attack from Russia. In a YouTube video entitled “The hidden truth about the war in Ukraine”,<sup>95</sup> Toroczkai argued that Vladimir Putin had to start “Special operation” as an act of self-defence. In other words, Russia acted legitimately in response to a threat posed by the Nazi regime in Kyiv.

Our Homeland also seeks cross-regional collaboration with other far-right parties in Europe like the Forum for Democracy (FvD)<sup>96</sup> in the Netherlands, which manifests in mutual visits and support with regards to their anti-Western, pro-Russian, and xenophobic messages.

### ***The Party’s Satellite Organisations: HVIM and the Army of Outlaws***

Currently, the most relevant pro-Russian paramilitary organisations of Hungary are closely collaborating with Our Homeland. HVIM, the Army of Outlaws, and the Wolves are all affiliated with the party in terms of human composition, ideological approach, and activities, centred around László Toroczkai. What makes it difficult for them to cooperate with other far-right platforms in Central Eastern Europe is that they have a very strong territorial revisionist approach and claim to restore Greater Hungary. Advocating for reclaiming territories inhabited by Hungarians in Slovakia, Romania, Ukraine, Serbia, and Croatia creates a huge amount of tension between these two Hungarian organisations. Another key feature to mention is that HVIM and Army of Outlaws are openly rejecting democracy as a system.<sup>97</sup>

Currently, HVIM is led by György Gyula Zagyva, former Jobbik MP and Gábor Barcsa-Turner. The movement depicts itself as an ultraright-ultraconservative platform, and the central element of its worldview is traditionalism and rejecting

modernity. HVIM is not only active in Hungary but also recruits members in various parts of Romania, Slovakia, Serbia, and Ukraine with a significant number of ethnic Hungarians in these countries being members or sympathisers. The heroisation of the glorious past and territorial irredentism is prominent in their worldview. The group's name, HVIM (name also refers to idealised historical periods), stems from the administrative design of Hungary before the Treaty of Trianon, which constituted 643 counties. To demonstrate this, the movement's badge also outlines the territory of historical Hungary.<sup>98</sup>

The paramilitary dimension of HVIM is mostly represented by the Wolves, an organisation affiliated with HVIM, focusing specifically on this (para)military activities, aspect by teaching (semi)military and martial arts skills to its male and female members with the help of veteran soldiers.<sup>99</sup> It is led by HVIM co-chair Gábor Barcsa-Turner, who also held martial arts training sessions. During such sessions, visitors could take part in airsoft games, and the Wolves members presented unarmed weapons to participants.<sup>100</sup> The group provides basic military training to its members, who, among others, use airsoft replicas of weapons. One of their unofficial trainers, Zsolt Dér, was a veteran of the Balkan wars and was in direct contact with separatists fighting in Eastern Ukraine in 2014. He admitted that he had been approached by pro-Russian forces to join them in Ukraine.<sup>101</sup> Dér said he ultimately refused to do so because he was employed by the Jobbik-delegated former deputy speaker of parliament and a member of Jobbik, Tamás Schneider, and preferred to remain at his disposal. The group's motto, *Ancient content, new form*, points to the acquisition of, in part, skills of modern warfare.<sup>102</sup> The movement has close ties with Betyársereg (Outlaw Army), the largest and most violent paramilitary far-right platform since it was established by Toroczkai in 2008. Its formation was triggered by the domestic political crisis that erupted in 2006.<sup>103</sup>

The black-clad self-defence force has a motor club as well and is also present at the HVIM youth camps, teaching kids survival skills, as well as Hungarian history. The organisation prioritises physical strength and coordinates training or self-defence. The platform group has a long history of violence against the Roma minority and advertised itself as helping with problems with the Roma. It primarily means that the group engages in the intimidation of the Roma community in smaller Hungarian settlements. Its leader, Zsolt Tyirityán, served a prison sentence on a charge of a vicious attack on a Roma citizen earlier,<sup>104</sup> and was a member of the Pax Hungarica Movement (abolished in 2017) that evolved

from the Hungarian Blood and Honour organisation. The organisation prioritises physical strength and coordinates training. The organisation is mostly active in Miklós Horthy commemoration,<sup>105</sup> national holiday events (23 October, 15 March), intimidation at LGBTQ+ parades, and demonstrating force through motorcycle tours, joint training sessions, and strength and sports competitions. While Betyársereg is considered a rather self-involved organisation that aims to reach out only to its core membership, and prefers not to put emphasis on external networking, it often collaborates with Our Homeland on the ground.<sup>106</sup> During their latest intimidating action, they were “patrolling” a “dangerous” settlement in Budapest, claiming to undercut “local gypsy crime” in public spaces.<sup>107</sup> The Army of Outlaw has co-jointly patrolled with two other extremist organisations in Sopron, a Western-Hungarian city, to “deter violent Ukrainians” who are “threatening public security”.<sup>108</sup>

These groups – along with Our Homeland – use online and social media as an effective mobilising tool, in particular Facebook, where they announce the details of their most important events. Online media platforms like Kurucinfo, Barikád, Alfahír, Hunhír, and Szent Korona Radio are among the most popular websites to disseminate their Pro-Russian and anti-American narratives. The HVIM, the Army of Outlaw, and the Wolves mostly present these ideas through their websites or via interviews they occasionally give to the mainstream media. The most active fringe platforms that would normalise pro-Russian narratives are individual accounts on social media along with Számok and pro-Kremlin sites (Orosz Hírek, Newsfront, and Balrad), among others.<sup>109</sup>

### **Security Threat: Russia Exploits Territorial Grievances**

Russia has been fuelling disputes between CEE countries and their extremist organisations by secret service and hybrid warfare tools since 2014.<sup>110</sup> Besides exploiting irredentist grievances, the overarching goal of the services is to fuel interethnic tensions and deteriorate bilateral relations with Ukraine.<sup>111</sup> One of the latest notorious examples was an SMS campaign in Transcarpathia, with a large number of Hungarian minorities.<sup>112</sup> The message from 2022 claimed that “Ukraine is for the Ukrainianians! Glory to the Nation! Death to the enemy! Let’s dip a knife into Hungarians!” It reached a significant number of local residents in the surroundings of Beregszász. The fact that such a campaign required a huge contact resource indicates that it was an active measure of the Russian secret

services. Another indicative factor is that the slogan “Let’s dip a knife into Hungarians” has appeared in previous Russian disinformation measures as well.<sup>113</sup>

Politicians in Our Homeland, the HVIM, and the Army of Outlaws have traditionally been very vocal about their anti-Ukrainian standpoint. They also contextualised it with regard to the protection of Hungarian minorities in neighbouring countries. In 2015, the platforms organised a boycott against Roshen sweets, which were produced by the firm of the former President of Ukraine, Petro Poroshenko. They claimed that “buying these products is a contribution to the assassination of Hungarian minorities in Transcarpathia, for which Poroshenko is responsible”.<sup>114</sup> In the same year, the extreme right Ukrainian paramilitary organisation Karpatska Sich<sup>115</sup> threatened to annihilate Jobbik and HVIM activists<sup>116</sup> for undermining the Ukrainian state and destabilising the region along ethnic fault lines in Western Ukraine and Subcarpathia.<sup>117</sup> The reasoning behind this approach was that the more historical debates over the borders are resurrected, the more fear and distrust are spread into the region, and the better it is for the Kremlin.<sup>118</sup> The radicalisation of HVIM became prominent in 2017 when two members, István Beke and Zoltán Szócs, were charged with attempting violent acts in Romania with revisionist intentions. According to charges filed by attorneys of Romania’s Directorate for the Investigation of Organised Crime and Terrorism (DIICOT), Beke and Szócs had wanted to blow up a section of a natural gas pipeline leading to Bucharest near Târgu Secuiesc.<sup>119</sup>

### **Foreign (Hungarian) Fighters in Ukraine**

Having such a diverse and active pro-Russian radical scene, the question arises whether the paramilitary flank of these organisations is supporting Russia on the ground in Ukraine. There is no indication that HVIM and the Army of Outlaws have supported Russian separatists on the ground with foreign fighters.<sup>120</sup> So far, four Hungarian citizens have been investigated for illegal recruiting and potentially joining the Russian forces in Ukraine. One of them is Krisztián Lehóczki, a former policeman who joined the separatist armed forces in Eastern Ukraine in 2014. He received a four-year suspended jail sentence for committing a war crime. The police have investigated four other similar cases since 2014. The most recent case occurred in September 2022, when the National



Investigation Agency revealed that a security guard, B. Richárd, was planning to establish a Hungarian private military company. The man's apartment in Budapest was searched and a number of documents and computer equipment were seized. In addition, the police were still looking for two other men on charges of illegal recruitment: Csaba Zsédely, 25, and Lajos Deme, 48, were arrested four years ago.<sup>121</sup> "Our investigation came to the conclusion that the Saint Stephan Legion was established by Russian citizens. In case Hungarians or Hungarian minorities in Ukraine were joining it, transposing Hungarian identity was an applied strategy only", said Szilvia Németh, an investigative journalist at a fact-checker portal Lakmusz.hu.<sup>122</sup>

### **Lack of Policy Responses - Live and let Live**

Having weak but visible far-right actors is supposed to demonstrate to the West that the Orbán government is the only guarantee to keep the extremists out of power. Our Homeland has been also serving Fidesz as a pioneer to mark out new pathways ideologically and politically. It accommodates numerous ideas of the party, including restricting abortion and introducing a restrictive law, directly connecting sexual minorities to paedophilia.<sup>123</sup> As far as law enforcement and investigative bodies are concerned, there is no emphasis on the threat posed by far-right pro-Russian organisations in Hungary. On the contrary, the scene represents an opportunity for the Orbán government, which provides symbolic gestures and political support for them.

Therefore, the far-right scene often has financial support as well. One of the most prominent NGOs of the extreme-right scene, Protected Society Foundation, linked to the MP of Our Homeland, Árpád Szakács, received 22 million HUF public support in 2023.<sup>124</sup> The platform is extensively disseminating anti-US and pro-Russian interpretations of the war in Ukraine. The privileged relationship has been also reinforced by the support of the pro-governmental local and national media outlets. It is indicative that while oppositional politicians did not have access to the government-linked media outlets, the centralised media of Orbán's Hungary, including the public broadcaster, would feature Toroczkai on a number of occasions. Furthermore, government-linked mouthpiece media outlets seem to employ an area with an obvious double standard towards Jobbik and Our Homeland, heavily criticising Jobbik for being an extremist organisation while remaining silent about the openly hate-mongering, anti-US Our Homeland.

Attacking Jobbik served the role of undermining the unity of the opposition that aimed at co-jointly challenging Fidesz during the parliamentary elections in 2022.<sup>125</sup>

President Katalin Novák also pardoned György Budaházy, who organised violent attacks with petrol bombs against the socialist-liberal Gyurcsány government between 2007 and 2009, was convicted of hate crimes against LGBTQ+ people and participated in the attack on the Public TV Headquarters in 2006.<sup>126</sup> These were carried out by the Hunnia Movement and a terrorist organisation called the National Liberation Movement of the Arrows of Hungarians, established by Toroczkai and Budaházy in 2007. It strongly indicates that the government aims to lure these nationalist-radical voters to Fidesz to prove that the governing party shares a certain affinity with them.<sup>127</sup>

### **Shift in the Domain of Russian Influence**

Interviewed experts agreed that the Kremlin's secret services have less intention to boost local enablers on the Hungarian far-right spectrum, in particular since Russia invaded Ukraine. Instead of putting direct financial and logistical efforts into organisations like Our Homeland, HVIM, or the Army of Outlaws, the Kremlin is mostly focusing on the Orbán's government.

Firstly, they have put great efforts into strengthening economic cooperation with the Orbán government, which acts as a deliberate Trojan Horse of the Kremlin within the EU and NATO. The Hungarian Prime Minister is among the few European leaders to have consistently refrained from supporting Ukraine with weapon supplies and the only one to have taken an openly anti-Ukrainian stance on several occasions. Also, the Orbán government is openly campaigning against the sanctions targeting Russia. It fits Viktor Orbán's Eurosceptic, anti-Western, and pro-Russian politics since Fidesz came to power in 2010. Viktor Orbán's Eastern Opening Strategy, in particular the strengthening of economic relations with Russia and China, served the role of expanding business opportunities for the clientelist network of the government.<sup>128</sup> Orbán's childhood friend, the wealthiest oligarch in Hungary, Lőrinc Mészáros, is the key beneficiary of these transactions, in particular the Paks 2 nuclear investment that is being financed by Russian loans.<sup>129</sup> The government has been embracing more extreme, religious fundamentalist actors since 2017, when Hungary first hosted the World Congress

of Families,<sup>130</sup> an American Christian organisation that has been accused of being an anti-LGBTQ+ hate group with links to the Kremlin.<sup>131</sup>

Secondly, in Hungary, the government-organised media actively disseminates disinformation narratives about the war to justify Russian aggression. These narratives are adopted either from official Russian communications or the pro-Kremlin media.<sup>132</sup> They are centred around ideas that “Euromaidan protests were a CIA plot to overthrow the Ukrainian regime” and consequently allow the US access to the Black Sea.<sup>133</sup> That would indicate there is a written agreement between NATO and Russia that the former would not expand towards the East. Consequently, the United States, the EU, and NATO are always framed as aggressive, imperialist actors, while the roles of Russia and Ukraine vary depending on the source of disinformation.<sup>134</sup> These narratives claim that Ukraine has no borders because “it did not register them” with the UN, and Russia, as the USSR’s successor, can do as it pleases in Ukraine and Belarus.<sup>135</sup> The recurring argument is that “Kyiv is the aggressor by violating the ceasefire”, obstructing the peaceful settlement, the ceasefire, and regularly attacking the separatists.<sup>136</sup> Since the Hungarian language is not closely related to the other, largely interrelated Slavic languages in Europe, it provides even smoother sailing for the Orbán government to create closed disinformation bubbles.

Thirdly, various factors indicate that Hungary became the ever-growing European headquarters of Russian secret services. While European countries have been downgrading the size of the staff at embassies and consulates of Russia, it is indicative that the staff of the Russian Embassy in Budapest is on the rise.<sup>137</sup> Moreover, the Hungarian government invited the Headquarters of the International Investment Bank to Budapest in 2019. It is a former Soviet financial instrument that has been turned into an asset of the Kremlin in exerting economic influence.<sup>138</sup> The bank can host an unlimited number of guests according to law, without background checks and with the freedom to move unrestrainedly within the Schengen Area – which is a threat to other EU and NATO member states. Furthermore, Russian hackers have entered the servers of the Hungarian Foreign Ministry several times and stolen plenty of information since 2012. Despite the revelations of the investigative website Direkt.36ú, there was no diplomatic response and no systemic steps to reduce these vulnerabilities.<sup>139</sup> As a result, according to Dezső, “Viktor Orbán is perceived by the Western intelligence community as an agent of influence working for Russia. There is not much difference between him and KGBéla in this regard.”<sup>140</sup>

Fourthly, the Russian Orthodox Church became an infrastructural power hub for Russia on the ground. Despite that, only 14,000 citizens declared themselves Orthodox believers, even though the Orbán government has been providing huge public funds to the Russian church in Hungary.<sup>141</sup> In 2022, the Hungarian government supported the construction of an orthodox chapel with one million euro, for which the “entire Russian Orthodox Church is grateful for Viktor Orbán.”<sup>142</sup> The official reasoning is that Hungary is a Christian country, and the government’s link with Russia is an aspect of that to uphold traditional Christian values that are neglected by the West.<sup>143</sup>

The importance of this relationship as a tool was reaffirmed on several occasions. Patriarch Kirill, the head of the Church, was excluded from a package of EU sanctions against Russia after the objection of Viktor Orbán in the EU Council. Kirill serves as an influential propagandist for the Kremlin who supported the invasion of Ukraine.<sup>144</sup> The Orthodox Church facilitated the transportation of eleven Ukrainian prisoners of war to Hungary in May 2023; the POWs belonged to Transcarpathia and were captured by Russia during its ongoing invasion of Ukraine. Such unilateral diplomatic efforts are further deteriorating Hungarian-Ukrainian relations and are perceived as a way to undermine the collective efforts by the EU Member States to pressure the Kremlin into backing down from the invasion of Ukraine.<sup>145</sup> “It indicates the shift in the functioning of the Russian secret services: the Kreml is building its local capacities through its Orthodox church. It is operating uninterrupted by the Hungarian counterintelligence services”, argued Panyi.<sup>146</sup> The importance of the Orthodox Church as a tool was reaffirmed by the Hungarian government on several occasions. Patriarch Kirill, the head of Russia’s Orthodox Church, was excluded from a package of EU sanctions against Russia after the objection of Viktor Orbán in the EU Council. He serves as an influential propagandist for the Kremlin who supported the invasion of Ukraine.<sup>147</sup>

## **Conclusions and Recommendations**

Kreko has argued that:

[W]hen it comes to the Hungarian pro-Russian far-right, there are more useful idiots than sorcerers paid by Russia. They are selling an alternative anti-Western reality where Putin is a hero. It is mostly ideology-driven and deliberate, in contrast to Western examples where Russia still has to put great

efforts into the far-right like in Austria or France. This is not needed anymore in a country where the main venue point of Russian influence is the Orbán government.<sup>148</sup>

However, Our Homeland and its satellite organisations are still serving a useful role for the Kremlin and posing a security threat. They are openly advocating for leaving the EU and NATO, and their anti-Ukraine standpoint is even more hostile than the government's.<sup>149</sup> One difference between Fidesz and the far-right is defined by their approach towards territorial revisionism; while the far-right openly advocates for it, the government has no such policy initiatives. However, the Hungarian Prime Minister provoked international criticism at various occasions by hinting that Hungary has a right to reclaim its lost territories. One of the latest examples was the yearly political festival of Fidesz in Baile Tusnád, Romania, where Orbán said that: "We never claimed these (Transylvania and Seclerland) were Romanian territorial units."<sup>150</sup> He also posted a video of himself at a football match wearing a scarf featuring a map of Greater Hungary in 2022. The scarf included territories that are today part of Ukraine, Romania, Serbia, Austria, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Croatia, which were perceived as blatant nationalism and irredentism.<sup>151</sup>

Whereas KGBéla and István Gyórkös's MNA were direct connections nurtured by Russian secret services, the current Hungarian far-right is under the indirect influence of the Kremlin. Despite the fact that Russia is not actively aiming to change the behaviour of these particular actors, harmful action can still take place due to pro-Russian discourse. There is circumstantial evidence proving that these far-right actors are acting on behalf of Russia to change the public attitude of Hungarian society by pushing anti-Western, anti-Ukrainian, and pro-Russian narratives. These far-right groups approved the Russian annexation of Crimea and invasion of Eastern Ukraine, allegedly to protect the Hungarian minority in Ukraine and in return obtain support for their fight against Western liberal values. Our Homeland and its satellite organisations serve Russian geopolitical interests and goals by inciting irredentist action and bolstering the autonomy of Transcarpathia in Ukraine. Our Homeland politicians are regularly voting with the governing Fidesz majority. Furthermore, House Speaker László Kövér, Orbán's close ally, decided that the openly anti-US and Pro-Russian party should become a member of the parliament's Committee on Defence and Security. Consequently, Előd Novák of MH gained access to classified, NATO-related materials, among others. Therefore, the Russian influence of the Hungarian far-right movements and their devotion to the Putin ideology threatens the stability

of Hungary and the entire region, which the Hungarian government should be considered as more than a potential security concern not only for Hungary but also its NATO allies and other EU Member States.<sup>152</sup>

Providing recommendations on how to combat pro-Russian far-right narratives in a country where the government corroborates their ideas is a difficult task to do. Therefore, a holistic and cross-sectoral approach is needed from the democratic forces to map, identify, and combat the security risk posed by the pro-Russian far right in Hungary.

- Finding a reasonable balance between not interfering with the right to associate and blocking radical and far-right actors from misusing this right is not easy. Yet, local authorities would need to employ a transparent and coherent strategy towards pro-Russian far-right actors who are threatening social cohesion. It is essential that local-level municipal leaders independent from the government have a better understanding of these risks to undercut their local subversive activities in a bottom-up fashion. In cooperation with civil society organisations and think tanks specialising in pro-Russian extremism, local municipalities should analyse the activities and narratives of these local organisations to provide better democratic responses to their anti-Western messages.
- Address social reconciliation by engaging relevant stakeholders and piloting strategies to boost trust, mutual tolerance, and democratic resilience at local levels of governance. Civil society should also aim at enacting social norm change by involving younger generations to develop their knowledge and ideas, raise concerns, and co-create solutions for social inclusion. This outcome could be highly significant at the local scale where pro-Russian disinformation and far-right organisations are the most vocal.

The EU should finance pilot countering strategies for increasing the democratic participation of marginalised (i.e. rural, poor, ethnic minorities) and disengaged groups (i.e. youth) designed to empower them and reinforce their participatory process in rural areas. It should create multiplication effects of social change by establishing and forming networks of young leaders across targeted countries. Such projects should increase political knowledge through a novel digital app Democratic Compass designed to reach groups that are vulnerable to political

manipulations and distortive practices and strengthen their participation in the democratic process through information support.

- In order to design better and more powerful counter-narratives to combat anti-Western pro-Russian disinformation, the EU should provide financial support to improve the skills of targeted stakeholders (i.e. local authorities, policymakers, CSOs at national and EU levels). Democratic political forces and civil society should aim at a methodological novelty to strengthen inclusive language and frame positive narratives around the European Union, the transatlantic alliance, democratic values, and mutual tolerance.
- While robust research reveals the Kremlin's influence within the far-right in CEE, the nature of Russia's influence is changing amid the war. Further academic and policy research needs to be conducted to explain the complex underpinnings of this shift—in particular, the involvement of the Russian Orthodox Church—and its security implications. This interdisciplinary approach between academics, policy experts, and investigative journalists should co-jointly open the black box of relationships. This cross-sectoral advance research, funded by NATO Public Diplomacy Division Grants, should build deeper insights into the connection between the Orbán government and the Russian Orthodox Church.
- Maintaining good political and economic relations with Russia provides a huge risk of corruption, which further undermines democratic institutions. The United States needs to invoke the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act and sanction government officials and oligarchs centred around Viktor Orbán for their extensive involvement in corruption. This is in particular warranted about Lőrinc Mészáros, who is extensively involved in the Paks 2 nuclear investment.
- The EU could also do more to push back against authoritarian foreign influence related to its Member States. The Commission should use its rich Rule of Law toolkit to monitor investments from suspected sources of malpractice such as monopolisation, corruption, and media capture in Hungary. The Commission should also reform its own EU Transparency Register to map lobbying activities in the EU institutions more efficiently. Despite the fact that it is obligatory to disclose lobbying on behalf of third-country governments, the current register is not legally binding, lacks sanctions, and is poorly enforced.

<sup>1</sup> András Rácz, “Authoritarian Ties: The Case of Russia and Hungary,” *Insight & Analysis*, 22 October 2021, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/authoritarian-ties-case-russia-and-hungary>.

<sup>2</sup> When the crisis in Ukraine was already underway, Hungary contracted Russia’s Rosatom to build two new nuclear power plant blocks in Paks in 2014. It was done without announcing a public tender and the project was financed by a €10 billion loan from Russia. One of the main Hungarian subcontractors was a close associate and oligarch of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, Lőrinc Mészáros.

<sup>3</sup> András Dezső, “The Secret Life of Bela Kovacs - European Press Prize.” 2017. *European Press Prize*, 27 February 2017. <https://www.europeanpressprize.com/article/the-secret-life-of-bela-kovacs/>.

<sup>4</sup> Péter Krekó, Lóránt Gyóri, and Edit Zgut, “From Russia with Hate - The Activity of pro-Russian Extremist Groups in Central-Eastern Europe,” 2014.

[https://politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/PC\\_NED\\_summary\\_analysis\\_EN\\_20170428.pdf](https://politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/PC_NED_summary_analysis_EN_20170428.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> One of the empirical backbones of this chapter is based on in-depth interviews with investigative journalists (Szabolcs Panyi, András Dezső, Szilvia Német), a former counterintelligence officer Ferenc Katrein, and an expert of Russian influence and disinformation, Péter Krekó.

<sup>6</sup> András Bozóki and Sarah Cueva, “Xenophobia and Power Politics: The Hungarian Far Right,” in *Transcript Verlag eBooks*, 2021, 109–20. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783839453155-008>

<sup>7</sup> Germany, France, and Hungary Poland. 2015. “Gender as Symbolic Glue the Position and Role of Conservative and Far Right Parties in the Anti-Gender Mobilizations in Europe Edited By: Eszter Kováts Maari Põim.” <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/budapest/11382.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> Weronika Grzebalska, Eszter Kováts, and Andrea Pető, “Gender as Symbolic Glue: How ‘Gender’ Became an Umbrella Term for the Rejection of the (Neo)Liberal Order,”., <https://hal.science/hal-03232926/document>

<sup>9</sup> Agnieszka Graff and Elżbieta Korolczuk, *Anti-Gender Politics in the Populist Moment*, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003133520>

<sup>10</sup> Mi Hazánk Mozgalom, “Egyetlen Migrációt Ellenző Párt Maradt: A Mi Hazánk,” [Only one anti-migration party left: Our Homeland.] 30 August 2023.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XhXquTJLGvg>

<sup>11</sup> “Oroszország Európa jobbik fele? – út a normalitás felé [Russia is the better part of Europe? - on the way to normality.] | Betyársereg,” 2022. <https://betyarsereg.hu/oroszország-európa-jobbik-fele-ut-a-normalitas-fele/>

<sup>12</sup> On the night of 8 February 1945, thousands of Hungarian and German soldiers attempted to get through the blockade of the Soviet forces, which eventually resulted in the death of most German and Hungarian forces. According to Krisztián Ungváry, a historian expert of the era, the outbreaks were not defending Europe, but rather victims who prolonged the agony of Nazi Germany. See more here: <https://en.kitoresnapja.hu/mitosz-es-valosag>

<sup>13</sup> Pető, Andrea. “Revisionist Histories, ‘Future Memories’: Far-Right Memorialization Practices in Hungary.” *European Politics and Society* 18 (1): 41–51, 2016.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/23745118.2016.1269442>.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Krekó, Péter, Lóránt Gyóri, and Edit Zgut, “From Russia with Hate - The Activity of pro-Russian Extremist Groups in Central-Eastern Europe.” *Political Capital*, 2017.



[https://politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/PC\\_NED\\_summary\\_analysis\\_EN\\_20170428.pdf](https://politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/PC_NED_summary_analysis_EN_20170428.pdf)

<sup>16</sup> Juhász, Attila, Lóránt Győri, and Edit Zgut. “The Truth Today Is What Putin Says It Is’ The Activity of Pro-Russian Extremist Groups in Hungary.” *Political Capital*, 2017.

[https://politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/PC\\_NED\\_country\\_study\\_HU\\_20170428.pdf](https://politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/PC_NED_country_study_HU_20170428.pdf)

<sup>17</sup> Róna, Dániel. “A Jobbik-Jelenség. A Jobbik Magyarországért Mozgalom Térnyerésének Okai.” [The Jobbik phenomena - Reasons behind the rise of the Movement for a Better Hungary.] *Magyar Tudományos Akadémia*, 2016. [http://real.mtak.hu/37892/2/rona\\_kotet.pdf](http://real.mtak.hu/37892/2/rona_kotet.pdf)

<sup>18</sup> Lakmusz, “Orosz Propaganda a Magyar Állam Támogatásával: Hazai Dezinformáció Az Orosz-Ukrán Háború És a Választások Idején - Lakmusz,” [Russian propaganda with the support of the Hungarian state: domestic disinformation during Russian-Ukraine war and elections.] *Lakmusz*, 25 May 2023. <https://www.lakmusz.hu/orosz-propaganda-a-magyar-allam-tamogatasaval-hazai-dezinformacio-az-orosz-ukran-haboru-es-a-valasztasok-idejen/>

<sup>19</sup> Panyi, Szabolcs. “Getting to the Bottom of Hungary’s Russian Spying Problem.” *Balkan Insight*, 30 November 2022. <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/11/30/getting-to-the-bottom-of-hungarys-russian-spying-problem/>

<sup>20</sup> Interview on Zoom with András Dezső on 11 July 2023 in Warsaw.

<sup>21</sup> Infostart.Hu. “Jogerősen életfogytiglant kapott a bőnyi rendőrgyilkos.” [The murderer of Bőny was sentenced to life imprisonment.] *Infostart.hu*, 11 December 2019.

<https://infostart.hu/bunugyek/2019/12/11/jogerosen-letfogytiglant-kapott-a-bonyi-rendorgyilkos>

<sup>22</sup> Veronika Munk, András Dezső. “A „migráns csürhe” ellen szervezkedett a rendőrgyilkos.” [The police murderer was conspiring against the “migrant horde’s”] *Index*, 11 November 2016. [https://index.hu/belfold/2016/10/26/gyorkos\\_istvan\\_portre/](https://index.hu/belfold/2016/10/26/gyorkos_istvan_portre/)

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> On the night of 8 February 1945, thousands of Hungarian and German soldiers attempted to get through the blockade of the Soviet forces, which eventually resulted in the death of most German and Hungarian forces. According to Krisztián Ungváry, a historian expert of the era, the outbreaks were not defending Europe, but rather victims who prolonged the agony of Nazi Germany. See more here: <https://en.kitoresnapja.hu/mitosz-es-valosag>.

<sup>25</sup> Veronika Munk, András Dezső. “A „migráns csürhe” ellen szervezkedett a rendőrgyilkos.” [The police murderer was conspiring against the “migrant hordes.] *Index*, 11 November 2016. [https://index.hu/belfold/2016/10/26/gyorkos\\_istvan\\_portre/](https://index.hu/belfold/2016/10/26/gyorkos_istvan_portre/)

<sup>26</sup> Juhász, Attila, Lóránt Győri, Edit Zgut, and András Dezső. “The Truth Today Is What Putin Says It Is.” *Political Capital*, 2017. [https://politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/PC\\_NED\\_country\\_study\\_HU\\_20170428.pdf](https://politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/PC_NED_country_study_HU_20170428.pdf)

<sup>27</sup> Sándor Németh Márton. “„Békét Oroszországgal!” – orosz zászló és munkásököl a Nyugati téren.” [Make Peace with Russia - Russian flag and the fist of the workers at the Square Western.] *Index*, 7 February 2023. <https://index.hu/belfold/2023/02/06/munkaspart-thurmer-gyula-tuntetes-nato-haboru-oroszorszag-ukrajna-demonstracio-orosz-ukran-konfliktus>

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Szabolcs, Panyi, András Dezső. “Orosz diplomaták gyakorlatoztak a rendőrgyilkos brigádjával.” [Russian diplomats were holding drills with the gang of the police murderer.] *Index*, 4 November 2016.

[https://index.hu/belfold/2016/10/27/orosz\\_hirszerzok\\_gyakorlatoztak\\_a\\_rendorgyilkos\\_harco\\_saival/](https://index.hu/belfold/2016/10/27/orosz_hirszerzok_gyakorlatoztak_a_rendorgyilkos_harco_saival/)

<sup>31</sup> András Dezső, “Szinte könyörögtek az orosz pénzért Győrökösök.” [Győrökös was almost begging for Russian money.] *Index*, 8 November 2016.

[https://index.hu/belfold/2016/11/07/szinte\\_konyorogtek\\_a\\_penzert\\_gyorkosek\\_az\\_oroszoktol/](https://index.hu/belfold/2016/11/07/szinte_konyorogtek_a_penzert_gyorkosek_az_oroszoktol/)

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Veronika Munk, András Dezső. “A „migráns csürhe” ellen szervezkedett a rendőrgyilkos.” [The police murderer was conspiring against the “migrant hordes.”] *Index*, 11 November 2016. [https://index.hu/belfold/2016/10/26/gyorkos\\_istvan\\_portre/](https://index.hu/belfold/2016/10/26/gyorkos_istvan_portre/)

<sup>34</sup> Juhász, Attila, Lóránt Győri, Edit Zgut, and András Dezső. “The Truth Today Is What Putin Says It Is.” *Political Capital*, 2017. [https://politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/PC\\_NED\\_country\\_study\\_HU\\_20170428.pdf](https://politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/PC_NED_country_study_HU_20170428.pdf)

<sup>35</sup> Interview on Zoom with András Dezső on 11 July 2023 in Warsaw.

<sup>36</sup> Szabolcs, Panyi. “The Great Escape of ‘KGBéla’, Hungarian MEP Accused of Spying for Russia.” *Index*, 11 October 2017.

[https://index.hu/english/2017/10/10/kgbela\\_escape\\_russia\\_hungary/](https://index.hu/english/2017/10/10/kgbela_escape_russia_hungary/)

<sup>37</sup> Interview on Zoom with Katrein Ferenc on 10 July 2023 in Warsaw.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Interview on Zoom with Katrein Ferenc on 10 July 2023 in Warsaw.

<sup>41</sup> András Dezső. “A bányi rendőrgyilkosság hazavágta a hungaristákat.” [The murder of a policeman undermined the “Hungarists”] *Index*, 20 June 2019.

[https://index.hu/belfold/2016/11/16/az\\_arcvonalosoknak\\_ezzel\\_befellegzett/](https://index.hu/belfold/2016/11/16/az_arcvonalosoknak_ezzel_befellegzett/)

<sup>42</sup> László Szemán János, Elítélték a Rendőrgyilkos Hungarista Szervezetének Nyolc Tagját. “Elítélték a rendőrgyilkos hungarista szervezetének nyolc tagját,” [Eight members of the police-murderer “Hungarist” organisation were convicted.] *Magyar Nemzet*, 13 June 2022.

<https://magyarnemzet.hu/belfold/2022/06/eliteltek-a-rendorgyilkos-hungarista-szervezetenek-nyolc-tagjat>

<sup>43</sup> Interview on Zoom with Katrein Ferenc on 10 July 2023.

<sup>44</sup> Juhász, Attila, Lóránt Győri, Edit Zgut, and András Dezső. “The Truth Today Is What Putin Says It Is.” *Political Capital*, 2017. [https://politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/PC\\_NED\\_country\\_study\\_HU\\_20170428.pdf](https://politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/PC_NED_country_study_HU_20170428.pdf)

<sup>45</sup> Jobbik has been dominating the Hungarian far-right party scene under the leadership of Gábor Vona up until 2018. After it took a centrist turn, the party split and László Toroczkai established a new party based on the radical flank of Jobbik.

<sup>46</sup> Interview on Zoom with András Dezső on 11 July 2023 in Warsaw.

<sup>47</sup> Chudjakov, Nikita. “Hungarian Far-Right MEP Suspected as Russian Spy.” *Euractiv*, 16 May 2014. <https://www.euractiv.com/section/elections/news/hungarian-far-right-mep-suspected-as-russian-spy/>

<sup>48</sup> András Dezső, “The Secret Life of Bela Kovacs – European Press Prize.”, *European Press Prize*, 27 February 2017. <https://www.europeanpressprize.com/article/the-secret-life-of-bela-kovacs/>

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Interview with András Dezső on 11 July 2023.

<sup>51</sup> Interview with András Dezső on 11 July 2023.

<sup>52</sup> András Dezső, “The Secret Life of Bela Kovacs - European Press Prize.” *European Press Prize*, 27 February 2017. <https://www.europeanpressprize.com/article/the-secret-life-of-bela-kovacs/>

<sup>53</sup> Despite that Béla Kovács claimed that his Japanese wife has no linkages to Russian secret services, her past holds a number of secret incidents and facts suggesting that the Soviet secret service, or the Committee of State Security (commonly known as the KGB) has been a common link in the couple’s life. See more here: Richard Field, “Jobbik MEP ‘KGBéla’ Kovács and Wife Outted as Russian Spies,” *The Budapest Beacon*, 7 October 2014, <https://budapestbeacon.com/jobbik-mep-kgbela-kovacs-and-wife-outted-as-russian-spies/>

<sup>54</sup> Szabolcs, Panyi. “The Great Escape of ‘KGBéla’, Hungarian MEP Accused of Spying for Russia.” *Index*, 11 October 2017.

[https://index.hu/english/2017/10/10/kgbela\\_escape\\_russia\\_hungary/](https://index.hu/english/2017/10/10/kgbela_escape_russia_hungary/)

<sup>55</sup> András Dezső. “Kágébéla lehet a Jobbik veszte.” [KGBéla might have been the fate of jobbik.] *Index*, 15 May 2020.

[https://index.hu/belfold/2014/05/15/kagebela\\_lehet\\_a\\_jobbik\\_veszte/](https://index.hu/belfold/2014/05/15/kagebela_lehet_a_jobbik_veszte/)

<sup>56</sup> András Dezső “The Secret Life of Bela Kovacs - European Press Prize,” *European Press Prize*, 27 February 2017, <https://www.europeanpressprize.com/article/the-secret-life-of-bela-kovacs/>

<sup>57</sup> Jobbik changed its approach towards Russia various times in the last two decades. Due to its radical far-right roots of the party, it originally accounted for an anti-Russian stance in the mid-2000s then took a pro-Kremlin turn after 2008, largely thanks to the effective operation of Béla Kovács. As a result, Jobbik became one of the most ardent supporters of the Kremlin with a hostile approach towards Ukraine by 2014. After the party decided to shift towards the centre for the 2018 parliamentary elections, it turned down its pro-Russian rhetoric once again and became critical of the Kremlin by 2023. See details here:

<https://telex.hu/belfold/2023/03/26/jobbik-fidesz-kdnp-orban-viktor-vona-gabor-kommunikacio-hasonlosag-oroszorszag-szankciok-keleti-kapcsolatok>

<sup>58</sup> Mateusz Piskorski was formerly a member of Samoobrona, then established the pro-Russian radical Change (Zmiana) party in 2015. He has an ongoing trial for collaborating with Russian and Chinese secret services. Piskorski was detained in 2016 and remained behind bars until 2019 when the court released him on bail of PLN 200,000. See more here: <https://wyborcza.pl/7,173236,30092711,putin-s-agents-of-chaos-how-pro-russian-trolls-poison-poland-s.html>

<sup>59</sup> Zoltán Ember. “Kovács Béla él és virul Strasbourgban.” [Béla Kovács is alive and kicking in Strasbourg.] *24.hu*, 15 June 2016. <https://24.hu/belfold/2016/06/15/kovacs-bela-el-es-virul-strasbourgban/>

<sup>60</sup> Reporter, Guardian Staff. 2017a. “Poland Detains Pro-Kremlin Party Leader for ‘Spying.’” *The Guardian*, 12 April 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/may/19/poland-detains-pro-kremlin-party-leader-mateusz-piskorski-spying>

<sup>61</sup> Interview on Zoom with Szabolcs Panyi on 13 July 2023 in Warsaw.

<sup>62</sup> András, Dezső. “A Glorious Match Made in Russia.” *Index*, 2 October 2017.

[https://index.hu/english/2014/09/28/a\\_glorious\\_match\\_made\\_in\\_russia/](https://index.hu/english/2014/09/28/a_glorious_match_made_in_russia/).

<sup>63</sup> Jean-Marie Le Pen was one of the founding members of the organisation in 2009. After Marine Le Pen overtook the leadership of the party in 2011, she sought cooperation with more moderate Eurosceptic parties and ended formal collaboration with AENM.

<sup>64</sup> Interview with Szabolcs Panyi on 13 July 2023.

- <sup>65</sup> Szabolcs Panyi, “The Great Escape of ‘KGBéla’, Hungarian MEP Accused of Spying for Russia.” *Index*, 11 October 2017.  
[https://index.hu/english/2017/10/10/kgbela\\_escape\\_russia\\_hungary/](https://index.hu/english/2017/10/10/kgbela_escape_russia_hungary/)
- <sup>66</sup> Interview on Zoom with Ferenc Katrein on 10 July 2023 in Warsaw.
- <sup>67</sup> Krekó, Péter and Mitchell a. Orenstein. “A Russian Spy in Brussels? The Case of ‘KGBéla’ -- and What It Means for Europe.” *Foreign Affairs*, June 26, 2023.  
<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/hungary/2014-05-29/russian-spy-brussels>
- <sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>69</sup> András Dezső. “Az Orosz Kém, Akit Majdnem Elfogtak.” [The Russian spy who almost got caught.] *Hvg.Hu*, 27 September 2022.  
[https://hvg.hu/360/20220927\\_Dezso\\_Andras\\_Az\\_orosz\\_kem\\_akit\\_majdnem\\_elfogtak](https://hvg.hu/360/20220927_Dezso_Andras_Az_orosz_kem_akit_majdnem_elfogtak)
- <sup>70</sup> EUobserver. “Former Jobbik MEP Sentenced to Prison for Russia Spying.” *EUobserver*, 27 September 2022. <https://euobserver.com/tickers/156154>.
- <sup>71</sup> Mércé. “Rasszista demonstrációt tartott a Mi Hazánk Törökszentmiklóson, ellentüntetők is megjelentek a rendezvényen – Percről percre a Mércén « Mércé.” [Our Homeland held a Racist demonstration in Törökszentmiklós, there were counter-demonstrators at the event - Live on Mércé.] *Mércé*, 23 May 2019. <https://merce.hu/2019/05/21/rasszista-vonulast-tart-a-mi-hazank-torokszentmikloson-ellentuntetok-is-erkeznek-percrol-percre-a-mercen/>.
- <sup>72</sup> Interview with András Dezső on 11 July 2023.
- <sup>73</sup> John R. Haines. “A New Political Movement Emerges on Hungary’s Far Right *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, 2018. <https://www.fpri.org/article/2018/07/a-new-political-movement-emerges-on-hungarys-far-right/>.
- <sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>75</sup> Political Capital. “A Mi Hazánk stratégiája: szociális fókusz, radikális rendpártiság és konteók”, [The strategy of Our Homeland: social focus, radical law and order stance and conteos.] *PC Blog*, 9 June 2022. <https://pcblog.atlatszo.hu/2022/06/09/nem-a-jobbik-2-0-a-mi-hazank-valasztasi-eredmenyeinek-melyelemzese/>
- <sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>77</sup> Inotai, Edit. “Hungary’s Orbán Eyes Opportunity, Risk in Rising Far-Right Party.” *Balkan Insight*, 22 April 2022. <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/04/22/hungarys-Orban-eyes-opportunity-risk-in-rising-far-right-party/>
- <sup>78</sup> Tamás Pál. “Több ezren vettek részt a Mi Hazánk járványszabályok elleni tüntetésén Budapesten.” [Thousands have participated in the demonstration against the pandemic restrictions of the Our Homeland in Budapest.] *Telex*, 16 January 2022.  
<https://telex.hu/koronavirus/2022/01/16/mi-hazank-tuntetes-koronavirus-jarvany-szabalyok-korlatozasok-covid-diktatura>
- <sup>79</sup> Jakab, Kárpáti. “Így Álltak Át a Vírusszeptikusok Az Orosz Propagandára - Lakmusz.” [This is how “virus-sceptics” have switched to Russian propaganda.] *Lakmusz*, 13 February 2023. <https://www.lakmusz.hu/igy-alltak-at-a-viruszeptikusok-az-orosz-propagandara/>
- <sup>80</sup> Interview with Szabolcs Panyi on 13 July 2023.
- <sup>81</sup> Mandiner. “Mi Hazánk: Ne fizessünk Ukrajnának!” [Our Homeland: Do not pay to Ukraine!], *Mandiner.hu*, 7 December 2022.  
[https://mandiner.hu/cikk/20221207\\_belfold\\_ellenzek\\_mi\\_hazank\\_ukrajna\\_tamogatas\\_hatarozati\\_javaslat](https://mandiner.hu/cikk/20221207_belfold_ellenzek_mi_hazank_ukrajna_tamogatas_hatarozati_javaslat)
- <sup>82</sup> Kata, Bálint, Bulcsú Hunyadi, Róbert László, and Csaba Molnár. ““Minél Jobbra, Minél Jobban” - A Magyar (Szélső)Jobb 100 Évvel Trianon Után.” [The more to the right, the better - The Hungarian (Far)-Right 100 years after Trianon.] *Political Capital*, 2020.

[https://politicalcapital.hu/pc-](https://politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/pc_boll_minel_jobbra_minel_jobban_2020.pdf)

[admin/source/documents/pc\\_boll\\_minel\\_jobbra\\_minel\\_jobban\\_2020.pdf](https://politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/pc_boll_minel_jobbra_minel_jobban_2020.pdf)

<sup>83</sup> “Putyin jogos testvérháborúja? – a magyar szélsőjobb a náciellenes Kreml szolgálatában, kivételekkel.” [Putin’s legitimate “war between brothers”? - The Hungarian far-right in the service of the Kreml’s denazification, with exceptions], *Political Capital*, 2022.

[https://politicalcapital.hu/hireink.php?article\\_read=1&article\\_id=2979](https://politicalcapital.hu/hireink.php?article_read=1&article_id=2979)

<sup>84</sup> Yuri Gagarin was the first human to travel into space, launching to orbit aboard the Vostok 3KA-3 (Vostok 1) on 12 April 1961. See more details:

[https://www.esa.int/About\\_Us/ESA\\_history/50\\_years\\_of\\_humans\\_in\\_space/Yuri\\_Gagarin](https://www.esa.int/About_Us/ESA_history/50_years_of_humans_in_space/Yuri_Gagarin)

<sup>85</sup> Interview on Zoom with Péter Kerekó on 2 August 2023 in Warsaw.

<sup>86</sup> Zrt Hvg Kiadó. “Putyin szerint több országnak is lehet területi követelése Ukrajnával szemben, egyedül a magyar kormány nem utasította el.” [According to Putin, many countries might have territorial claims towards Ukraine, the Hungarian government was the only one that did not reject it.] *hvg.hu*, 6 November 2022.

[https://hvg.hu/itthon/20221106\\_putyin\\_ukrajna\\_magyarország\\_területi\\_koveteles](https://hvg.hu/itthon/20221106_putyin_ukrajna_magyarország_területi_koveteles)

<sup>87</sup> Dávid Kovács Ferenc. “Toroczkai László Magyarországhoz csatolná Kárpátalját.” [László Toroczkai would annex Transcarpathia to Hungary.] *Index*, 14 November 2022.

<https://index.hu/kulfold/2022/11/13/toroczkai-laszlo-orosz-ukran-konfliktus-haboru-karpatalja/>

<sup>88</sup> Sadecki, Andrzej. “Ukraine–Hungary: The Intensifying Dispute over the Hungarian Minority’s Rights.” *OSW*, 2018. <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2018-08-14/ukraine-hungary-intensifying-dispute-over-hungarian-0>

<sup>89</sup> An estimated 80,000 ethnic Hungarians live in Zakarpattia province in Western Ukraine. The main cause of the tension was the Education Act passed by the Ukrainian parliament in September 2017 that enhanced a comprehensive reform of the education system and imposed serious restrictions on the use of the languages of national minorities, including Hungarian, in school education.

<sup>90</sup> Mandiner, “Mi Hazánk: Ne fizessünk Ukrajnának!” [Our Homeland: Do not pay to Ukraine!], 7 December 2022.

[https://mandiner.hu/cikk/20221207\\_belfold\\_ellenzek\\_mi\\_hazank\\_ukrajna\\_tamogatas\\_hatarozati\\_javaslat](https://mandiner.hu/cikk/20221207_belfold_ellenzek_mi_hazank_ukrajna_tamogatas_hatarozati_javaslat)

<sup>91</sup> Mi Hazánk. “Dúró Dóra a Russia Today-Nak: Ukrajnának Le Kell Mondania Területekről,” [Dóra Dúró for the Russia Today: Ukraine must give up territories.] 2023.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jBUFCH4bMUI>

<sup>92</sup> Toroczkai László. “Az Eltitkolt Igazság Az Ukrajnai Háború Mögött [Eng Sub],” 2022.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vjIlWjtiN0E>

<sup>93</sup> Eszter, Neuberger. “Putyin Háborús Propagandáját Viszi Magával a Parlamentbe a Mi Hazánk.” [Our Homeland is bringing Putin’s war propaganda into the Parliament.] *Lakmusz*, 27 May 2022. <https://www.lakmusz.hu/putyin-haborus-propagandajat-viszi-magaval-a-parlamentbe-a-mi-hazank/>

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Toroczkai László. “Az Eltitkolt Igazság Az Ukrajnai Háború Mögött [Eng Sub],” [The hidden truth behind the Ukrainian war.] 2023.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vjIlWjtiN0E>

<sup>96</sup> Dániel Dér. “Az új európai szövetség.” [The new European alliance.] *Mi Hazánk Mozgalom*, 13 July 2023. <https://mihazank.hu/az-uj-europai-szovetseg/>

<sup>97</sup> Kata, Bálint, Bulcsú Hunyadi, Róbert László, and Csaba Molnár. “Minél Jobbra, Minél Jobban” - A Magyar (Szélső)Jobb 100 Évvel Trianon Után.” [The more to the right, the

better - The Hungarian (Far)-Right 100 years after Trianon.] *Political Capital*, 2020.  
[https://politicalcapital.hu/pc-](https://politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/pc_boll_minel_jobbra_minel_jobban_2020.pdf)

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<sup>98</sup> Szerk. “Hogyan radikalizálódott a Hatvannégy Vármegye Ifjúsági Mozgalom. A „Nagy-Magyarország” térképektől terrorista merényletek kiterveléséig – Adevãrul.” [ How did the Sixty-Four County Movement get radicalized. From the maps of the “Greater Hungary” to the planning of terrorist attacks.] *EuroCom - Romániai Sajtófigyelő*, 26 May 2016.

<https://eurocom.wordpress.com/2016/05/25/hogyan-radikalizalodott-a-hatvannegy-varmegye-ifjusagi-mozgalom-a-nagy-magyarorszag-terkepektol-terrorista-merenyletek-kiterveleseig-adevarul/>

<sup>99</sup> Farkasadmin. “Farkasok - Hagyományörző és Ifjúságképző Csoport.” [Wolves - Traditionalist and Youth Training groups.] *Farkasok*, 5 August 2023. <https://farkasfalka.com/>

<sup>100</sup> Anarki. “Farkasok: Nem vagyunk a Jobbik magánhadserége.” [Wolves: We are not the private army of Jobbik.] 444, 3 August 2021. <https://444.hu/2016/03/10/farkasok-nem-vagyunk-a-jobbik-maganhadserege>.

<sup>101</sup> Attila, Lóránt Győri, Edit Zgut, and András Dezső. “The Truth Today Is What Putin Says It Is.” *Political Capital*, 2017. [https://politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/PC\\_NED\\_country\\_study\\_HU\\_20170428.pdf](https://politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/PC_NED_country_study_HU_20170428.pdf)

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> After former Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsany admitted to lying about the severe state of the economy to win re-election in April 2006, thousands of people protested peacefully for days demanding his resignation, but a few hundred rioters and radicals attacked the Headquarter of the Hungarian Public Broadcaster. Main football clubs and the radical right scene have been prominent during the clashes between the protestors and the police in Budapest. See more here: “CNN.com - Hungary: Rioters Attack TV Station - Sep 18, 2006.” n.d. <https://edition.cnn.com/2006/WORLD/europe/09/18/hungary.riots/>

<sup>104</sup> Tamás Fábrián. “Náci vagyok, vállalom! Vona meg a barátom.” [I am a nazi, I admit it. And Vona is my friend.] *Index*, 23 November 2015.

[https://index.hu/belfold/2015/06/15/naci\\_vagyok\\_vallalom\\_vona\\_meg\\_a\\_baratom/](https://index.hu/belfold/2015/06/15/naci_vagyok_vallalom_vona_meg_a_baratom/)

<sup>105</sup> Miklós Horthy was an admiral who served as the regent of the Kingdom of Hungary between the two World Wars and most of World War II—from 1 March 1920 to 15 October 1944. As head of state, he established an authoritarian, ultraconservative nationalist and revisionist regime, and in 1944, he was responsible for the mass deportation of 400,000 Hungarian Jews who were murdered in Auschwitz.

<sup>106</sup> Mi Hazánk Mozgalom. “Terepszemle a Betyársereggel a Közrend Érdekében,” [Field oversight with the Army of Outlaws or the sake of public security.] 2021.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YZIcMSuYPkM>

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> Nemzeti.net. “Egészségügyi sétát tartott a Betyársereg és a Légio Hungária Sopronban.” [The Army of Outlaws and the Légio Hungária took a “healthy walk” in Sopron.]

*Nemzeti.net*, 21 June 2023. <https://nemzeti.net/egeszsegugyi-setat-tartott-a-betyarsereg-es-a-legio-hungaria-sopronban-20932741.html>

<sup>109</sup> Zgut-Pryzbylska, Edit. (ed). “Visegrad Group - Disinformation and Civil Society Mapping Report.” *Techsoup*. 2023. [https://www.techsoupeurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/TechSoup\\_Disinformation-and-Civil-Society-Regional-Mapping-Report\\_Visegrad\\_Group.pdf](https://www.techsoupeurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/TechSoup_Disinformation-and-Civil-Society-Regional-Mapping-Report_Visegrad_Group.pdf)

<sup>110</sup> Péter Krekó, Lóránt Győri, and Edit Zgut, “From Russia with Hate – The Activity of pro-Russian Extremist Groups in Central-Eastern Europe,” 2014. [https://politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/PC\\_NED\\_summary\\_analysis\\_EN\\_20170428.pdf](https://politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/PC_NED_summary_analysis_EN_20170428.pdf)

<sup>111</sup> Various cases demonstrated these efforts in CEE: Slovak far-right paramilitary figures were fighting in Eastern Ukraine and promoted the separatists’ case in Slovakia. One of them was the case of Martin Keprta, a former member of the Slovak Conscripts (Slovenskí Branci-SB), whose organisation had received training from ex-members of Spetsnaz, the Russian military intelligence’s special forces. See more here: [https://politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/PC\\_NED\\_summary\\_analysis\\_EN\\_20170428.pdf](https://politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/PC_NED_summary_analysis_EN_20170428.pdf)

<sup>112</sup> According to the latest census in 2018, the number of Hungarian minorities in Transcarpathia is approximately 131,000 people. See more here:

<https://hang.hu/kulfold/mennyi-a-magyar-karpataljan-102494#:~:text=T%C3%A1mogassa%20a%20Magyar%20Hangot!&text=Tizen%C3%B6t%20%C3%A9v%20ut%C3%A1n%20k%C3%A9sz%C3%BClt%20demogr%C3%A1fiai,helyett%20k%C3%B6r%C3%BClbel%C3%BCl%20131%20ezren%20%C3%A9lhetnek>

<sup>113</sup> HVG. “Orosz Dezinformációs Kampanynak Tűnő SMS-Ek Élezik a Feszültséget Kárpátalján,” [Tension raised by sms’ resembling Russian disinformation in Transcarpathia.] *HVG.Hu*, 2022. [https://hvg.hu/vilag/20220322\\_dezinformacios\\_kampany\\_karpatalja](https://hvg.hu/vilag/20220322_dezinformacios_kampany_karpatalja)

<sup>114</sup> *Alfahir.hu*. “Bojkott indult a kárpátaljai magyarokért,” [A boycott was launched for the Hungarian minorities in transcarpathia.] *Alfahir.hu*, 2015.

[https://alfahir.hu/hirek/bojkott\\_indult\\_a\\_karpataljai\\_magyarokert](https://alfahir.hu/hirek/bojkott_indult_a_karpataljai_magyarokert)

<sup>115</sup> “Fegyveres ukrán szervezet fenyegette meg a Jobbikot és a HVIM-et | Betyársereg.” [Armed Ukrainian organization threatened Jobbik and the HVIM. - Army of Outlaws.] *Betyarsereg*, 2015. <https://betyarsereg.hu/fegyveres-ukran-szervezet-fenyegette-meg-a-jobbikot-es-a-hvim-et/>

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>117</sup> Péter Krekó, Lóránt Győri, and Edit Zgut, “From Russia with Hate – The Activity of pro-Russian Extremist Groups in Central-Eastern Europe,” 2014. [https://politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/PC\\_NED\\_summary\\_analysis\\_EN\\_20170428.pdf](https://politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/PC_NED_summary_analysis_EN_20170428.pdf)

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>119</sup> *Maszol.Ro*. “Itt a vádirat: bemutatjuk a „székelyföldi terrorizmus” ügyészégi dossziéját.” [Here is the indictment: we present the prosecutor's file of the "terrorism in Seclerland.] *Maszol*, 23 May 2016. [https://maszol.ro/index.php/tarsadalom/64783-itt-a-vadirat-bemutatjuk-a-szekelyfoldi-terrorizmus-ugyeszsegi-dossziejat?utm\\_source=mandiner&utm\\_medium=link&utm\\_campaign=mandiner\\_201610](https://maszol.ro/index.php/tarsadalom/64783-itt-a-vadirat-bemutatjuk-a-szekelyfoldi-terrorizmus-ugyeszsegi-dossziejat?utm_source=mandiner&utm_medium=link&utm_campaign=mandiner_201610)

<sup>120</sup> Interview on Zoom with Szilvia Német on 3 August 2023 in Warsaw.

<sup>121</sup> *Blikk-Információ*. “Döbbenetes: ezért vadásznak a zsaruk a magyar zsoldosokra.”

[Shocking: this is why cops are chasing Hungarian sorcerers.] *Blikk*, 29 March 2019.

<https://www.blikk.hu/aktualis/kulfold/ukrajna-magyar-zsoldos-vadaszat-rendorok-tiltott-toborzas/15e8zs2>

<sup>122</sup> Interview on Zoom with Szilvia Német on 3 August 2023 in Warsaw.

<sup>123</sup> Inotai, Edit, Miroslava German Sirotnikova, Tim Gosling, and Claudia Ciobanu. 2020.

“Democracy Digest: States of Emergency.” *Balkan Insight*, 2 October 2020.

<https://balkaninsight.com/2020/10/02/democracy-digest-states-of-emergency>

<sup>124</sup> *K-Monitor*. “Adatbázis: Védett Társadalom Alapítvány | K-Monitor.” [Database: Protected Society Foundation - K-Monitor.] *K-Monitor*, 2023. <https://adatbazis.k-monitor.hu/adatbazis/cimkek/vedett-tarsadalom-alapitvany>

- <sup>125</sup> Bence Bogatin. “Fidesz-közeli újság szórólapja népszerűsíti Toroczkaiék mozgalmát.” [Toroczkai’s movement is being popularized by a leaflet of a newspaper that is affiliated with Fidesz.] *Mérce*, 10 July 2018. <https://merce.hu/2018/07/10/fidesz-kozeli-ujsg-szorolapja-nepszerusiti-toroczkaiek-mozgalmat>
- <sup>126</sup> Guardian Staff. “Far-Right ‘hijacking’ Hungary Protests,” *The Guardian*, 2 December 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2006/sep/24/theobserver.worldnews4>.
- <sup>127</sup> Edit Inota. “Pardoned Far-Right Extremist Rides to Freedom in Hungary,” *Balkan Insight*, 10 May 2023. <https://balkaninsight.com/2023/05/09/pardoned-far-right-extremist-rides-to-freedom-in-hungary/>
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- <sup>129</sup> Tamás Forgács. “Pávatáncnak vége: a keleti nyitás tarthatatlan, az új magyar kormánynak be kell tagozódnia Európába,” [The end of the “peacock dance”: the Eastern Opening is unsustainable, the new Hungarian government has to be part of Europe.] *Népszava*, 2022 [https://nepszava.hu/3152200\\_magyarorszagoroszoszag-keleti-nyitas-europai-unio-haboru-vlagyimir-putyin-Orb%C3%A1n-viktor](https://nepszava.hu/3152200_magyarorszagoroszoszag-keleti-nyitas-europai-unio-haboru-vlagyimir-putyin-Orb%C3%A1n-viktor)
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## 6

# France: Interference Based on Resistance to the System

Nicolas Hénin

Schematically speaking, the French far-right can be divided into four main clusters. But before developing them, it should be remembered that such a division is necessarily excessively schematic. Some activist circles have drawn up maps<sup>1</sup> that better illustrate its diversity. It is also important to mention the schools of thought which, under an often pseudo-intellectual veneer of bookshops and magazines, provide a link between conservative circles and violent militants.<sup>2</sup>

Our first two clusters are naturally the two political parties that represent what we refer to as the far-right, our two others are more nebulous movements. The National Rally (RN), following a rebranding operation from the National Front, is the political party traditionally embodying the far-right. Long marginalised and excluded from any coalition with other political parties (a process known as ‘barrage’) made a win for the RN in the second round of three presidential elections (2002, 2015, 2022) impossible. However, the RN has been notably mainstreamed since 2022 and has managed to secure a significant number of minority seats in parliament. Its aim, since this electoral success, has been to normalise and pursue a policy of “de-diabolisation”, abandoning its calls for withdrawal from the euro or the EU and sanctioning the most blatant racist expressions among its activists. The RN does, however, continue to maintain links with groups, or former members, that are keen on violence, in particular the Groupe Union Défense (GUD).<sup>34</sup>

The second party, Reconquête (literally “Reconquest”, based on the premise that the country is being invaded and that control has to be regained), which emerged ahead of the 2022 elections around populist polemicist Eric Zemmour, remains

more controversial than the RN, aiming much more to provoke rather than to mainstream. Its competitive relationship with the RN is linked to its origins: it emerged by poaching leaders and seeking to capture voters. Reconquête assumes a representation of the world based on a migratory invasion that would endanger France and its identity, leading to xenophobic, racist, and Islamophobic narratives, as well as adherence to the theory of the Great Replacement.<sup>5</sup> It is close to militant groups such as Génération identitaire (which was one of its founders).<sup>6</sup> Reconquête is tantamount to a form of French-style Trumpism, both in terms of its massive recourse to influence operations on social media,<sup>7</sup> and the ease it shows in dealing with the facts, purveying a form of post-truth.

On the French political spectrum, these two parties are the closest to the Kremlin's positions.<sup>8</sup> In 2014, the RN benefitted from two loans from a Russian bank for a total of six million euros, which led to an even more visible alignment with Moscow's positions (already very compatible)<sup>9</sup>: anti-globalism, anti-liberalism, anti-LGBTQ+, anti-immigration, and perceived resistance to a threatening Muslim world. This ideological proximity concerns not only issues relating to Russia,<sup>10</sup> but international relations as a whole.<sup>11</sup> The RN at the time (and those who left to found Reconquête) were the most virulent in defending and rehabilitating Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria and denying his crimes. RN member of parliament Thierry Mariani was one of Moscow's most active advocates in France, founding an association, Dialogue franco-russe, which is a front for Russian intelligence<sup>12</sup> to exert influence, and organising numerous trips to Damascus. Russian support for the RN crossed the boundaries of legality during the 2017 presidential election: the Macron Leaks, an audacious hack and leaks operation carried out with malware developed by Russian military intelligence (GRU)<sup>13</sup> and amplified by the US alt-right through highly visible X (formerly Twitter) accounts and more discreet Telegram channels,<sup>14</sup> aimed to prevent the election of Emmanuel Macron while he was engaged in an electoral standoff against Marine Le Pen.<sup>15</sup> Notwithstanding RN's actions, it is Zemmour's civilisational representation of the world which makes him ideologically the closest to the "conservative revolution"<sup>16</sup> ideas promoted by the Kremlin. The Russian ambassador to France indicated in 2015 to the author, when Zemmour was just a columnist not yet involved in politics, that he considered him to be the best analyst of French political life and an asset to work with.<sup>17</sup>

Researcher Adrien Nonjon recalls<sup>18</sup> the reasons for the far right's fascination with Vladimir Putin: virile, conservative, a defender of traditional values, particularly

in the area of morality. Where France is portrayed as in decline, Putin offers the response of a man who is said to have turned his country around when it was plunging into chaos and restored its place in the international arena. Finally, he presents an alternative to the way the Western world is organised, offering a sovereigntist alternative to a situation that would otherwise place France in a position of vassalage to the US.

A third cluster is made up of a nebula of non-legalistic local action groups advocating violent action. These groups constitute what the security services call the ultra-right to differentiate them from the “official” radical right, which respects the law and participates in elections. The main difference is also the call for violence, although in practice, the line between a “legalistic far-right” and a “violent ultra-right” is not so watertight. Many of the militants involved in violent ultra-right actions are or have been members of far-right political parties. This ultra-right is fragmented but largely made up of neo-Nazi groups, some of them popular and close to skinheads, others elitist and royalist.<sup>19</sup>

Recently, their mode of networking has been both global, through internet channels (notably Telegram), and local, around places such as bars, combat sports clubs, soccer fans’ clubs, or bookshops.<sup>20</sup> The tactic has been to set up branches down to medium-sized, provincial towns, supposedly to defend local cultural identity against the immigrants, leftists, or homosexuals who purportedly threaten it. They post photos and videos on their Telegram accounts in which they perform shows of force, organising fights and raids against their targets. The flagship Telegram channel of the neo-Nazi hooligan movement, Ouest Casual, has played a major role in recent times, becoming a flagship of the radical-right internet apparatus. It also communicates in English and interacts with the international neo-Nazi scene, which is relatively new, given that the French far-right is traditionally French-speaking and Franco-centric. These groups are occasionally the subject of legal proceedings. Some have been the subject of administrative disbandment, which has had little effect since they quickly reformed under a different name, suffering only somewhat from these types of sanctions.<sup>21</sup>

This ultra-right-wing ecosystem has been profoundly disrupted by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.<sup>22</sup> Many activists deplore this “civil war between whites, which distracts from the real fight, that against the migratory invasion”.<sup>23</sup> But while the vast majority appreciate Putin’s ideology, some of the neo-Nazi movements have come out clearly in favour of Ukraine, but a Ukraine embodied by a fantasised Azov Battalion. These individuals are not directly controlled by

Moscow but while joining highly controversial Ukrainian units they inadvertently, and in a minor sense, validate the Russian narrative on the need for “denazification” of Ukraine.<sup>24</sup>

The fourth cluster in our description of the French far-right extremism is a new movement that is being described by the intelligence services as “conspiracists” (sometimes also nicknamed “ultra-jaunes”, or ultra-yellows, to refer to radicalised Yellow Vests).<sup>25</sup> In fact, it began to be observed during the Yellow Vests protest movement in 2018, a populist movement that was initially not very politicised but gradually became radicalised and was absorbed by the far-right. This protest movement took the form of roundabout occupations on the outskirts of towns, large-scale and violent demonstrations every Saturday in Paris, and publications (texts, but above all videos) by influencers on social networks. Most of these influencers were unknown or little known before the crisis. It is interesting to note that they were highly valued and amplified by the Kremlin’s media,<sup>26</sup> but also by Alexandr Dugin who gave them vocal support on his Facebook page.<sup>27</sup> They are still part of a powerful narrative today used by pro-Kremlin media in France.<sup>28</sup>

Among the figures who have lent strong support to the Yellow Vests are André Ryssen, a *Unité Radicale* activist,<sup>29</sup> or Jacques Sapir, known on social media under his *Russeurope* alias, and an outspoken advocate of the Kremlin.<sup>30</sup> Several Yellow Vests have been convicted of calling for violence or forcible overthrow of institutions.<sup>31</sup> After the end of this social crisis, leaders of this movement again became very active during the pandemic, adopting COVID-19-sceptic or anti-vax stances before taking up the Kremlin’s narratives<sup>32</sup> during the full scale Russian aggression of Ukraine.<sup>33</sup> Many of these players can count on a parallel media ecosystem, calling itself *reinformation media*.<sup>34</sup> These media, present exclusively on the internet (websites, web-hosted TV channels, Telegram channels), have shown large areas of overlap with the Kremlin media.<sup>35</sup> The subjects covered, and the people invited to talk about them were largely the same. This very marginal ecosystem partly intersects with traditional media (*Valeurs actuelles*, *CNews*, *Sud Radio*, or newcomers like *Omerta*), sharing common guest speakers and narratives.<sup>36</sup> They were also very present on the Russian state media (*RT France*, *Sputnik in French*) until their ban by the EU in 2022.

Regardless of the aforementioned clusters, this chapter will study two cases that illustrate the Russian influence and penetration of the French far-right. First is the case of Joël Sambuis, a pioneer of far-right online activism in France, who has

been based in Russia since 1998, and secondly is Rémy Daillet, a leader of the *complosphere* (online ecosystem for spreading conspiracy theories)<sup>37</sup> who illustrates that even if this radical ecosystem is not directly activated by Russia, it is manipulated and amplified in the hope of provoking violent action in France. Our two main characters began their careers in right-wing or radical-right political parties, before drifting away from any institutionalised organisation, advocating violent action while establishing themselves as leaders of their own movements. The first one is directly linked to Russia, as it is based there and promotes the country and its political system. The second is a radical right-wing figure who curates audiences activated and agitated by the Kremlin media.

### **Case Study 1: Joël Sambuis, a Predecessor of Online Hate**

Joël Sambuis was born in 1959 near Grenoble, in the foothills of the Alps. Before becoming involved in extremism, he was first active in two traditional right-wing movements, the Inter-University Union (UNI)<sup>38</sup> and the Rally for the Republic (RPR).<sup>39</sup> He soon found himself in trouble with the law. In 1986, he received his first prison sentence for charges of participation in a paramilitary group and possession of weapons.<sup>40</sup> Then he began running credit card scams. In 1995, he was sentenced to four years imprisonment for charges of a new scam but was released in 1997 and married a Russian citizen in October of the same year. In 1998, he moved to Russia under a forged Russian passport. In 2001 he was sentenced to five years' imprisonment in France, which he never served.

His first signs of online activity date back to the closing years of the last century, around the time of his departure to Moscow. At the time, the web was still a largely undeveloped and deregulated territory, with several pioneers exploring the limits of freedom of expression. Under a pseudonym on the Usenet forum, a general discussion platform divided into chatrooms, he particularly frequented the newsgroup fr.soc.politique. In January 2000, he created the *cameleon.org* site, which promoted total freedom of expression and provided anonymisation solutions.<sup>41</sup>

In January 2001, Sambuis created a website *SOS Racailles* – a name that resonates with another name of one of the main anti-racist NGOs, *SOS Racisme*, and the word *racaille*, which is racist slang for scum. The head of *SOS Racaille* hides behind the pseudonym “Nick Samere”.<sup>42</sup> Joël Sambuis has never admitted to being behind *Liberty web's* French-language sites but the site's development

uses the same non-public programme as the commercial site Sambuis openly ran with his wife (moskokiosk.com).<sup>43</sup> SOS Racaille regularly praised Putin's Russia ("the only country today that dares to fight the Islamist threat"), operated around a core of five main contributors, all identified by investigations done by activists known as V8.<sup>44</sup> V8 identified Sambuis: the host of SOS Racaille, usually very careful to conceal any clues to his identity, mistakenly posted a message revealing his email.<sup>45</sup> This address, along with many other clues, enabled them to trace Sambuis's identity.

Liberty web's chatrooms had self-proclaimed armed branches, the *Comités canal résistance* (CCR), which mainly called for violence, promising "armed actions in housing estates" and "targeted eliminations".<sup>46</sup> It also claimed to have damaged mosques (including at least one arson attack) as well as the premises of anti-racist organisations, and committed at least one physical attack, on the parish priest of Saint-Denis cathedral, calling him a "collaborator of the migratory invasion".<sup>47</sup> Led by a mysterious Colonel X (yet another Sambuis alias), the CCR appeared in August 2001 via a press release on SOS Racailles.<sup>48</sup> One of their main targets was president Jacques Chirac, referred to by the racist term Ben Shirak, supposedly to demonstrate his complicity with immigration.<sup>49</sup>

On 14 July 2002, a 25-year-old neo-Nazi militant, Maxime Brunerie, inspired by this call to violence, decided to attempt to assassinate Jacques Chirac as he reviewed the troops on the Champs-Élysées for Bastille Day.<sup>50</sup> He fired one shot, which missed, then turned the gun on himself, but did not have time to fire again. He was subdued by passersby and police. Even though the psychological disorders are confirmed (the perpetrator seems to have been unsettled by a breakup with his partner), premeditation of the act and its ideological roots were established. Maxime Brunerie had been active in neo-Nazi groups since he was a teenager, had posted a message on a Combat 18 forum inviting people to watch what he was going to do on television, and emptied his bank account in the days before. He was sentenced to ten years in prison.<sup>51</sup>

Investigators, unaccustomed at the time to looking for evidence online, established a connection with the sites run by Joël Sambuis and obtained his arrest by the Russian police in July 2003. Sambuis was remanded in custody pending trial in Russia, where he was accused of having entered with a false passport in 1998. It was agreed that France would then obtain his extradition to serve his five-year prison sentence for bank fraud before a possible trial for his involvement in the attempted murder of Jacques Chirac.<sup>52</sup>

Shortly after his imprisonment, Sambuis applied to Russia for political asylum, claiming to be the object of “political persecution” in France and preferring “to die in Russia than to return to France”.<sup>53</sup> To everyone’s surprise, Sambuis was released in January 2004, a decision that mortified the French investigators.<sup>54</sup> Thirteen years later, journalist David Doucet tracked down the retired police officer who had led the investigation. Doucet’s book reveals the connection between Sambuis and the failed attempt on Chirac’s life:

The investigations we carried out within the anti-terrorist section revealed links, exchanges, between Brunerie and Sambuis. In these messages, we learn that it was Sambuis who launched the idea of carrying out an attack on the 14th of July, and Maxime Brunerie told him he was going to take action.<sup>55</sup>

SOS Racailles disappeared in March 2003 but promised to reorganise.<sup>56</sup> In fact, under his various aliases, Sambuis continued to make death threats against Chirac. A message posted by user JackyNice who signed his call CCR on Liberty Web's fr.soc.politique forum, targeted the president, calling for “a VERY hard hit on Ben Shirak and a dozen other targets selling France to the Muslims”.<sup>57</sup> At the same time, a joint investigation by V8 and the anti-racist association Movement Against Racism and for Friendship between Peoples (MRAP) profiled a number of CCR members: one of them had been involved in the bombing of a mosque in Romans-sur-Isère in 1982.<sup>58</sup> However, the case against Sambuis in the Chirac affair was dismissed in 2009. The Russians’ lack of cooperation ruined the investigation.

There is virtually no trace of Sambuis’s activity between his last provocations in 2003 and the summer of 2015. All he did was post, under the pseudonym SOS R, on the blog euro-reconquista.com. In 2015, Sambuis decided to come back to the web. He first created a website named Eurocalifat, seeking to weaponise jihadist attacks,<sup>59</sup> but above all the migration crisis. “The Muslim invasion of Europe began a few weeks ago”, wrote the administrator to justify the site. The site was overflowing with uninhibited, xenophobic, and Islamophobic hate content, providing anonymisation advice, pleading for urgent action in the face of an imminent ethno-religious civil war.<sup>60</sup> The site was shut down in 2017 following a court ruling, something rare to happen in France. Sambuis replaced EuroCaliphathat with reseaulibre.org, which was itself quickly replaced with another site in 2018 to thwart an investigation by the online media outlet Mediapart. Sambuis took over one of his former aliases and opened leonfrance.net (which is



no longer updated but still online). “You’ve understood that no election can change anything, so much so that the country is in the hands of a mafia sold out to the invaders? Are you preparing for a merciless confrontation in your villages and towns to liberate our country? You are Léon!”<sup>61</sup> displayed a welcome message on this new site.<sup>62</sup> In May 2016, he opened rusreinfo.ru, which amplified the content of his other sites.<sup>63</sup>

This cascade of sites is contradictory: it seems to want to blur the traces and ensure an online presence even if a site is targeted by an investigation – but at the same time, these sites do not hide their affiliation, reference each other, use the same terms, and focus on the same targets. Similarly, their administrator, Joël Sambuis, remains clearly identifiable despite the forest of pseudonyms he hides behind.<sup>64</sup>

A study of the narratives propagated by these sites shows a predominance of disinformation, sometimes crudely forged, with a focus on Kremlin priorities: demonstration of the moral decadence of the West, the need for a multipolar world in the face of American hegemony, division, and demoralisation of Western public opinion, in particular by showing the corruption and duplicity of their elites. For example, rusreinfo claimed, a few days after the 13 November attacks, that Fabius had admitted to delivering assault rifles to the Islamic State (ISIS).<sup>65</sup> Just as Russian propaganda puppets in Africa claim that the French are complicit with jihadist groups in the Sahel, claiming that the West was supporting and arming ISIS was one of Russia’s main narratives to pretend that they were the ones actually fighting terrorism in Syria, while their main aim was to support Bashar. In November 2016, Sambuis revived one of his old techniques and attacked two right-wing politicians, including a presidential candidate, with Arabic sobriquets: François Fillon became Farid Fillon and Alain Juppé Ali Juppé, using the same process as his call for Chirac’s murder.<sup>66</sup> In March 2017, he again attacked Fillon by fabricating the news of his wife’s suicide.<sup>67</sup> In early 2018, Paris regional council member Pierre Serne was targeted by a violent harassment campaign after he took part in an LGBTQ+ rights march in Moscow.<sup>68</sup> In July 2018, he disseminated the Kalergi Plan conspiracy theory for the destruction of Europe.<sup>69</sup> This far-right, anti-Semitic theory, disseminated in France by Alain Soral, among others, supports the idea of a great replacement of Europe’s indigenous populations, made possible by the construction of Europe and benefiting Jewish supremacy – echoing the anti-EU, anti-Semitic clichés of Russian propaganda. The Yellow Vests provide an opportunity for further

misinformation: in January 2019, he forged and circulated a false memo signed by the then–Minister of the Interior, Christophe Castaner, claiming that the government would seek to seize the weapons of the people, suggesting that it was fearful of being overthrown.<sup>70</sup>

In April 2019, he took up Russian Elena Chudinova’s theory on the Islamisation of Europe:

By 2048, Islam has taken the reins of power in most of the countries of the European Union, renamed the Euro-Islamic Bloc or Euroislam. At first, a large Albania, reunited with Kosovo, and re-Islamized and armed with petrodollars, seized what was left of Serbia. (...) In this nightmarish Europe, only two countries retained their independence: Greece, at the price of paying a heavy annual tribute, and Poland, the last Catholic country in Europe, which had the wisdom to ally itself with Russia and leave the European Union while [there] was still time. Russia stands as the last representative of the free world.<sup>71</sup>

These fantasies were tantamount to conspiracy theories, suggesting, for example, that the fire at Notre Dame was provoked by president Macron so that he could build a minaret in place of the spire. Via his various sites, he propagated alternative, conspiratorial, and pro-HCQ discourses during the pandemic.<sup>72</sup>

In October 2022, a retired man imbued with racist ideology, 84-year-old Claude Sinké, attempted to set fire to the Bayonne mosque after shooting and hitting two worshippers who were trying to flee. The investigation revealed the role played by the nebula of Islamophobic sites, including those of the Sambuis galaxy, in activating this act, convincing him that the use of violence against Muslims was an urgent necessity.<sup>73</sup> Currently, Sambuis is mainly present via a nebula of French-language hate sites, hosted under his tvs24.ru domain. These include a mirror of the Riposte laïque site, as well as the sites of several contributors. Among the most visible contributors to these sites is Boris Karpov who also has a Telegram channel with over 18,000 subscribers and echoes Kremlin narratives. Behind this alias is no real person to be found – it could even be another account by Sambuis. In January 2023, for example, Karpov called for the derailment of trains carrying weapons to Ukraine. “Derailing a train isn’t very difficult, a few judiciously placed concrete blocks do the job perfectly.” “There are lots of other possible actions to help us without leaving France, and I invite those who really want to (with ACTS, not phrases!) to contact me by Telegram @B\*\*\*\*\*

(residents in France only, if and only if you're ready to make a concrete engagement)”.<sup>74</sup>

## Case Study 2: An “Ultra-Yellow” turned Violent

The second case study is that of Rémy Daillet-Wiedemann. He is a living example of an ideological ecosystem dubbed the *complosphere* by the security services, which grew in influence during the Yellow Vests crisis and particularly proliferated during the pandemic.<sup>75</sup> Members of this far-right ecosystem draw heavily on the propaganda of the Kremlin media which has amplified their outreach considerably—and make no secret of their admiration for Vladimir Putin. However, it would be an exaggeration to consider them mere Russian assets. Their fascination with the fantasy of a child-kidnapping deep state also affiliates them closely with the QAnon movement.<sup>76</sup>

Born in 1969, Daillet’s political involvement began in 1991 when, at the height of the Yugoslav war, he and his brother enlisted in the Croatian National Guard which at the time attracted a number of French nationalist activists.<sup>77</sup> Then, he briefly became a local executive in his father’s centre-right Democratic Movement (MoDem) party but was expelled after a stormy meeting during which he secretly recorded the discussions. Next, Daillet concentrated his activities on the internet, offering training courses for parents wishing to unschooled their children. A father of seven himself, he became involved with the School Withdrawal DaysJRE movement, and with his partner authored a guide entitled *I school at home* (2012) which advocates homeschooling children.<sup>78</sup> According to his site, “school is a dangerous place: pedos [*sic*], harassers, delinquents, drug dealers, labs and government are the big vectors of malaise, suicide, murder and common crime”.<sup>79</sup> Some of these sites adopt the codes of personal development or promise entrepreneurial recipes for making a fortune. He promotes his coaching activities on his Telegram channel *La Nouvelle France*, which was filled with praises of him, posted by fake admirers. Settled on a Malaysian island since 2015, he sold advice on how to make a fortune expatriating. He found himself hosting sites and pages on social media devoted to his favourite topics: opposition to vaccination, 5G, chemtrails, or Renaud Camus’ racist theory of the Great Replacement. He endorsed QAnon’s theses on the corruption of American politicians, compromised in an international paedophile conspiracy. He also

supported Holocaust denier and Nazi activist Vincent Reynouard and posted revisionist texts on Facebook under the pseudonym Thibault Lacroisade.<sup>80</sup>

Starting in October 2020, Rémy Daillet called for a coup d'état in several videos viewed hundreds of thousands of times on YouTube.

I'm going to overthrow the government of the Republic which has totally sold out to the powers of money [...] I am the one who will abolish the current regime and replace it with a new one [...] It's us, Mr. Macron, who are going to oust you. You have betrayed France.<sup>81</sup>

Following these videos in late 2020, a 39-year-old man rammed a gendarmerie station with his car in Dax (Landes). He had told the investigators who had arrested him that he was in contact with Daillet, and that he wanted to launch a coup d'état.<sup>82</sup> The perpetrator, diagnosed as bipolar, was given an eighteen-month suspended prison sentence. On his website, Daillet explicitly recruited militants to join his coup project. Each person can choose a role according to his or her skills or tastes: "liaison officer" or "handling explosives and dangerous devices".<sup>83</sup>

Jeannot, Pitchoune, le Corbeau, Bruno, Bouga – these are the pseudonyms, which may sound farcical but were apparently not perceived as such by those who adopted them, of the people Daillet recruited online, convincing them that COVID-19 is a scam designed to establish a health dictatorship by Emmanuel Macron who collaborates with obscure hidden forces. More or less discreetly, they all joined the so-called "resistance", acquiring false vaccination certificates and exchanging information with their guru as they waited to take action. In April 2021, Rémy Daillet triggered his followers into action. He conceived and remotely ordered the abduction by several men of an eight-year-old girl, Mia Montemaggi, who was staying with her grandmother in the Vosges. The operation aimed to return the child to her mother, a fan of conspiracy theories and radicalised during the Yellow Vests movement, who had lost custody and was no longer allowed to see her unsupervised. After a five-day search that focused media attention, the little girl was found in a squat in Switzerland.<sup>84</sup>

In May 2021, Daillet and his wife were arrested by Malaysian police and extradited to France in June, along with all of their three children. He took advantage of the media exposure of his first court appearance to announce his candidacy for the presidential election, to be held the following year. In the end, the proceedings initiated by the local court were taken over by the anti-terrorist

prosecutor's office since the investigating magistrates considered that the child abductions were an integral part of the plan of violent action aimed at overthrowing the state.<sup>85</sup> The investigation showed that the plan to kidnap Mia had been conceived by the plotters under the code name of Operation Lima and its ultimate objective was to topple the governmental institutions. Daillet's plan for the young Mia, the abducted eight-year-old, was to take her to the only place where he and his accomplices believed she would be safe: Russia.<sup>86</sup>

The coup d'état project was called Opération Azur and was conceived in Daillet's self-imposed exile in Malaysia while France was locked down<sup>87</sup>. Daillet used his websites and Telegram channel to recruit a more or less serious network. The organisation involved cells in different regions with *captains* and was divided into two branches: one civilian and one military, with actual weapons preparations and a recruitment plan. This second branch was led by two soldiers from the French army. In Daillet's phantasmagorical plans, one group of demonstrators was to engage the security forces without attacking them so that the latter would be overwhelmed. Another group would have used incendiary projectiles, while another would have gone "into contact and shoved [blackboulers] the adversary" explained the conspiracist himself. The attackers were equipped with explosives and riot shields. Once the Élysée was in Daillet's hands, he imagined giving a long speech. Meanwhile, his militants would have taken control of a radio or TV station to broadcast their propaganda over and over again, for at least three or four hours, according to the press account of his hearings.<sup>88</sup> While in pre-trial detention in October 2021, Daillet was implicated in another case by the General Directorate for Internal Security (DGSI, the French domestic intelligence agency)<sup>89</sup>: a planned attack by the neo-Nazi group Honour and Nation founded in late 2019 by Sébastien Dudognon, a former leader of the National Youth Front (FNJ, the RN's youth movement). Phone taps as part of this investigation revealed discussions about *Jewish France*, compared to an "octopus to be eliminated". The most advanced scouting operations concerned Masonic temples, which the militants wanted to blow up. An initial wave of arrests within this group led to the identification of several people who regularly exchanged views with Daillet.<sup>90</sup>

In March 2022, Sylvain Baron, one of the Yellow Vests' conspiracy figures, was indicted along with other Daillet associates on charges of conspiring against governmental institutions.<sup>91</sup> Barron has long adopted positions in favor of Putin's Russia, whom he begs to come to the aid of French "resistance fighters".<sup>92</sup> In May 2023, Rémy Daillet was finally released from prison.<sup>93</sup> The Paris-examining

magistrate's court had authorised his release under house arrest and electronic surveillance.

Admittedly, Rémy Daillet only had a virtual relationship with Vladimir Putin's Russia. There is no indication that he has been activated by Russian agents. On the other hand, he is part of a conspiracy fringe, which flourished during the Yellow Vests<sup>94</sup> and then the pandemic<sup>95</sup> which has been agitated and promoted incessantly through various Kremlin channels and flourished further after the invasion of Ukraine.<sup>96</sup> Putin has probably never heard of Daillet, but that has not stopped the latter from using the former in his recruitment for a planned coup d'état: to motivate his subscribers on his social media, Daillet claimed to be in contact with the Russian president (and also with Trump) as these would have lent their support in the event of an insurrection against the French government and institutions.<sup>97</sup> In this case, Russian influence, however evanescent, has mainly been an amplification, notably through the Kremlin media RT and Sputnik.<sup>98</sup> These media have brought together anti-system movements that were initially quite heterogeneous, even if most of them had an affinity for the far right. They have structured them and done their utmost to make their message both more audible and more normalised. To a lesser extent, Russia provided these groups with technical resources, particularly electronic ones. The lax regulation of a platform like the Russian VK has been a godsend, making it a rallying place for these militants.

### **Threat Analysis**

The two case studies show actions taking place mainly online, with calls for violence leading to concrete acts, even if the kinetic impact of these movements remains far below the ambitions of their initiators. At the very least, Russian interference seems to have consisted of facilitation and the provision of resources. Moscow seems to have taken pleasure in inspiring and encouraging the development of far-right movements in France with varying degrees of ideological conviction: from the most doctrinaire far-right, seeking to develop a constructed ideological corpus, to the most nebulous, ideologically opportunistic, amalgamating anti-system frustrated people wishing to turn the tables. Whatever the case, the risk of violence is real, and the limited results so far seem to be the result of the mediocrity of the players involved.

The question remains whether Moscow instigates or accompanies these calls for violence. In other words, are individuals seeking violence looking to Russian propaganda for an ideological framework and justification to carry it out, or is Moscow activating individuals through hate speech, driving them to violence? Both phenomena are probably at work simultaneously. While the two case-study characters discussed above undoubtedly adhered to Russian positions on their own initiative, and declared their allegiance, in the case of Sambuis, Moscow provided him with asylum and means, while in the case of Daillet, Kremlin propaganda helped radicalise an audience that enabled him to find followers.

### **Counter-measures**

The example of Joël Sambuis and his network of sites demonstrates the limits of counter-measures when the perpetrator is located in a country that is not cooperative in judicial matters, such as Russia, which seems, at the very least, to tolerate these activities from its soil. Moreover, this case shows the limits of justice when internet traces are blurred. Cascading pseudonyms do not fool many people, but they go some way towards maintaining a plausible deniability that favours closing the case in the absence of absolutely irrefutable evidence. The impact of these sites is mixed: on the one hand, the low visibility of these sites must be emphasised as they remain confidential and are rarely shared, as shown by the CrowdTangle tool.<sup>99</sup> These sites have also been flagged up by disinformation watchdogs such as FirstDraft<sup>100</sup> and Les Décodeurs du Monde factcheckers for their propagation of false news. However, within a certain radical sphere, these sites undoubtedly help to create a reality and incite people to take violent action. Furthermore, these marginal discourses are slowly infusing into more mainstream media, helping to popularise a kind of casual hate speech.

A major vulnerability is media regulation which is no longer as much a matter for the national level as for the European Commission. This raises legitimate fears since a liberal democracy rests fundamentally on pluralism and freedom of expression. However, the RT and Sputnik experiences have shown how malicious actors succeed in weaponising liberal legislation for their own benefit. Right from the beginning of the Yellow Vests crisis, one of the main narratives promoted on RT France was the delegitimisation of liberal democracy.<sup>101</sup> Since their Europe-wide ban following the invasion of Ukraine, the Kremlin's media have deployed strategies enabling them to circumvent these sanctions, including the creation of

false-hat media, such as the Omerta web TV<sup>102</sup> and an eponymous printed magazine,<sup>103</sup> without any particular reaction from the authorities. In addition, there have been ethical flaws on the part of traditional media: the BFM-TV news channel found it appropriate to conduct a complacent interview with Daillet in Malaysia before his arrest without taking into account the dangerousness and infectiousness of his words.<sup>104</sup>

## Recommendations

In France, counter-terrorism and counter-interference are entrusted to the same players: the domestic intelligence chain, headed by the DGSI. However, within this chain, hybridisations could be useful. France has not seen any major right-wing extremist attacks, although it has been hit particularly hard by jihadist-inspired terrorism. Counter-terrorism resources have risen sharply (the total cost of counter-terrorism operations following the 2015 attacks reached nine billion euros in 2019, according to a report by the Cour des Comptes,<sup>105</sup> while intelligence services have seen their budget envelope continue to grow)<sup>106</sup> but still need to be redeployed to cover the whole spectrum of threats even if awareness of the problem is growing, as shown by DGSI Nicolas Lerner's media interviews, in which he reminds that, while the risk of jihadist attack remains the main threat, the trivialisation of the use of violence by the "ultra-right" presents a significant risk of terrorist violence "in Western democracies, and in France in particular". In particular, he considers that the French radical right has been radicalised by the jihadist attacks that France has seen, but also cites "the influence of radical ideologies" from the US (but does not mention Russia).<sup>107</sup>

The system for preventing radicalisation is more precarious, as shown by the drift of the SG-CIPDR (the state body responsible for designing and implementing, among other things, policies to prevent extremism), illustrated by the Marianne Fund<sup>108</sup> (a generous subsidy allocated in a light-hearted way, assigning the largest amounts to incompetent, biased, and even hateful actors). It is urgent to broaden this approach to take account of changes in the threat. The prevention of radicalisation would benefit from taking better account of foreign interference: for example, debates on the Muslim Brotherhood are polluted by caricatured language from the Middle East. In addition, these case studies show a certain success in recruiting the violent extreme right among members of the forces of law and order or the military. Dedicated prevention is urgently needed.<sup>109</sup>



Last but not least, the actors identified are able to take crude advantage of their use of pseudonyms and their extraterritoriality (it was not for sedition or terrorism that Daillet was arrested by the Malaysian police but for a residence offence). It is probably unrealistic to expect the Russian police to cooperate in the current circumstances while the Russo-Ukrainian war continues. However, opportunities to neutralise the actors judicially have undoubtedly been overlooked in the past. Every possible window of opportunity must be seized to activate international judicial cooperation. The case of Boris le Lay, perhaps the most convicted neo-Nazi militant in France, who escapes punishment thanks to his exile in Japan, even though his address is known,<sup>110</sup> is a grim reminder of France's inability or unwillingness to prosecute such offenders.

<sup>1</sup> La Horde. “Schéma de l’extrême droite (màj 12.2022) – La Horde.” [Diagram of the far right], 22 January 2023. <https://lahorde.samizdat.net/Schema-de-l-extreme-droite-maj-12-2022>.

<sup>2</sup> These schools can be found in two major networks: Alain de Benoist’s Nouvelle droite (New Right) and the Mouvement Nationaliste Révolutionnaire (MNR). One of their aims is to build bridges between traditional right-wing movements and more radical ones. What these “schools” have in common is their ideological alignment with the Kremlin. Alexandr Dugin, the main ideologist of the Russian New Right, has been a source of inspiration for its French counterparts. The French Nouvelle Droite expresses itself mainly in the magazines *Éléments* (of which a Russian edition, *Elementi*, appeared for a while), *Krisis* or *La Nouvelle revue Histoire*, and can be found in places such as the Institut Illiade (which took a rather pro-Ukrainian stance after the invasion, provoking tensions), or around people like Guillaume Faye. Little-known figures played an essential role, such as MNR’s Christian Bouchet’s *Ars Magna* publishing house, which translated Dugin into French. Bouchet had been in contact with the Russian far right since the fall of the Wall. Blending traditional far-right references with elitist, counter-revolutionary esotericism (he has visited Kashmir, where he claims Christ died), he is notably the editor of the “Geopolitics” pages of the magazine *Réfléchir et agir* (Think and Act).

<sup>3</sup> Guillou Clément. “Rassemblement National: Jordan Bardella Peu Pressé de Rompre Avec Les Anciens Du GUD.” [Rassemblement National: Jordan Bardella in little hurry to break with GUD former members], 15 May 2023.

[https://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2023/05/15/rassemblement-national-jordan-bardella-peu-presse-de-rompre-avec-les-anciens-du-gud\\_6173493\\_823448.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2023/05/15/rassemblement-national-jordan-bardella-peu-presse-de-rompre-avec-les-anciens-du-gud_6173493_823448.html).

<sup>4</sup> Baruch Jérémie and Guillou, Clément. “La GUD Connection. [The GUD Connection], 7 July 2023. [https://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2023/07/07/en-2022-le-rn-a-verse-au-moins-deux-millions-d-euros-aux-entreprises-de-la-gud-connection\\_6180978\\_823448.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2023/07/07/en-2022-le-rn-a-verse-au-moins-deux-millions-d-euros-aux-entreprises-de-la-gud-connection_6180978_823448.html).

<sup>5</sup> Trippenbach Ivanne. “La théorie complotiste du « grand remplacement » chemine avec Eric Zemmour.” [The conspiracy theory of the "Great Replacement" goes hand in hand with Eric Zemmour] *LeMonde.fr*, 4 November 2021.

[https://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2021/11/03/la-theorie-complotiste-du-grand-remplacement-chemine-avec-eric-zemmour\\_6100783\\_823448.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2021/11/03/la-theorie-complotiste-du-grand-remplacement-chemine-avec-eric-zemmour_6100783_823448.html).

<sup>6</sup> Romano Camille. “Présidentielle: de Génération Identitaire à Reconquête, qui est Damien Rieu, la nouvelle recrue d’Eric Zemmour?” [Presidential election: from Génération Identitaire to Reconquête, who is Damien Rieu, Eric Zemmour's new recruit?], *lejdd.fr*, 5 September 2023. <https://www.lejdd.fr/Politique/presidentielle-de-generation-identitaire-a-reconquete-qui-est-damien-rieu-la-nouvelle-recrue-deric-zemmour-4089264>.

<sup>7</sup> Carpentier Arthur, Marceau Bretonnier, Adrien Sahli, Elisa Bellanger, and Emile Costard. “Comment des militants d’Eric Zemmour gonflent artificiellement la présence de leur candidat sur Twitter” [How Eric Zemmour activists artificially boost their candidate's Twitter profile How Eric Zemmour activists artificially boost their candidate's Twitter profile], 2022. [https://www.lemonde.fr/election-presidentielle-2022/video/2022/02/02/comment-des-militants-d-eric-zemmour-gonflent-artificiellement-la-presence-du-candidat-sur-twitter\\_6112033\\_6059010.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/election-presidentielle-2022/video/2022/02/02/comment-des-militants-d-eric-zemmour-gonflent-artificiellement-la-presence-du-candidat-sur-twitter_6112033_6059010.html).

<sup>8</sup> Vaissié Cécile. *Les Réseaux Du Kremlin En France [Kremlin Networks In France]*, Les Petits matins, 2016.

<sup>9</sup> Laske Karl, Marine Turchi, and Madeleine Leroyer. “Le financier de la campagne 2017 de Marine Le Pen est lié aux autorités russes.” [The funder of Marine Le Pen's 2017 campaign is linked to Russian authorities], *Mediapart*, 20 April 2022.

<https://www.mediapart.fr/journal/international/200422/le-financier-de-la-campagne-2017-de-marine-le-pen-est-lie-aux-autorites-russes?userid=151e5eb4-8e78-42b0-ae44-aa1e39197b74>.

<sup>10</sup> Stéphane François. “L’extrême-droite française contemporaine et le monde: une vision ‘alternative’ des relations internationales” [The contemporary French far right and the world: an ‘alternative’ vision of international relations], *Revue Interrogations*, 2015.

<https://www.revue-interrogations.org/L-extreme-droite-francaise>.

<sup>11</sup> Schmitt Olivier. *Pourquoi Poutine Est Notre Allié? Anatomie d’une Passion Française*, [Why Putin Is Our Ally: Anatomy of a French Passion], *Hikari*, 2017.

<sup>12</sup> According to a French intelligence assessment note, calling it “vérolé par le SVR”, “infected by the SVR”, disclosed in Hénin, Nicolas. 2016. *La France Russe: Enquête Sur Les Réseaux Poutine*.

<sup>13</sup> “Les Preuves de l’ingérence Russe Dans La Campagne de Macron En 2017.” [Evidence Of Russian Interference In Macron's 2017 Campaign], *LeMonde*, 6 December 2019.

[https://www.lemonde.fr/pixels/article/2019/12/06/macronleaks-des-hackeurs-d-etat-russes-ont-bien-voie-la-campagne-presidentielle-de-2017\\_6021987\\_4408996.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/pixels/article/2019/12/06/macronleaks-des-hackeurs-d-etat-russes-ont-bien-voie-la-campagne-presidentielle-de-2017_6021987_4408996.html).

<sup>14</sup> Scott Mark. “US Far-Right Activists Promote Hacking Attack Against Macron.”, *New Work Times*, 6 May 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/06/world/europe/emmanuel-macron-hack-french-election-marine-le-pen.html>.

<sup>15</sup> Some 20,000 emails from Emmanuel Macron's campaign team were hacked by an actor using a malware developed by the GRU. They were then disseminated, mixed with a few forged or falsified emails, on a 4chan forum, with a major amplification effort provided by US alt-right influencers, starting with Jack Posobiec, and Kremlin media. The timing of the leak – two days before a presidential run-off election pitting Emmanuel Macron against Marine Le Pen, when a period of silence had begun that prevented the candidates from speaking publicly, and even the media from covering the election – was particularly sensitive. In the end, it was an attempt (ultimately unsuccessful) to upset the election in favour of Marine Le Pen. Read Jeangène-Vilmer, Jean-Baptiste. 2021. “The “#Macron Leaks” Operation: A Post-Mortem.” *Atlantic Council*, August. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/the-macron-leaks-operation-a-post-mortem/>.

<sup>16</sup> Eric Zemmour positions himself by proposing a “civilizational counter-culture”, analysts explain. Magal, Marylou. 2022. “Une rentrée sous le signe de la civilisation pour Éric Zemmour.” [Éric Zemmour "back to school day" with a civilized outlook], *Le Figaro*, 11 September 2022, <https://www.lefigaro.fr/politique/une-rentree-sous-le-signe-de-la-civilisation-pour-eric-zemmour-20220911>.

<sup>17</sup> Hénin Nicolas. *La France Russe: Enquête Sur Les Réseaux Poutine*. [Russian France: Investigating Putin's Networks] Fayard, 2016.

<sup>18</sup> Interview with the author, June 2023.

<sup>19</sup> *Libération* newspaper publishes an updated map of radical right-wing groups in France, with their ideology and local presence: [https://www.liberation.fr/politique/carte-interactive-des-groupuscules-dextreme-droite-ils-sont-vraiment-partout-20231003\\_5HWZLQE2IBAJBLZZSEW5NRYZTY/?redirected=1](https://www.liberation.fr/politique/carte-interactive-des-groupuscules-dextreme-droite-ils-sont-vraiment-partout-20231003_5HWZLQE2IBAJBLZZSEW5NRYZTY/?redirected=1).

<sup>20</sup> François, Stéphane. *Géopolitique Des Extrêmes Droites: Logiques Identitaires et Monde Multipolaire* [Geopolitics of the Extreme Right: Identity Logics and a Multipolar World], 2022.

<sup>21</sup> Plottu Pierre and Macé Maxime. “Dissous il y a huit mois, Génération identitaire est de retour à bas bruit.” [Disbanded eight months ago, Génération identitaire makes a low-key comeback], *Libération*, 20 October 2021. <https://www.liberation.fr/politique/dissous-il-y-a->

huit-mois-generation-identitaire-est-de-retour-a-bas-bruit-20211020\_XO3OEYPR5RAZHBR5XVXRRR4XXQ.

<sup>22</sup> According to the author's monitoring of the ecosystem on Telegram.

<sup>23</sup> As worded by researcher Adrien Nonjon, interview with the author, June 2023.

<sup>24</sup> Geoffroy Romain. "Qui sont les soldats du régiment Azov, accusés d'être les « néonazis » de l'armée ukrainienne?" [Who are the soldiers of the Azov regiment, accused of being the "neo-Nazi" of the Ukrainian army?], *Le Monde*, 24 March 2022. [https://www.lemonde.fr/les-decodeurs/article/2022/03/23/qui-sont-les-soldats-du-regiment-azov-accuses-d-etre-les-neonazis-de-l-armee-ukrainienne\\_6118771\\_4355770.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/les-decodeurs/article/2022/03/23/qui-sont-les-soldats-du-regiment-azov-accuses-d-etre-les-neonazis-de-l-armee-ukrainienne_6118771_4355770.html).

<sup>25</sup> Mahfud Y., and Adam-Troian J. "Macron demission!": Loss of significance generates violent extremism for the Yellow Vests through feelings of anomia. *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations*, 24(1), 108–124, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1368430219880954>.

<sup>26</sup> Colin Gérard, Guilhem Marotte, and Loqman Salamatian. "RT, Sputnik et Le Mouvement Des Gilets Jaunes: Cartographie Des Communautés Politiques Sur Twitter." [RT, Sputnik and Le Mouvement Des Gilets Jaunes: Mapping Political Communities on Twitter], *L'Espace Politique*, no. 40, October 2020. <https://doi.org/10.4000/espacepolitique.8092>.

<sup>27</sup> Mandraud Isabelle. "Les « gilets jaunes » vus de Moscou: une « révolution de couleur » fomentée par les Etats-Unis." [The "yellow vests" as seen from Moscow: a "color revolution" fomented by the United States], *Le Monde*, 3 December 2018. [https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2018/12/03/les-gilets-jaunes-vus-de-moscou-une-revolution-de-couleur-fomentee-par-les-etats-unis\\_5392159\\_3210.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2018/12/03/les-gilets-jaunes-vus-de-moscou-une-revolution-de-couleur-fomentee-par-les-etats-unis_5392159_3210.html).

<sup>28</sup> The magazine Omerta, founded and staffed by former journalists of RT France after the station was banned, dedicated the cover story of its third issue (Oct. 2023) to their legacy. See [https://twitter.com/Omerta\\_officiel/status/1713547076498264348](https://twitter.com/Omerta_officiel/status/1713547076498264348).

<sup>29</sup> Unité radicale was a revolutionary nationalist political organisation created in June 1998 by the alliance of the Groupe union défense (GUD), Jeune Résistance and the Union des cercles de résistance, which had been joined by dissident executives and leaders of the Œuvre française, such as Thierry Maillard, and the Parti nationaliste français et européen (PNFE), criticising the inaction, folklorism, and backwardness of their former organisations. See LEBOURG Nicolas, « L'hydre de l'ultradroite » [The hydra of the ultraright], *Sciences Humaines*, 2019/6 (N° 315), p. 25–25. DOI: 10.3917/sh.315.0025. URL: <https://www.cairn.info/magazine-sciences-humaines-2019-6-page-25.htm>.

<sup>30</sup> Jacques Sapir, "Economiste, spécialiste de la #Russie et des questions monétaires #Euro", November 2012, <https://twitter.com/russeurope>.

<sup>31</sup> *Le Parisien*. "L'ancien Gilet jaune Christophe Chalençon visé par une enquête après avoir menacé de mort Jacques Attali." [Former Gilet jaune Christophe Chalençon under investigation after making death threats against Jacques Attali], *leparisien.fr*, 5 July 2022. <https://www.leparisien.fr/faits-divers/lancien-gilet-jaune-christophe-chalencon-vise-par-une-enquete-apres-avoir-menace-de-mort-jacques-attali-05-07-2022-4W42JLOSHVHLBDNS63NI4DBN24.php>.

<sup>32</sup> Plottu Pierre, and Maxime Macé. "Comment les antivax sont devenus les meilleurs relais de la propagande russe." [How antivax became the best relay for Russian propaganda], *Libération*, 24 March 2022. [https://www.liberation.fr/politique/comment-les-antivax-sont-devenus-les-meilleurs-relais-de-la-propagande-russe-20220324\\_5CBSAUUXIJGR3DPE2Y5W5TEE64/](https://www.liberation.fr/politique/comment-les-antivax-sont-devenus-les-meilleurs-relais-de-la-propagande-russe-20220324_5CBSAUUXIJGR3DPE2Y5W5TEE64/).

<sup>33</sup> Anizon, Emmanuelle. "Ils disaient: « On nous ment sur le Covid ». Désormais, ils disent: « On nous ment sur l'Ukraine »." [They used to say: "We're being lied to about Covid". Now they say: "We're being lied to about Ukraine".], *L'Obs*, 16 March 2022.

<https://www.nouvelobs.com/societe/20220316.OBS55731/ils-disaient-on-nous-ment-sur-le-covid-desormais-ils-disent-on-nous-ment-sur-l-ukraine.html>.

<sup>34</sup> Stephan, Gaël. “Réinformation.” *La Revue Européenne Des Médias Et Du Numérique*, October 2023. <https://la-rem.eu/2023/10/reinformation/>.

<sup>35</sup> Brunet Margot, and Jean-Loup Adenor. “Après le Covid, les réseaux de “réinformation” antivax s'emparent de la guerre en Ukraine.” [After Covid, antivax “reinformation” networks take over the war in Ukraine], *Mariannet*, 10 March 2022.

<https://www.marianne.net/societe/apres-le-covid-les-reseaux-de-reinformation-antivax-s'emparent-de-la-guerre-en-ukraine>.

<sup>36</sup> There are few resources available that publish the audiences of radical right “alternative news” sites. Since the closure of Amazon's dedicated tool, researchers have had little choice but to use Similarweb and CrowdTangle. An infographic produced by ConspiracyWatch in May 2021 on “France's 10 most visited conspiracy sites” is available at <https://www.conspiracywatch.info/complosphere-quels-sont-les-10-sites-les-plus-visites.html>. All the sites listed can be politically classified as “far-right”. With two exceptions, their overall audience remains below one million page views per month. Websites mentioned as case studies in this research reach much lower levels.

<sup>37</sup> Fondation Descartes. “Complosphère, l'esprit conspirationniste à l'ère des réseaux.” [Complosphere, the conspiracy mindset in the age of networks], *Fondation Descartes*, July 2020. <https://www.fondationdescartes.org/2020/06/complosphere-lesprit-conspirationniste-a-leres-des-reseaux/>.

<sup>38</sup> The Union nationale inter-universitaire (UNI) is a French university organisation founded in 1969. Initially close to the moderate right, it became radicalised in the 1980s. In 2022, UNI national delegate Jacques Smith claimed that “the vast majority” of the union’s members also belong to Génération Z, the youth organisation of the radical-right Reconquête party. Read Trippenbach, Ivonne. “Avis de tempête à Reconquête,” *LeMonde*, 16 July 2022. [https://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2022/07/16/avis-de-tempete-a-reconquete-le-parti-d-eric-zemmour\\_6134991\\_823448.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2022/07/16/avis-de-tempete-a-reconquete-le-parti-d-eric-zemmour_6134991_823448.html).

<sup>39</sup> Rassemblement pour la République (RPR) was France's large mainstream right-wing political party between 1976 and 2002. It claims to be part of the legacy of General de Gaulle and was renamed Union pour un mouvement populaire (UMP).

<sup>40</sup> Manach Jean-Marc. “transfert.net./ Sos-Racaille : Sambuis, le cerveau présumé, sera d'abord jugé en Russie” [Sos-Racaille: Sambuis, the alleged mastermind, will first be tried in Russia], 2003. <https://transfert.net/Sos-Racaille-Sambuis-le-cerveau>.

<sup>41</sup> Albertini Dominique, and David Doucet. *La Fachosphere: Comment l'extrême Droite Remporte La Bataille d'Internet* [The Fachosphere: How the Far Right Wins the Internet Battle], Flammarion, 2016.

<sup>42</sup> Nick Samere is slang for motherf\*cker. Manach, Jean-Marc. “transfert.net./ Pas de pitié pour la haine en ligne!” [No mercy for online hate!], 2003. <https://transfert.net/Pas-de-pitie-pour-la-haine-en>.

<sup>43</sup> Manach Jean-Marc. “transfert.net./ Sos-Racaille: Sambuis, le cerveau présumé, sera d'abord jugé en Russie”, 2003. <https://transfert.net/Sos-Racaille-Sambuis-le-cerveau>.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ternisien Xavier. “La victoire d'une poignée de cyberjusticiers contre des sites racistes.” [The victory of a bunch of cyber vigilantes against racist sites], *LeMond*, 29 September 2003. [https://www.lemonde.fr/archives/article/2003/09/29/la-victoire-d-une-poignee-de-cyberjusticiers-contre-des-sites-racistes\\_335846\\_1819218.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/archives/article/2003/09/29/la-victoire-d-une-poignee-de-cyberjusticiers-contre-des-sites-racistes_335846_1819218.html).

- <sup>46</sup> Launet Edouard. “Traquer les caméléons du Net.” [Tracking the Net's chameleons], *Libération*, 29 October 2003. [https://www.liberation.fr/grand-angle/2003/10/29/traquer-les-cameleons-du-net\\_449830/?redirected=1](https://www.liberation.fr/grand-angle/2003/10/29/traquer-les-cameleons-du-net_449830/?redirected=1).
- <sup>47</sup> Ternisien Xavier “Un groupe d’extrême droite veut s’en prendre aux « intérêts musulmans de France ».” [A far-right group wants to attack "Muslim interests in France"], *Le Monde*, 1 February 2003. [https://www.lemonde.fr/archives/article/2003/02/01/un-groupe-d-extreme-droite-veut-s-en-prendre-aux-interets-musulmans-de-france\\_4269600\\_1819218.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/archives/article/2003/02/01/un-groupe-d-extreme-droite-veut-s-en-prendre-aux-interets-musulmans-de-france_4269600_1819218.html).
- <sup>48</sup> SOS-racaille, “Communiqué des CCR”, 2001, <https://web.archive.org/web/20011212084809/http://sos-racaille.org/ccr1.html>.
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<sup>61</sup> Léon is a pun on the word chameleon, to suggest that the author is elusive, ubiquitous, and can hide anywhere. The injunction “You are Léon” is an invitation to join this clandestinity by hiding like a chameleon. The term contains another pun with the word *camé*, French slang for junkie, but it’s unlikely that Sambuis meant to suggest a “junkie Léon”.

<sup>62</sup> “Léon, c’est vous, c’est moi, c’est nous!” [Léon, c’est vous, c’est moi, c’est nous!"] Léon France. <https://leonfrance.net/leon-cest-vous-cest-moi-cest-nous/>.

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<sup>63</sup> Personal OSINT research by the author.

<sup>64</sup> Albertini Dominique and David Doucet. *La Fachosphère: Comment l’extrême Droite Remporte La Bataille d’Internet* [The Fachosphere: How the Far Right Wins the Internet Battle], 2016; Suc Matthieu and Marine Turchi. “Révélations sur des «patriotes» qui projetaient des attentats islamophobes.” [Revelations about "patriots" who planned Islamophobic attacks], *Mediapart*, 20 May 2021.

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<sup>98</sup> The Sputnik and RT France channels have devoted dozens of programs to him, often mentioning him in ambiguous or laudatory terms. Many of them are no longer available, following the EU ban on these media after the invasion of Ukraine.

<sup>99</sup> Crowdtangle is a tool belonging to Meta, Facebook's parent company, that maps the distribution of contents across several social networks. It is free for use by researchers only.

<sup>100</sup> FirstDraft, L’impact de CrossCheck Sur Les Journalistes & Les Publics.

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<sup>101</sup> Berteau Alexandre, and Alexandre Piquard. “La chaîne RT surfe sur le mouvement des « gilets jaunes ».” [RT channel surfs the "yellow vests" movement], *LeMonde*, 5 January 2019.

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<sup>102</sup> Tesquet Olivier. “Prorusse et anti-woke... Qui est le sulfureux Charles d’Anjou, l’homme derrière le média ‘Omerta’?” [Prorussian and anti-woke... Who is the sulphurous Charles d’Anjou, the man behind the 'Omerta' media?], *Télérama*, 26 April 2023.

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<sup>104</sup> Affaire Mia: Pour Rémy Daillet, les ravisseurs sont “des héros, ils rétablissent le droit” [Mia case: For Rémy Daillet, the kidnappers are "heroes, they are restoring the law"] <https://twitter.com/BFMTV/status/1384493544396623872>.

<sup>105</sup> Vincent, Elise. “Selon la Cour des comptes, la lutte antiterroriste a coûté 9 milliards d’euros depuis 2015.” [According to the Cour des Comptes, the fight against terrorism has cost 9 billion euros since 2015], *LeMonde*, 16 July 2020.

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<sup>106</sup> Vincent Elise. “Budget des armées: le renseignement, DGSE en tête, grand gagnant des arbitrages du projet de loi de programmation”, *LeMonde*, 18 April 2023.

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<sup>107</sup> Albertini Antoine, and Christophe Ayad. “Djihadisme, ultradroite et ultragauche: l’appel à la « vigilance » du patron de la DGSI.” [Jihadism, ultra-right and ultra-left: DGSI boss calls for "vigilance"], *LeMonde*, 10 July 2023.

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<sup>108</sup> Laurent Samuel. “Fonds Marianne: ce que dit le rapport de la commission d’enquête sénatoriale sur la « dérive d’un coup politique ».” [Fonds Marianne: what the report of the Senate inquiry says about the "drift of a political stunt"], *LeMonde*, 7 July 2023.

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<sup>109</sup> Grasset, Fasquelle and Forêt, Élodie, and Xavier Demagny. “Chez les policiers, la tentation grandissante du vote RN.” [Among police officers, the growing temptation to vote RN], *France Inter*, 17 May 2021. <https://www.radiofrance.fr/franceinter/chez-les-policiers-la-tentation-grandissante-du-vote-rn-3142534>.

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<sup>110</sup> Le Télégramme, “On a retrouvé Boris Le Lay, le néonazi breton réfugié au Japon [Exclusif]” [We found Boris Le Lay, the Breton neo-Nazi who has fled to Japan [Exclusive]] 12 December 2022.

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## **Italy: Russia's Influence over Far-Right Offline and Online**

**Ottavia Galuzzi**

The political, economic, and cultural ties connecting Russia and Italy date back to the Cold War era when Italy had the largest communist party in Western Europe, threatening NATO unity.<sup>1</sup> In the 1960s, the centrist Christian Democrats paved the way for economic agreements with the Soviet Union on oil, via the Italian state-owned company Eni<sup>2</sup> on gas which is still in place today.<sup>3</sup> This shows that Italy's positive attitude towards Russia has not been the interest of a specific party, but political and economic relations with Moscow developed both under Italy's right and left governments.<sup>4</sup> Due to this widespread indulgence towards Russia, Italy is perceived as one of Europe's "Russia understanders" with approval across different political cultures.<sup>5</sup> Yet within the Italian political landscape, the modern far-right has positioned itself as the primary supporter of Vladimir Putin's Russia by depicting it as the geopolitical alternative to Euro-Atlantic institutions.<sup>6</sup> As a matter of fact, the rise of far-right parties in Italy has offered Russia new opportunities to exploit their pro-Russian rhetoric<sup>7</sup> and anti-EU sentiment, fuelled by views of patriotism, anti-immigration, anti-LGBTQ+, and anti-establishment.<sup>8</sup>

This chapter showcases how Italian far-right parties would not have needed to be directly aligned with Russia to effectively do Moscow's bidding via their anti-EU attitudes.<sup>9</sup> Following the Crimean annexation in 2014, Russia has utilised the voices of Italian far-right parties, like Northern League (LN), Brothers of Italy (FdI), and Forward Italy (FI), to further the growing pro-Russian ecosystem through economic and political deals, strong institutional relationships, and mutual interests, which have led these parties to support Russia's geopolitical

aspirations, condemn sanctions against Russia, and decry the EU and NATO.<sup>10</sup> This ecosystem legitimises Russia's politics through relationships with like-minded politicians and consequent agreements,<sup>11</sup> such as Russian officials hosting LN members in Crimea, Italian far-right leaders meeting with Putin in Moscow, and the formal cooperation agreement between United Russia and LN.<sup>12</sup> The political openness towards Russia is backed by mutual economic interests that have led Prime Minister Mario Conte to sign bilateral economic agreements with Russia valued at 1.5 billion euros in 2018,<sup>13</sup> and have brought hundreds of Italian businesses to invest in the Russian market over the years<sup>14</sup> representing today the 6.3 percent of international businesses actors present in Russia.<sup>15</sup> The scope of this research is to assess Russia's influence on the Italian far-right landscape, and the role played by cyberspace in furthering such influence. The research also aims to evaluate the risks of violence that these influences may lead to, with particular attention to the risks of violent extremism.

As a result of the 2022 elections, Italy's government is led by the centre-right coalition headed by Giorgia Meloni's Fdl,<sup>16</sup> and includes the aforementioned LN<sup>17</sup> and FI.<sup>18</sup> This new coalition has raised concerns internationally for two main reasons: firstly, the current administration is the first in Italy's postwar history whose majority partner, FdI, is rooted in the post-fascist tradition; secondly, the inclusion of parties sympathetic to Russia, LN, and FI, could enhance Russia's influence over the Italian political landscape in general and its right-wing elements in particular.<sup>19</sup> For instance, LN leader, Matteo Salvini openly expressed his sympathies for Moscow by wearing Putin T-shirts in the European Parliament in 2015 and in Red Square in 2017.<sup>20</sup> The former leader of FI, Silvio Berlusconi, was among the strongest advocates of Russia's membership of the G8 and bringing it into the NATO Alliance.<sup>21</sup> During a popular television show in September 2022, Berlusconi attempted to justify the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and there are recordings of him talking to FI supporters and a member of the parliament in which he claimed that "Putin had been forced into war and that he only wanted to replace the Zelensky government with well-mannered people."<sup>22</sup>

Regarding the extreme far-right New Force (FN),<sup>23</sup> in 2014 and 2015, its leader Roberto Fiore participated in conventions in defence of the traditional family organised by the Kremlin and was among the ten leaders from European extreme far-right parties invited to a Russian Conservative International Forum sponsored by the Kremlin in Saint Petersburg.<sup>24</sup> Since Russia's annexation of Crimea, a few FN voters and sympathisers have been in Ukraine to defend Russia's stances and,

in some cases, even fight for Russia.<sup>25</sup> Some of these individuals are still in Ukraine; their involvement in the ongoing conflict and activities, particularly online, will be discussed later in this paper.

Meloni's FdI appears to lack direct ties with the Kremlin, which has facilitated the sudden shift from advocating openness towards Russia and opposing European economic sanctions against Russia,<sup>26</sup> in line with far-right ideology, to firmly condemning Russia's war on Ukraine and sanctions.<sup>27</sup> This shift is mostly due to economic factors that render attempts to buy gas from Russia mute as this has become impossible under the new EU sanctions, but also political ones, such as the new government's determination to remain in the EU and NATO's good books.<sup>28</sup> Due to such policy shifts, FdI will not be a part of this analysis, but its trajectory raises some interesting points for future research, namely, under what circumstances a given radical right actor might opt away from Russia. The chapter will thus shed light on Russia's influence on LN led by Matteo Salvini and generally on the Italian far-right milieu within the online ecosystem, using FN supporters as an example of actors directly influenced via cyber means.

## **The Case Studies**

The above contextualisation provides insights into the two main focuses of this chapter, which are addressed through two case studies. The first case study analyses Russia's political influence on LN by exploring the political activities carried out by its members and supporters, as well as several Russians belonging to Putin's close circle.<sup>29</sup> As will be shown, the questionable relationships and veiled accords established over the years brought LN and United Russia, Putin's party, to sign a formal political agreement of collaboration in 2017.<sup>30</sup> The case analyses how such collaboration is backed by pro-Russian cultural organisations based in Italy,<sup>31</sup> and it is connected to LN's economic interests of overturning European economic sanctions against Russia.<sup>32</sup> This influence is characterised by several layers, which include mutual online propaganda through the think tank *Katehon*,<sup>33</sup> and a Russian attempt to illegally fund LN's political campaign through an inconclusive oil trade. Beyond this direct political influence, the case study examines Russia's indirect political and cultural influence upon LN's anti-gender values to assess the risks of violence stemming from the normalisation of harmful narratives and stigmatisation of "othering" pursued by the Kremlin and LN.<sup>34</sup> The choice of this specific topic is linked to the recurring online and

physical violence against the LGBTQ+ community, and the backsliding of inclusive social policies which is occurring in Italy.<sup>35</sup> The decision to analyse the Russian influences over LN, instead of other aforementioned Italian far-right parties, derives from the abundance of evidence, which is publicly available and allows for a thorough analysis of the Russian influence over Salvini's party, be it political, cultural or financial.

The second case study discusses the cyber influence that Russia can indirectly exert upon the Italian far-right milieu through the ideologically motivated cyberattacks of a decentralised network of malicious actors and the risks of online radicalisation into violent extremism stemming from such influence. To narrow down this topic, the case covers a series of cyberattacks delivered by pro-Russian hacktivist collectives against Italy's institutions' websites because of its opposition to the invasion of Ukraine,<sup>36</sup> and it assesses how these cyber operations are perceived by FN's voters to evaluate the presence of indirect political and cultural influence. In this context, FN supporters are used as an example of far-right actors that could be potentially influenced by pro-Russian hacktivists through cyber means and information operations. The anonymous nature of cyberspace makes it difficult for this research to present the existence of direct Russian influence over the FN community via cyber means, but the example of FN is discussed to shed light on a growing trend that sees the pro-Russian hacking community and the Italian far-right milieu engaging online, sharing information, and overall influencing each other. Through the analysis of these two communities on Telegram – FN voters as an example of an Italian far-right actor, and pro-Russian hacking collectives – the case study identifies overlaps in sharing of the pro-Russian and pro-war content, hate speech, and sharing of the content produced by the Italian foreign fighters fighting for Russia against Ukraine. As will be shown, the Italian far-right milieu and the pro-Russian hacking community share ideological affinities, particularly on the Russo-Ukrainian war, and indirectly influence each other by amplifying pro-Russian news. Additionally, these online communities may be a breeding ground for far-right and extreme groups or individuals with low cyber skills, where they could learn how to deliver cyberattacks from the pro-Russian hacking collectives in the name of Russia's interests. The case determines the indirect logistical influence these malicious actors could have by organising military cyber exercises and offering cyber tools, leveraging existing cybercrime as a service model.<sup>37</sup> Given the ideological affinity of these communities, further research into Telegram's private channels and dark web forums could reveal ongoing collaborations. What

is evident from this research is Russia's lack of interest in avoiding the interrelations of similar communities online because of the benefits it may gain, and the implications that ideologically motivated cyberattacks, borderline content, and online violent extremism have on the offline world.

Both case studies are discussed in detail in the following sections, which include a threat analysis of Russia's influence and an assessment of the risks stemming from this. The chapter also presents current measures in place to counter such influence and reduce its impacts. Finally, the chapter provides recommendations on how to prevent and counteract the effects of Russian influence, particularly leading to ideologically motivated cyberattacks and far-right violent extremism online.

### ***Research Methodology***

This chapter relies on desktop research into the relationship and influence between Russia and the Italian far-right, and on a review of the existing literature. The qualitative research uses a combination of keywords inherent to the topics of discussion.<sup>38</sup> Further, it gathers information through open-source intelligence and text analysis of websites, and public Telegram channels related to pro-Russian hacking collectives or individuals, Italian far-right groups or individuals, and known Italian foreign fighters. The research was limited to Telegram due to its wide use by far-right and cybercriminal actors.<sup>39</sup> Further findings supporting this chapter's topics could be identified on social media platforms such as Discord, Gab, and MeWe, to name a few,<sup>40</sup> dark web forums or websites,<sup>41</sup> or channels and groups, oftentimes private, maintained by other Italian far-right actors, such as Casa Pound.<sup>42</sup>

### **Case Study 1: Russia and Salvini's LN**

Today LN is one of the main far-right parties in the Italian political landscape, where it is part of the current centre-right coalition government with FdI and Forza Italia.<sup>43</sup> Despite LN losing 3.2 million votes during the 2022 election, a significant drop compared to the 5.7 million votes obtained in the previous election,<sup>44</sup> and obtaining only 23 seats in the Chamber of Deputies,<sup>45</sup> its leader Matteo Salvini maintains a loyal electorate through the motto "Italians first."<sup>46</sup>



Previously known as Lega Nord, LN underwent a process of ideological transformation after Salvini became leader in 2013, shifting the party into the far-right nationalist party of today.<sup>47</sup> This transformation led to the endorsement of anti-Europeanism sentiments, anti-immigration positions, and the defence of the heterosexual family as the fundamental unit of society.<sup>48</sup> In this context, Salvini became the symbol of European sovereignty in Italy, with millions of followers on social media platforms where he transforms anger into public consent and uses slogans belonging to Mussolini's fascism<sup>49</sup> such as "So many enemies, so much honour" ("*Tanti nemici, tanto onore*").<sup>50</sup>

The overall anti-democratic stance taken by LN brought a shift of its electorate to the extreme right,<sup>51</sup> making it an appealing ally for Russia's interests in Europe. Over the last few decades, LN's voters have reflected this anti-democratic stance by expressing a loss of trust in the parliament, ineffectiveness of moderate political positions, and dissatisfaction with democratic institutions.<sup>52</sup> Beyond the condemnation of democracy and Europe's liberal forces, there is evidence of LN's members spreading racist and xenophobic propaganda, as well as pushing for homophobic policies in order to defend the so-called *Italian identity* (white, Catholic, heterosexual).<sup>53</sup> Such negative narratives foment the anti-democratic perceptions of LN's voters, which could lead to systemic discrimination against specific communities like immigrants and the LGBTQ+. This approach is aligned with Russia's strategy of political warfare which includes meddling in the internal affairs of European states to promote alliances with anti-democratic actors,<sup>54</sup> with the ultimate scope to cause societal divisions and disruptions at the European level.<sup>55</sup> In several circumstances, Salvini has publicly adulated Putin and portrayed Russia as a bastion of sovereignty and cultural conservatism against the forces of liberalism damaging Europe.<sup>56</sup> As such, the Russian influence over LN could potentially further radicalise the party, which would attract more extreme supporters and consequently, radicalise the existing electorate via the provision of harmful narratives. A drift towards more radical politics could be accompanied by even more stringent opposition to the sanctions regime against Russia and hinder European efforts to restrain Russian forces.

Russia's influence over LN appears to be multilayered and relies on the ideological affinities between the two sides, impacting LN's political perspectives. It also, however, rests on economic issues and a sense of shared cultural values. Although initially, Russia lacked a declared line of influence over LN, the Kremlin has often shown its intent and capability to be allied with

Salvini's party. For instance, Moscow's media outlets echoed Salvini's complaints against the West's alleged anti-Russian policies.<sup>57</sup> Russian officials hosted LN members in Crimea, and Salvini, together with other LN members, met representatives of United Russia in Moscow, including President Vladimir Putin.<sup>58</sup> Consequently, what enabled the establishment of a more overt Russian influence over LN was the political coordination agreement signed between United Russia and LN in 2017.<sup>59</sup> This case study argues that the combination of veiled and official relationships established between the two sides led to this act of political agreement and ideological understanding. Valid for five years and automatically renewable, the content of this agreement relies on ten essential points, and it is based on the principles of state sovereignty, mutual respect, and mutual non-interference.<sup>60</sup> The parties agreed to organise bilateral and multilateral events, exchange information, and contribute to the unification of all forces in defending traditional values.<sup>61</sup> This agreement formalised the bonds between the two parties and brought advantages to both. On the one hand, it allowed Moscow to assume a more decisive role within Italy and the geopolitical strategies of the EU, where all countries must agree to maintain the embargo against a third-party country like Russia.<sup>62</sup> On the other, it made LN Russia's supporter and guardian of the economic interests of those Italian companies counting on the possibility of trading with Russia.<sup>63</sup> Therefore, this agreement demonstrates the interconnection between the two parties' political and economic interests, which has turned LN into a more fertile ground for Russian influence.

Particularly, these influences emerged through the involvement and relationships established between a few personalities close to LN and associated with the Kremlin, such as Gianluca Savoini, Konstantin Malofeev, and Aleksey Komov.<sup>64</sup> Savoini is Salvini's spokesperson assigned to strengthen the ties with the Kremlin and increase LN's visibility, without ever being a party member.<sup>65</sup> Malofeev is a Russian oligarch and businessman who has joined Aleksandr Dugin, philosopher of the modern Russian right, to gauge European far-right interests in collaborating with Russia.<sup>66</sup> Finally, Komov is Malofeev's associate dedicated to nurturing relationships with European conservatives through participation in relevant events (such as LN's congress where Salvini became the party secretary in 2013) and organisations linked as evidence of the intent to strengthen the Kremlin-LN collaboration.<sup>67</sup> What is peculiar is that most of the profiles mentioned in this case study do not hold official political positions but are close to the ruling elites in Russia or LN.<sup>68</sup>

Together with LN's representatives, Savoini created the Lombardy-Russia Cultural Association (ACLR) in 2014, intended to convey Putin's worldview based on the cornerstones of identity, sovereignty and tradition, while developing trade agreements between Italian companies and Russia.<sup>69</sup> This entity is important to illustrate Russia's influence over LN for three reasons. First, Komov was elected honorary president of the ACLR,<sup>70</sup> which suggests the intent of officialising the collaboration with the Kremlin. Second, this type of entity is not legally obliged to publicise its financial reports, so it is unclear if ACLR may have received money from Russian individuals.<sup>71</sup> Third, ACLR has openly supported Russia's politics by justifying Crimea's annexation and by condemning economic sanctions through online publications and physical demonstrations, often organised with the Russian Embassy in Rome and the Russian Consulate General in Milan.<sup>72</sup> Additionally, the ACLR and LN are headquartered in the same building in Milan<sup>73</sup>. To further promote ACLR's goals and their engagement within it, Malofeev, Dugin, and Savoini have also contributed to fostering the Kremlin-LN relationship by disseminating online propaganda through conservative websites like *Katehon*.<sup>74</sup> Referred by Dugin as an informational initiative of pro-Russian nature,<sup>75</sup> the think-tank *Katehon* presents numerous articles proclaiming the collaboration between the Kremlin and LN, praising the leadership of Putin and Salvini and promoting conservative values.<sup>76</sup> Savoini appeared among *Katehon*'s contributors, along with Alessandro Fiore, son of FN leader Roberto Fiore, and he was often interviewed on topics related to the Kremlin-LN relationship.<sup>77</sup>

Similar to ACLR's mandate, the organisation Russian Centre of Science and Culture (*Rossotrudnichestvo*) has facilitated Russia's influence over LN by connecting like-minded politicians and diplomats committed to forging closer cooperation between Russia and LN. "Rossotrudnichestvo is "a leading Russian agency whose main mission is to strengthen Russia's humanitarian influence in the world",<sup>78</sup> and it is represented in 80 different countries.<sup>79</sup> While the organisation officially organises cultural events and language courses, the ultimate goal is to influence public opinion outside Russia. Both ACLR and the Russian Centre of Science and Culture represent examples of Russian soft power aimed to consolidate the Italian far-right's efforts to promote pro-Russian views.<sup>80</sup> All of these references show how Russia's influence on LN emerged in an existing pro-Russian environment, in which key figures connected to the party and the Kremlin acted to build relationships and to create structures designed to further Russia's political influence. These key figures have also attempted to promote

economic interests favouring both the Kremlin and LN's members and voters. For instance, Savoini and Claudio D'Amico opened the consultancy agency Orion in Russia with the goal of expanding the network of Italian anti-sanction companies, and several Italian business leaders voting for LN pushed to maintain trade operations with Russia.<sup>81</sup> For these reasons, Salvini has always advocated for stopping the Western sanctions against Russia, citing the adverse implications on the Italian economy. Although LN has declared its intention to protect the Ukrainian population, the party has not changed its position against the economic sanctions for Russia.<sup>82</sup> The potential financial influence of Russia on LN goes beyond these sanctions, as investigations were conducted into the meeting that occurred at the Metropol Hotel in Moscow, where Russian and Italian counterparts – including Savoini – allegedly agreed to a financial scheme supporting LN's political campaign.<sup>83</sup> This was to be directed through an oil trade agreement and illicitly directed towards LN.<sup>84</sup> The Italian court later exonerated Savoini and the other Italians involved, as the oil sale did not take place.<sup>85</sup> Despite this, the investigation suggests the existence of intent and capability for Russia to promote financial influence to facilitate local political goals supporting its interests,<sup>86</sup> and proves the interconnection between political and financial influences in this context. With the United Russia-LN arrangement still valid today, the parties' intention to collaborate is plausible, and it raises questions about where these influences may lead considering the current Russian military invasion of Ukraine, and the recognition of Russia as an actor that sponsors terrorism according to the European Parliament.<sup>87</sup>

In addition to what was previously discussed, the ideological affinities between Putin's Russia and LN have facilitated the emergence of indirect political and cultural influences, leading to discriminatory discourse, borderline content, and ultimately, violence towards specific communities. A great example is Russia's and LN's anti-gender narratives as they directly pinpoint their ideological affinity to encourage the spread of harmful narratives. It is known that individuals like Dugin, Malofeev, and Komov are actively involved in anti-gender organisations, such as the World Congress of Families (WCF), and have operated to find new allies at the European level.<sup>88</sup> The cooperation with WCF enables the Russian government to act through the local proxy actors and seemingly hide behind an alliance of individuals with similar religious and ideological convictions.<sup>89</sup> On its side, LN is closely allied with the anti-gender network that politically mobilises conservative and pro-life organisations to undermine LGBTQ+ rights.<sup>90</sup> For instance, LN supported the Eighteenth WCF conference taking place in Verona

in 2019 through the endorsement of the then-LN government ministers – Salvini as Minister of the Interior, Lorenzo Fontana as Minister for Family and Disabilities, and Marco Bussetti as Minister for Education – to reinforce the party’s position around the natural patriarchal family as the fundamental unit of society.<sup>91</sup> This furthers Russia's end goal of dividing the European member states’ opinions on LGBTQ+ issues and leveraging the erosion of the common understanding of fundamental rights and protection of minorities.<sup>92</sup>

LN reveals its ambivalence towards violence through the spread of discriminatory language targeting the LGBTQ+ communities in line with Russia and through the normalisation of harmful narratives and stigmatisation of the *othering*.<sup>93</sup> On the one hand, LN supports individuals and entities that are evidently homophobic and spread offensive narratives.<sup>94</sup> On the other, it shares anti-LGBTQ+ messages, which may not be openly insulting but convey discriminatory opinions and depict the LGBTQ+ community as *other* compared to the community of white, cisgender, heterosexual males used as the basis of LN’s nationalist discourse.<sup>95</sup> For instance, Salvini commented on the anti-LGBTQ+ law proposed by Hungarian President Victor Orbán as the liberty of any state to decide on its own school, university organisation, and justice system, while the EU criticised it as a discriminatory regulation.<sup>96</sup> More recently, LN representatives confirmed that Salvini had a conversation with the former paratrooper commander Roberto Vannacci about his book “*The World Back to Front*,” where, among other derogatory messages, he makes homophobic remarks.<sup>97</sup> According to sources, LN representatives have defended Vannacci’s right to express his views through his book.<sup>98</sup>

Regarding the use of discriminatory language, LN’s pro-family stance is expressed through Salvini and other LN representatives’ statements about the necessity of a child to have a mother and a father, which must be reflected in a school education dedicated to fostering the idea of so-called natural family.<sup>99</sup> Beyond the pro-family stance, there are also examples of LN delegates directly spreading derogatory messages against LGBTQ+ people. In relation to the 2015 Gay Pride of Milan, LN members Massimiliano Bastoni and Luca Lepore stated that the city would be the “depressing stage for a few thousand frustrated people, victims of nature’s aberrations.”<sup>100</sup> In 2018, during a radio show, LN’s former municipal councillor in Verona, Alberto Zelger, asserted that “gays are a disaster for the reproduction and conservation of the species.”<sup>101</sup> Even though the city council distanced itself from Zelger’s remark, it appears he conveyed the opinion

shared by other LN members at the time.<sup>102</sup> These harmful narratives are well aligned with those shared by the Kremlin, which, for instance, released a pro-constitutional reform video to show that a child could be adopted by a same-sex couple if the proposed amendment to article 72 of the Russian Constitution – which defines marriage as a union between a man and a woman – was not accepted.<sup>103</sup>

Russia's efforts to target LGBTQ+ people by normalising harmful narratives lie at the heart of political homophobia connected to its moral sovereignty, as opposed to the decadent West.<sup>104</sup> At the same time, Salvini's narrative around the demographic decline fits into this worldview which also includes Putin's narrative of connecting homosexuality with paedophilia.<sup>105</sup> Perceived symbiosis between the two augments a political and cultural alliance and understanding.<sup>106</sup> The alliance helps increase the risks of violence towards the "others" in Italy.<sup>107</sup> Since 2015, LN has denied LGBTQ+ rights by opposing the implementation of bills on same-sex unions and homophobic violence<sup>108</sup> while changing LGBTQ+-inclusive laws.<sup>109</sup> In 2019, Interior Minister Salvini deleted *parent 1* and *parent 2* from ID documents to restore the traditional *mother* and *father*, and LN is prone to block LGBTQ+-friendly initiatives across Italy such as introducing sex and gender education in school curricula.<sup>110</sup> More recently, Italian far-right parties, including LN, voted against the legislative bill known as the Ddl Zan<sup>111</sup>, which aimed to make violence against LGBTQ+ people and disabled people, as well as misogyny, a hate crime.<sup>112</sup> The European Parliament condemned Italy for its anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric,<sup>113</sup> which is aligned with the poor ranking position of Italy for the achieved LGBTQ+ rights (34<sup>th</sup> out of 49 European countries).<sup>114</sup> Following the ban of the Ddl Zan, hate speech has remained common, even among politicians, and anti-LGBTQ+ hate crimes have continued with physical threats and violence.<sup>115</sup> In 2021, the leading Italian LGBTQ+ association Arcigay recorded 126 incidents of homo-transphobic hatred reported by the mass media,<sup>116</sup> while the project Chronicles of Ordinary Homophobia recorded 70 cases of homophobic violence, consisting of single attacks, multiple attacks (targeting several people together), and murders.<sup>117</sup>

## **Case Study 2: Pro-Russian Hacking Collectives and Italian Far-Right**

As one of the global leading actors in cyberspace, Russia is more than capable of exerting its influence through the leverage of cyber means.<sup>118</sup> However, Russian

cyber policy responds to crises and emerging opportunities, making Russia's cyber approach mostly tactical.<sup>119</sup> This case study explores the cyber influence that Russia indirectly exerts upon the Italian far-right milieu, taking FN and its sympathisers, for example, through the ideologically motivated cyberattacks of a decentralised network of malicious actors. Additionally, this case assesses the risks of online violence and online radicalisation into violent extremism stemming from such cyber influence. Different studies have shown the direct harm of cyberattacks on people and consequent societal impacts,<sup>120</sup> while multi-stakeholder fora agree on the risks of harmful content and online radicalisation leading to offline violence.<sup>121</sup> In such an intertwined world, Russia's influence through cyber means should not be underestimated given its advanced cyber capabilities of delivering cyberattacks affecting both civilian critical infrastructure and military targets and relying on an expert range of cyber actors providing cyber tools and carrying out cyber operations, such as branches of the Russian army and secret service, private companies, and network of hackers and cybercriminal groups.<sup>122</sup>

In this chapter, FN's supporters are used as an example of far-right actors because of their tendency towards a neo-fascist, ultra-nationalist and conservative ideology, often supported by acts of violence. For instance, back in 2015, eighteen members of FN were accused of serious bodily harm, preparation of explosives and aggravated domestic violence.<sup>123</sup> It is thus clear that FN relies on an extreme right-wing and violent electorate, and its members are accused of homophobic political campaigns<sup>124</sup> and recurrence of violence during demonstrations.<sup>125</sup> Due to FN's fascist and racist narratives and incitement to violence, Facebook removed the profiles of administrators of several pages connected to the party, classifying it as a hate organisation.<sup>126</sup>

The involvement of FN in this analysis is also due to its pro-Russian stance. Since 2015, FN is openly supportive of Russia, defined by Fiore as the "third Rome,"<sup>127</sup> and it has facilitated Italian investments in Crimea by organising several business trips.<sup>128</sup> Some of the most known Italian foreign fighters present in Ukraine, but fighting on the Russian side, like Andrea Palmeri, Riccardo Cocco,<sup>129</sup> and Alessandro Bertolini,<sup>130</sup> are former members or sympathisers of FN, which is indicative of the inclination towards violence among FN's voters. Between 2014 and 2016, roughly 50 to 60 Italian foreign fighters were present in Ukraine, while currently, the number has dropped to fourteen.<sup>131</sup> The majority of the Italian

extreme-right foreign fighters have been in Ukraine since 2014, and most deployed on the Russian side of the conflict.<sup>132</sup>

In May 2022, the pro-Russian hacking collective Killnet launched a series of DDoS<sup>133</sup> attacks against the websites of several Italian institutions, such as the Senate, the National Health Institute, and the Ministry of Defence, making them temporarily unreachable.<sup>134</sup> According to the hackers' Telegram channels, these attacks were delivered to punish Italy's opposition to the Russian military invasion of Ukraine.<sup>135</sup> Although these attacks did not bring any serious implications, as the websites were offline for a few hours,<sup>136</sup> Killnet's success was to set a fierce narrative about the war in Ukraine and amplify it through its cyberattacks.<sup>137</sup> Known as hack-for-hire cybercriminals, Killnet became openly vocal in backing Russia's offensive when the war started. The group's goal was to damage Western governments for their absolute support of Ukraine and anti-Russian sentiments.<sup>138</sup> Through a combination of their technological skills and ideological beliefs, Killnet launched ideologically motivated cyberattacks to further Russia's interests even though there are no signs of direct control from Russia.<sup>139</sup> This is aligned with Russia's cyber strategy of leveraging cyberattacks from non-state actors claiming to act on its behalf, while the Kremlin neither contradicts these claims nor intervenes to stop such cyberattacks.

Additionally, disinformation on the war in Ukraine has been disseminated on Italian broadcasting shows by hosting guests like Nadana Fridrikhson – a Kremlin delegate – who asserts Ukraine's "Nazi problem" and denies Russian involvement in the civilian massacre of Bucha, raising the percentage of Italians who do not believe the media on Ukraine.<sup>140</sup> Therefore, the ideological nature of the cyberattacks and disinformation campaigns turns them into force multipliers of political and cultural influence, which are indirectly used by Russia to disseminate pro-Russian values, particularly pro-war discourse. This suggests that the threat of ideologically motivated cyberattacks should not be devalued as unrealistic,<sup>141</sup> particularly in a pro-Russian ecosystem like the Italian far-right milieu.

What this case aims to determine is the potential presence of Russia's influence over the Italian far-right milieu through Killnet's cyberattacks and online activities by reflecting on the example of FN's community. Despite the lack of direct Russian influence over FN through cyber means, this case points out similarities and overlap between FN supporters online and pro-Russian hackers that suggest a growing trend of indirect influences in cyberspace among these



groups, notably the Italian far-right milieu and pro-Russian hacking collectives. With a focus on pro-war discourse, the case analyses the content of public Telegram channels, which are the go-to place for recruiting, seeking donations, and inciting violence against either the Russian or Ukrainian side of the war.<sup>142</sup>

Firstly, this part of the study is based on the content analysis of channels We Are Killnet, Legion, and two other hacker groups or individuals connected to Killnet – HackBeregini and NoName057(16). There are many smaller groups connected to Killnet and Legion that aim to amplify Killnet’s messages, while other private channels are used to manage operational activities.<sup>143</sup> All these channels disseminate pro-war content, strongly oppose “Russophobes” with insulting and derisive comments, and either claim or praise the cyberattacks delivered against those actors resisting Russia, declaring them cyber war. These hacking collectives fall within the category of politically motivated hackers, who use aggressive expressions, engage with audiences through various communication channels, and are likely to add photos, videos, and hyperlinks to state their beliefs.<sup>144</sup>

Secondly, Italian far-right activities on Telegram from a larger study<sup>145</sup> have been examined, focusing on the channels related to FN. The FN channel praises the Kremlin and Putin, describing him as the guardian of traditional values and a victim of hate from the West. Several posts claim the need to end economic sanctions against Russia, with organised protests and petitions, and support Russia’s geopolitical ambitions over Ukraine. Similar content was shared also by the official Facebook account before being suspended,<sup>146</sup> and now it is shared by the affiliated page Radio Forza Nuova. The other selected channels, like La Terza Roma, share far-right and neo-fascist sentiments combined with anti-NATO, anti-EU, and pro-Russia values to different extents, representing a fertile ground to further Russia’s influence over the Italian far-right milieu. The online Italian far-right ecosystem is used for explicitly fascist propaganda, creating cyber-communities of debate and mobilising a political cause,<sup>147</sup> like Russia’s aspirations over Ukraine. These channels frame pro-Russia discourse to further pre-existing narratives about the West, claiming that the war is caused by the aggression of NATO and Western governments. As such, FN voters online appear to be prone to spread dissatisfaction about the status quo and incite voters to acts of violence, for instance by disseminating information on the Russo-Ukrainian conflict,<sup>148</sup> often through the posting of borderline content. In this context, FN is used as an example to investigate the topics discussed by the wider Italian far-right community online, overlapping with pro-Russian discourse. The fact that all

these Telegram channels are public suggests the intent of Killnet's community and the Italian far-right community, beyond only FN voters, on disseminating pro-Russian propaganda and increasing societal tensions, which indirectly intensifies Russia's influence and the risks of further violent extremist ideologies online. An additional analysis of the indirect influences is presented in the following paragraphs, outlining some of the potential consequences of such influences.

The final step of this analysis is identifying overlaps between Italian far-right and pro-Russian hackers' channels through mentions and hyperlinks. Previous studies confirm that hyperlinks can be considered indicators of closeness, traces of communication, and means for reciprocal help in obtaining public attention.<sup>149</sup> Following a content analysis of these public channels, the case identified overlaps between four channels, that either openly support FN or far-right values, share pro-Russian and pro-war content, and mention Killnet's channels and news about its cyberattacks as information resources or means to defend the Kremlin. For instance, the channel Gruppo di Sostegno FLN re-shared the news about Killnet's cyberattacks, claiming they were a lie from the Italian government aimed to make Russia the usual public enemy. Few of these channels, like Saker Italia Notizie and Donbas Italia, forbid users to insult Russia and targeted specifically Italian audiences in favour of Russia's invasion of Ukraine by echoing Russian propaganda and by praising the pro-Russian hackers' operations. There are also attempts from these hackers to incite conservative Italians to favour Russia. NoName057(16) posted about the positive reactions from Italian users who actively protested against the "Russophobic policies of their country" and fomenting their dissatisfaction. Although some channels do not openly mention FN, they amplify alike views shared by extreme channels like La Terza Roma, intensifying the influence of pro-Russian views on the Italian far-right milieu.

Another element reinforcing the existing pro-Russian ecosystem is the reference to Italian foreign fighters in some of the channels mentioned previously. Particularly, few of the pro-Russian hackers mention the Telegram channel of Vittorio Nicola Rangeloni as a reliable source of information regarding the war in Ukraine. Even if the role of Rangeloni in Ukraine is unclear, he refers to the Russian invasion as the liberation of a population, and his closeness to the Italian neo-fascist environment is proved by his re-sharing of posts from La Terza Roma. Similarly, few of these channels mention the Facebook account of Andrea Palmeri, fighting against the Ukrainian government since 2014 and FN supporter,

who shares updates about the ongoing war and amplifies the conservative views of La Terza Roma to an audience of more than 5,000 followers. These information overlaps suggest that the Italian far-right milieu, relying on the example of Forza Nuova's supporters online and the Killnet's community, share ideological affinities on the Ukraine war and indirectly influence each other by amplifying pro-Russian propaganda. As such, this strengthens Russia's political and cultural influence over the Italian far right on divisive topics, like the war in Ukraine.

Besides representing a breeding ground for pro-Russian and violent extremist ideologies, these public channels could represent a learning environment for far-right audiences. Taking the example of the FN community, the exposure to the content shared by Killnet may be compelling thanks to the pro-Russian frame, and regardless of the cyber skills needed. Therefore, this case suggests that the pro-Russian hacking collectives could recruit far-right users into delivering cyberattacks to further Russia's interests, and indirectly create a logistical influence favouring Russia. This logistical influence can be established through the cybercrime as a service (CaaS) model, where cybercriminals are hired to attack specific targets or sell cybercriminal tools, infrastructure, and services to the highest bidder,<sup>150</sup> and through cyber military exercises, where users are trained to deliver cyberattacks. While it is difficult to find evidence of CaaS without accessing the dark web and deploying investigative tools, cybercriminals use public communication channels to organise military cyber exercises aimed at recruiting users to join their criminal activities and eventually contribute to their cause. Through its Telegram channel, Killnet communicated about the organisation of cyber military exercises and encouraged its followers to train their cyber capabilities over a list of targets,<sup>151</sup> including Italian infrastructures. In the connected channel Legion, the attack instructions are more detailed, administrators assent to launch attacks, and recruitment posts for new hacktivists are released.<sup>152</sup>

Considering the number of followers these channels have, the spread of their narratives is impactful. With its 11,494 followers, Legion repeatedly called hacktivists to attack Italy because of its opposition to the war in Ukraine, while NoName057(16) shared calls to join their DDoS project with 46,200 subscribers.<sup>153</sup> These groups look both for expert programmers and users with low-cyber skills eager to join their cause,<sup>154</sup> as in these channels it is possible to find tutorials explaining how to deliver DDoS attacks.<sup>155</sup> Particularly, DDoS attacks can be an engaging start for nontechnical users, as they can be performed

through the use of various instruments that can be rented or obtained for free from various attacker groups online.<sup>156</sup> Recently, security researchers detected the Wagner ransomware, a ransomware attack likely targeting Russians and demanding to join the private military corporation Wagner Group, instead of asking for money.<sup>157</sup> Despite the lack of information about ransomware, this example shows how easily malicious cyber tools can be delivered by users with different cyber skills to convey a political message, and potentially recruit new affiliates.

All of the aforementioned examples point to the intent and capabilities of the pro-Russian hacking community to exert logistical influence over an audience's keenness in acting to promote Russia's interests and carelessness regarding the harm caused, like FN voters. The goal of using cyberspace as an attack medium to extend influence and cause harm is aligned with Russia's cyber strategy. While a deeper analysis of the engagement between these communities could provide further evidence of intent, the Italian far-right community could join cybercriminal activities like DDoS campaigns, considering the limited technical skills needed and the availability of training materials offered by Killnet's community. Russia's lack of actions in avoiding pro-Russia-motivated cyberattacks and potential cyber offensive training of far-right audiences raises high concerns about the offline implications of cyberattacks and the likelihood of leveraging cyber means to radicalise and recruit more violent extremist users. Although only a few states currently have the cyber capabilities to cause severe disruptions and physical damage,<sup>158</sup> this case presents the adverse impacts of hacking collectives' operations and the potential connection with the Kremlin. With a growing attack surface, exploitable vulnerabilities, and the weaponisation of cyber tools, the likelihood of ideologically motivated cyberattacks intensifying pro-Russian values, and, indirectly, Russia's influence is a realistic threat to consider with particular attention to increasing far-right activities online.

### **Existing Measures**

As was shown, one of the root causes of Italy's far-right milieu's expansion is the fact that extremist thoughts and ideas are now freely expressed by different "mainstream" political actors. This is happening even though such statements and utterances are effectively unconstitutional. Indeed, article XII of the Italian Constitution affirms that "The reorganization, in any form, of the dissolved fascist

party is prohibited. As an exception to article 48, temporary limitations on the right to vote and eligibility for the leaders responsible for the fascist regime are established by law for no longer than five years from the entry into force of the Constitution.<sup>159</sup> Additionally, the Scelba Law prohibits the reconstitution of fascist parties and regulates the procedures to dissolve such groups, including punishing individual and collective behaviours.<sup>160</sup> These are part of Italy's constitutional and legislative efforts to avoid and limit the spread of neo-fascist ideologies.

Regarding Russia's leverage, as a European member state, Italy has the responsibility to limit Russia's influence through the implementation and respect of restrictive measures against it. They include visa measures and economic sanctions, such as import and export restrictions on Russia aimed to thwart its capabilities to continue the aggression.<sup>161</sup> Although these sanctions are designed to maximise the negative impact on Russia's economy while limiting the consequences for European countries,<sup>162</sup> a few Italian far-right parties like LN have continuously opposed these measures seen as damaging to the Italian economy.

As of January 2019, political parties are prohibited from receiving funding from foreign donors in light of what the Metropol deal could have led to.<sup>163</sup> Additionally, the European strategy includes individual sanctions targeting people supporting, financing, or implementing actions that undermine the territorial integrity and independence of Ukraine.<sup>164</sup> Several individuals were charged in Italy for recruiting fighters to go into Ukraine<sup>165</sup> and others were arrested for participating in "preordained and violent actions aimed at changing the constitutional order or violating the territorial integrity of the Ukrainian government," such as recently for the foreign fighter Alessandro Bertolini.<sup>166</sup>

As previously discussed, Russia exerts its influence also via the dissemination of propaganda and disinformation through media outlets. To counter this, the broadcasting activities of several Kremlin-backed disinformation outlets, like Katehon, are suspended in Europe.<sup>167</sup> Pro-Russian propaganda and disinformation are also widespread among online communities, where this research shows that it is often picked up by far-right users increasing the volume and risks of hate speech and radicalisation of violent extremist views.

In the case of hate speech, the Italian legal framework refers to the Mancino Law, which criminalises hate speech inciting violence and discrimination on a religious, national, and ethnic basis.<sup>168</sup> Civil society advocates argue the need to

expand the protected characteristics in criminal law to include protection for targeted communities,<sup>169</sup> like LGBTQ+ people. Although applicable media legislation prohibits all content that contains incitement to hatred and intolerant behaviours based on “differences of race, sex, religion, or nationality”,<sup>170</sup> harmful narratives on divisive topics, like homosexual rights, continue to grow online bringing severe implications to the offline lives of targeted people. The lack of a proper and legal definition of hate crime in Italy tends to exacerbate existing tensions and does not protect the most vulnerable.<sup>171</sup> These concerns must be addressed offline as much as online.

## **Recommendations**

This final section presents a few recommendations that can be adapted to the Italian context to prevent and counter the impacts of Russia’s influences and the risks of violence posed by Italian far-right groups, which echo pro-Russian views and are enabled by them. These recommendations aim to respond to the threats posed by borderline content, particularly hate speech, ideologically motivated cyberattacks, and violent extremism radicalisation.

Firstly, the Italian Parliament should apply more fiercely the laws in force, particularly the Scelba Law,<sup>172</sup> and implement the proposed law AC 3074 aimed at introducing the new criminal offence of fascist and Nazi-fascist regime propaganda into the penal code.<sup>173</sup> The proposal also intervenes on current legislation regarding the performance and ostentatious use of symbols and emblems attributable to the contents and methods of the fascist and Nazi-fascists parties.<sup>174</sup> In this regard, FN’s neo-fascist stance and its involvement in violent protests in 2021 triggered the Democratic Party to file a motion in Parliament reporting that violence “as a method of political struggle can never be tolerated” and calling for the government to dissolve the FN and all the other groups that refer to fascism.<sup>175</sup> However, the application of the Scelba law is often challenged by the Constitutional freedom of expression, leveraged by the far-right parties to oppose the Democratic Party’s motion.<sup>176</sup>

Secondly, the Italian Ministry of Education should be looking into including cybersecurity skills and training in high-schools to foster public resilience and online critical thinking within the younger generations. This could lead to the creation of an educational curricula, then translated into a nation-state implementation program which focuses on enhancing digital and media literacy

to identify pro-Russian fake news, as well as on digital resilience and cybersecurity skills to better understand the cyber threats posed by pro-Russian actors and their offline implications. The educational curricula could be developed with the support of the National Cybersecurity Agency the national cybersecurity authority aimed to protect the national interests in the field of cybersecurity, safeguard security and resilience in cyberspace, prevent cyberattacks and promote awareness. This workstream would require the collaboration with a network of civil society organisations that could bring their expertise in protecting and empowering targeted communities, like LGBTQ+ people. Through this type of collaboration, LGBTQ+ individuals could acquire the knowledge and skills to understand the cyber threats and attackers they face, learn how to recognise a cyberattack, defend themselves, and report any violent actions.

Thirdly, policymakers, practitioners, and tech companies should promote wider use of the redirect method to reduce the spread of harmful content contextually relevant to national growing threats, like the search for pro-Russia and pro-war narratives, hate speech, and local far right content that could lead users to further radicalisation. As an open-source methodology deploying targeted advertising to connect people looking online for harmful content with constructive alternative messages,<sup>177</sup> this method can redirect users searching for pro-war content or far-right supporters to reliable resources, alternative narratives, and non-extremist links, reducing the volume of far-right<sup>178</sup> and pro-Russia propaganda shared. To ensure its effectiveness, this method should be applied to the Italian cultural and political context to address harmful and extreme content searched by local far-right groups, which often echo pro-Russian narratives, as this research shows. Additionally, this method could also be used to redirect users searching for cybercrime-related content to material providing concrete examples of the adverse implications that cyberattacks and cybercrime cause in the offline world. As most of the cybercrime research may happen through dark web sites, the method would require specific plugins and technical changes to effectively work on dark web browsers, like the Tor browser, and bypass anonymous proxies or encrypted tunnels that are not normally set up for clear web sites.

Additionally, Italy must implement the Digital Service Act, designed to improve the removal of illegal content and protect online users' fundamental rights,<sup>179</sup> as incitement of terrorist activity, hate speech, and violence are considered inadmissible content.<sup>180</sup> The most recent measure is the Terrorist Content Online

Regulation, which obliges hosting service providers offering their services within the EU to take down terrorist information from the Internet or restrict access to it within one hour of receiving an order from authorities.<sup>181</sup> While these European measures focus mostly on terrorist content and require application in Italy, national procedures and legislation need to be implemented and strengthened to combat hate crime and hate speech.

Lastly, further research based on the content and thematic analysis of public/private Telegram channels related to the pro-Russian hacking collectives and the Italian far-right community is needed to understand the growing trend of influence between these two groups and assess what the realistic consequences are. The content and thematic analysis on similar groups should be carried out also in mainstream platforms such as Facebook and X (formerly Twitter), on alternative platforms, like Discord, Gab, and MeWe, to name a few, and in dark web forums and websites. Particular attention is required for the analysis of ideologically motivated cyberattacks delivered by far-right groups in Europe, and of the influence of Russia's advanced cyber capabilities. It is essential to understand the nature of this threat by analysing the volume of far-right ideological cyberattacks, their victims, modus operandi and impacts to assess the degree of connection between online and offline violence.<sup>182</sup> This research would be insightful for P/CVE programs, as it could shed light on the interconnection between the malicious hacking community and the far-right community: on one side, it could analyse the factors that push violent extremist actors to join cyber operations and deliver cyberattacks; on the other, it could explore the factors that may lead the radicalisation process of cyber attackers<sup>183</sup> to far-right violent extremism. Given the Kremlin's involvement in several known malicious cyber operations, it would be worthy to assess the influence of Russia on far-right ideologically motivated cyberattacks, particularly if they target European institutions, causing further political, economic, and societal tensions.



- <sup>1</sup> Andrew S. Weiss, “With Friends Like These: The Kremlin’s Far-Right and Populist Connections in Italy and Austria”, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, (February 2020): 1–4 [https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Weiss-Austria\\_and\\_Italy-FINAL.pdf](https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Weiss-Austria_and_Italy-FINAL.pdf).
- <sup>2</sup> Elisabetta Bini, “A Challenge to Cold War Energy Politics? The US and Italy’s Relations with the Soviet Union, 1958–1969,” in *Cold War Energy*, ed. Jeronim Perović (Naples: University of Naples, 2017), 203.
- <sup>3</sup> Weiss, “With Friends Like These”, 1–4.
- <sup>4</sup> Raimondo Lanza, “Putin’s Friends? The Complex Balance Inside Italy’s Far-Right Government Coalition”, Briefings de French Institute of International Affairs (IFRI), 28 November 2022: 2, [https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/lanza\\_russia\\_italy\\_nov2022.pdf](https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/lanza_russia_italy_nov2022.pdf).
- <sup>5</sup> Lanza, “Putin’s Friends?”, 3.
- <sup>6</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>7</sup> Weiss, “With Friends Like These”, 1.
- <sup>8</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>9</sup> Cecilia Strand, Jakob Svensson, “Disinformation Campaigns about LGBTI+ People in the EU and Foreign Influence”, *Policy Department for External Relations Directorate General for External Policies of the Union* PE 653.644, (July 2021): 20, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2021/653644/EXPO\\_BRI\(2021\)653644\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2021/653644/EXPO_BRI(2021)653644_EN.pdf).
- <sup>10</sup> Weiss, “With Friends Like These”, 8–9.
- <sup>11</sup> Futàk-Campbell, “Political Synergy”, 34–35.
- <sup>12</sup> Jon Henley, “Rise of Far-Right in Italy and Austria Gives Putin Some Friends in the West,” *Guardian*, 7 June 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jun/07/rise-of-far-right-in-italy-and-austria-gives-putin-some-friends-in-the-west>.
- <sup>13</sup> Redazione La Stampa, “Conte da Putin: ‘Sanzioni da superare’. Firmati 13 accordi commerciali Italia-Russia” [Conte da Putin: 'Sanctions to be overcome'. 13 Italy-Russia trade agreements signed], *La Stampa*, 25 October 2018, <https://www.lastampa.it/esteri/2018/10/25/news/contе-da-putin-sanzioni-da-superare-firmati-13-accordi-commerciali-italia-russia-1.34055077/>.
- <sup>14</sup> Nona Mikhelidze, “Italy and Russia: New Alignment or More of the Same?”, *Istituto Affari Internazionali Commentaries* 19|28, April 2019: 3, <https://www.iai.it/en/pubblicazioni/italy-and-russia-new-alignment-or-more-same>.
- <sup>15</sup> Gabriele Carrer, Teresa Coratella, Silvia Samorè, “Democratic Defence: How Italy Can Lead the Fight against Russian Disinformation”, *European Council on Foreign Relations*, 5 July 2023, <https://ecfr.eu/publication/democratic-defence-how-italy-can-lead-the-fight-against-russian-disinformation/>.
- <sup>16</sup> Fratelli d’Italia is a far-right political party which defends the principles of popular sovereignty, social solidarity, merit, and fiscal fairness, drawing inspiration from the values of the national, liberal, and popular tradition. The party recalls values and principles of the Italian neo-fascist movement. Created in 2012 as Fratelli d’Italia - Centrodestra Nazionale, denominated Fratelli d’Italia - Alleanza Nazionale in 2014, it assumed its current name in 2017. It was founded by Ignazio La Russa, Guido Crosetto, and Giorgia Meloni, current leader of the party. In the 2022 political elections, the party established itself as first in the country with around 26 percent of the votes and obtained with the centre-right coalition (Forza Italia, Lega, Noi moderati) around 44 percent of the votes, allowing the formation of the Meloni government. Source: “Fratelli d’Italia”, Treccani, last accessed 2 November 2023,

<https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/fratelli-d-italia/>. Official party's website:  
<https://www.fratelli-italia.it/>.

<sup>17</sup> Lega is a far-right political party supporting populist and Eurosceptic positions. It is the longest-running party in the entire Italian political panorama, as it was founded in 1991 by Umberto Bossi to bring together all the autonomist electoral associations of northern Italy (previously it was denominated Lega Nord). In 2017, Lega per Salvini Premier was created as direct political descendant of Lega Nord, with Matteo Salvini as secretary and leader. In the 2022 political elections, even if Lega lost several consensuses obtaining not even 9% of the votes, it joined the centre-right coalition led by Meloni's government. Source: "Lega Nord", Treccani, last accessed November 2, 2023, <https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/lega-nord/>. Stefano Pagliarini, "La Lega di Salvini fa il pieno di parlamentari ed è in continua mutazione: da antieuro a partito di lotta e di Governo" [Salvini's League is full of parliamentarians and is constantly changing: from anti-euro to a party of struggle and government], Today, 18 July 2021, <https://www.today.it/politica/lega-matteo-salvini.html>. Official party's website: <https://legaonline.it/>.

<sup>18</sup> Forza Italia is a centre-right political party created in 1994 by Silvio Berlusconi, whose ideology includes elements of liberal conservatism, Christian democracy, liberalism, and populism. It was created in response to the wave of Italian left political parties. In the 2022 political elections, even if Forza Italia obtained only 8 percent of the votes, it joined the centre-right coalition led by Meloni's government. Following the death of the leader Berlusconi in June 2023, Antonio Tajani was elected the party's national secretary. Source: "Forza Italia", Treccani, <https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/forza-italia/>, last accessed 2 November 2023. Official party's website: <http://www.forza-italia.it/>.

<sup>19</sup> Nathalie Tocci, Leo Goretti, "Giorgia Meloni's Italy and Europe: Ambitions and Realities", IAI Commentaries 23|44, September 2023: 1, <https://www.iai.it/en/pubblicazioni/giorgia-melonis-italy-and-europe-ambitions-and-realities>.

<sup>20</sup> Samorè, Carrer, Coratella, Silvia, "Democratic Defence".

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## 8

# Slovakia: Politics and Paramilitarism

Daniel Milo

Russian influence on the far-right and right-wing extremists in Slovakia has to be conceptualised in a wider context of Russian-Slovak relations, history, and specifically, the perception of Russia and its footprint in Slovakia. These factors greatly influence the ability of Russian actors to leverage certain elements of the far-right milieu for its strategic goals.

Slovakia stands out as the most pro-Russian country in the region of Central and Eastern Europe.<sup>1</sup> The pro-Russian views of Slovaks are manifested in many ways – whether it is the low perception of Russia as a threat, significant support for strategic partnership with Russia, or the widely accepted notion of Slavic Unity. Perhaps the most telling illustration of the pro-Russian attitudes in Slovakia is manifested in assigning the responsibility for the current war in Ukraine. According to the latest polling, Slovaks are least inclined to put the blame for the war on Russia with mere 40 percent supporting such a notion, while in Hungary it is 54 percent, in the Czech Republic 71 percent, and in Poland 85 percent who see Russia being responsible for starting the war with Ukraine.<sup>2</sup>

Unlike in Poland, Czech Republic, or Hungary, the dominant narrative in the public discourse concerning Russia was until February 2022 a rather positive one. While the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine led initially to a radical change in the perception of Russia, the long-existing narratives and political discourse continue to cloud judgement and support pro-Russian attitudes even in the post-invasion reality. The main elements of that perception are centred on the idea of Slavic brotherhood (78 percent agree that Russia is our Slavic brother<sup>3</sup>), rejection of perceiving Russia as a security threat (only 20 percent perceived Russia as a threat in 2021;<sup>4</sup> currently it is just 54 percent<sup>5</sup>), and strong anti-Americanism (50

percent perceive the US to be a security threat in 2023<sup>6</sup>). Another important element is the appeal of a strong leader, personified by Vladimir Putin, who is still perceived positively by 27 percent in 2023.<sup>7</sup> There are several reasons enabling such a positive attitude towards Russia in Slovakia:

**1. Slavic Brotherhood.** The so-called Slavic brotherhood is a belief that all Slavic nations share not just language or some historic ancestry roots but are connected by a special bond existing until this very day. Sometimes this bond is even presented as a spiritual one by describing the history of Slavic nations through the prism of ethnicity and common ancestry.<sup>8</sup> Another important element of the Slavic brotherhood belief system is a special place of Russia in it, notwithstanding the fact that the Russian Federation is composed of many different nationalities, not just ethnic Russians, who compose approximately 80 percent of the whole population.<sup>9</sup> Russia is, supposedly, the protector of all Slavic nations and is the only bulwark against the “decadent West”. According to this narrative, made popular in particular by Alexander Dugin in his neo-Eurasianism doctrine, Russia is not just a country but represents a different form of civilisation, based on other principles than the Euro-Atlantic one.<sup>10</sup> Such a notion combines centuries-old schism between the Eastern Orthodox and the Roman Catholic Church dating back to 11<sup>th</sup> century<sup>11</sup> and also incorporates Russian geopolitical goals. While majority of Slovaks declare themselves as Catholics,<sup>12</sup> the notion of Russia being a protector of the so-called traditional values (rejection of LGBT rights, feminism, equality of men and women) plays very well into the pro-Russian attitudes. During the nation building period in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, founding fathers of the Slovak nation such as Ľudovít Štúr<sup>13</sup> or Ján Kollár<sup>14</sup> often espoused the romantic image of uniting all Slavic nations under the “mighty (Russian) oak”, where Slavic nations should seek their refuge from Hungarian or German oppression. The concept of Slavic brotherhood underpins the victimhood narrative that sees Russia as a mere victim of the West. As illustrated by the opinion poll results, this romantic perception of Russia, notwithstanding its real actions, is still very much present in the minds of many Slovaks.

**2. History and the Communist Past.** The legacy of communism and the liberation of Czecho-Slovakia by the Soviet Red Army at the end of World

War II (WWII) plays an important role in modern perception of Russia in Slovakia. The Soviet Red Army, which liberated Slovakia from the Nazi Germany in 1945, suffered heavy losses in the process and monuments commemorating their sacrifice are in almost every town or village.<sup>15</sup> The martyrdom of Red Army soldiers has been one of the main elements of communist ideology and is deeply ingrained in the national memory. The martyrdom and sacrifice which are at the centre of WWII commemoration events are often abused by modern pro-Russian proxy actors such as motorcycle group Night Wolves to push modern Kremlin narratives, using the banner of anti-fascism to further antagonise the population against the West, EU, and NATO.<sup>16</sup> Due to Night Wolves' activities against Ukraine, the whole organisation, including its Slovak branch leadership was placed on the EU sanctions list in 2022.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, the legacy of communist past is interpreted differently in Slovakia than in the neighbouring countries. During communism, Slovakia witnessed massive industrialisation and economic development thus the attitude towards the communist era is more positive. Even the 1968 occupation of Czechoslovakia by the Warsaw pact armies was not perceived in Slovakia as negatively as in the Czech Republic.<sup>18</sup> While the fall of communism is seen positively in most of the former socialist bloc countries, including the Czech Republic, this was not entirely the case in Slovakia.<sup>19</sup> After the initial support for democratic changes, the harsh impact of economic transformation in Slovakia led to resentment and even negative perception of the democratic transformation. Such post-communist nostalgia also contributes to the anti-Western attitudes, instrumentalised by Russia in the whole region of Central and Eastern Europe.

- 3. Energy Dependence and Economic Influence.** Slovakia was until last year largely dependent on Russian energy imports. Slovakia takes around 85 percent of its natural gas and 66 percent of its oil from Russia,<sup>20</sup> and only after the economic sanctions on Russian energy in 2022 did Slovak energy imports start to diversify.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, all the fuel for two Slovak nuclear power plants using Russian technology also comes from Russia, which created a heavy energy dependence. This legacy of decades-long Russia-oriented energy and raw material dependency manifested also in the coal or iron ore imports for heavy industry and resulted in a significant economic influence of Russia in Slovakia. In addition, Slovakia is also an

important corridor for Russian energy infrastructure – the transport fees from oil and gas pipelines transiting Slovakian routes to Western Europe were a significant source of income for the state budget.<sup>22</sup>

**4. Pro-Russian networks.** The above-mentioned affinity for Russia existing in a significant segment of the population has been used and further strengthened by numerous Russian actors and pro-Russian proxies operating in Slovakia. Slovakia had, until recently, a robust and effective network of pro-Russian actors comprising media outlets, businesses, cultural associations, and sports clubs, which facilitated Russian influence in the country on many different levels. The existence of such networking dates back to communist times and these networks were revived and further strengthened during Putin’s reign. Such networks exist in various areas:

- Fringe media outlets of all formats – internet radios, printed magazines, online TV projects, and publishing houses producing pro-Russian content with sometimes unclear and dubious sources of financing.<sup>23</sup>
- Martial arts clubs – Systema MMA clubs, host appearances of Russian martial arts instructors serving as a recruitment and indoctrination vehicle.
- Cultural and academic associations building on the vast network of such contacts from the communist era.
- Motorcycle clubs and subculture – using history and motorbikes to spread Russian influence.<sup>24</sup>
- Paramilitary groups – drawing from a lack of state-sponsored alternatives, these groups are often a gateway for young males into antidemocratic movements, tainted with anti-western attitudes and Russian propaganda.<sup>25</sup>
- Business entities with direct links to the Russian Federation, building upon the significant energy and heavy industry dependence of Slovakia.

### **Russian Influence on Slovak Far-Right and Right-Wing Extremist Scene**

The Slovak far-right and right-wing extremist scene has always been deeply anti-Western and embraced Russia as its natural ally in its antidemocratic struggle. While most actors in the Slovak far-right and right-wing extremist scene take their

inspiration from the neo-Nazi and fascist ideology or its modern offshoots, Russia has always been admired due to its position as a geopolitical and cultural counterweight to the US, NATO, and the EU.<sup>26</sup> The historic legacy of Russia (or the Soviet Union) as the power that defeated fascism might seem at odds with nativist, racist, xenophobic, and antidemocratic attitudes of the far-right, yet the “enemy of my enemy is my ally” principle allows Russia to exert certain influence on these actors in Slovakia.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, many of the groups belonging to the far-right spectrum try to whitewash their extremist views and/or background by embracing anti-Western or so-called anti-globalist attitudes, utilising the Russia-originated narratives, incorporating them into their own political agenda.

Such long-term affinity between Slovak far-right actors and Russia has been manifested on numerous occasions by prominent members of the Slovak far-right even without any visible tangible support or leads from Russia. The pro-Russian attitudes mostly manifested in anti-NATO and anti-US public actions, demonstrations, and slogans by prominent far-right actors, as well as voting of far-right MPs and Slovak MEPs. Cases of direct influence are quite rare due to the clandestine nature of Russian operations and the lack of clear attribution from open sources. Thus, the influence of Russia on the Slovak far-right is predominantly indirect. It uses the same tools that Russia utilises to project its image abroad and to strengthen support for its strategic goals such as information operations, providing political or organisational support, and creating networks of like-minded individuals via culture, sports, and ideology. Such assessment was confirmed also by experts interviewed for this analysis.<sup>28</sup> In the course of interviews, the experts pointed to publicly known cases of contacts and meetings between members of the far-right milieu and Russian representatives and the ideological alignment between far-right actors and Russia. However, due to the existence of extensive Russian and pro-Russian networks in Slovakia, it is quite likely that there have been cases of more direct influence (i.e. providing financial, logistical support), yet these are beyond the domain of open-source intelligence. Moreover, on several occasions, such contacts or influence did not involve directly far-right individuals and groups.



### ***Selection Criteria for the Two Cases***

The cases selected for this study represent relatively rare cases when the Russian influence was made visible, to a certain extent, by actions of the far-right actors or Russian actors themselves also in the open-source domain.

The first case concerns the far-right political party People's Party – Our Slovakia and its successor Republic Movement. It was selected as a typical example of right-wing-extremists-turned-politicians, embracing pro-Russian, anti-Western attitudes, and narratives, which are in line with Russian strategic goals. The Russian influence in this case was, as illustrated below, predominantly indirect. Yet one particular incident involving a Russian intelligence officer bribing a Slovak citizen might illustrate a broader trend of Russian support which remains hidden due to the clandestine nature of such activities.

The second case includes a paramilitary group Slovak Conscripts, which illustrates how Russia tried and to a certain extent failed in creating a puppet violent paramilitary organisation in the EU and NATO member state. While not being a typical far-right group, the case of Slovak Conscripts well illustrates the methods, approaches, and tools Russia applied in exerting its influence in the nationalist, paramilitary milieu. It also represents the closest example of a violent group, since the paramilitary group was clearly preparing for an armed conflict and its loyalty to official Slovak armed forces was highly dubious. This group also gained international attention due to an HBO documentary *When the War Comes* providing an insider perspective on the group's inner working and ideology.<sup>29</sup>

### **Case Study 1: The People's Party – Our Slovakia and the Republika Movement**

The People's Party – Our Slovakia of Marian Kotleba (LSNS further on) has been, until recently, the most important pro-Russian far-right political party in Slovak politics. Having received 8 percent of the votes in the 2016 elections and securing two MEPs (out of fourteen) in the 2019 European Parliament elections, LSNS for more than ten years dominated the far-right political spectrum and was seen as the most successful political project of this type. LSNS is described by political scientists as a (neo-) fascist party due to its clear inspiration and admiration of

Slovak wartime fascist state and its current nativist, xenophobic, and racist ideology.<sup>30</sup>

The history of LSNS dates back to 2009 when its leader Marian Kotleba rose to prominence by organising marches in Roma settlements, promising quick fixes to the people living in the neighbourhoods of these marginalised communities. His first attempt at creating a political party (a right-wing extremist one) in 2005 was unsuccessful since the Supreme Court disbanded it due to violation of the Slovak Constitution in 2006. The main reason for this decision was the political programme of the party, which suggested limiting the right to vote only to citizens organised in professional groups, in violation of the Constitution.<sup>31</sup> Yet, in 2013 Marian Kotleba won the seat of Banska Bystrica region governor in a surprising victory over a social democratic predecessor. He used this position to create a power base and get access to public funding and media attention, which he utilised to solidify support for his party.<sup>32</sup> The transformation of a former radical extremist movement into a political party decreased the potential for violence and open anti-system rhetoric in an attempt to gain voter support. Yet, many of their followers originate in the right-wing extremist subculture and manifest much more openly their proximity to extremist ideologies and violence.<sup>33</sup>

Marián Kotleba and his fellow party members have been expressing anti-EU, anti-NATO, and pro-Russian attitudes openly for years. However, these views at that time did not receive much attention due to the marginal position at the far end of the political spectrum. This has changed after he became the head of Banska Bystrica's self-governing region in 2013. During the tenure of Marian Kotleba as the regional governor, he refused EU funding<sup>34</sup> and even removed the EU flag from the Banská Bystrica regional self-governing region office.<sup>35</sup> A prime example of his pro-Russian attitudes is his open letter he issued at the height of the 2014 Maidan revolution, urging then-president of Ukraine Yanukovich not to resign, warning him of the EU and NATO membership:

As a member of the Slavic nation, I fully understand what is now being fought for in Ukraine. The European Union needs new markets and the NATO terrorist organization is trying to move closer to the border of the Russian Federation. As a citizen of an EU Member State I can responsibly tell you that the opening to the EU will not bring anything good to the Ukrainian people. Ukraine will become just another huge market where there is no place for the original Ukrainian goods. Production will be

replaced by imports and consumption, and hundreds of thousands of people will lose their jobs. At the end of this process there will be anything but totally enslaved Ukrainian people and the transfer of Ukrainian land into the hands of foreign investors.<sup>36</sup>

In 2016 LSNS entered the Slovak Parliament with 8 percent support, becoming the first far-right party to be represented in the national parliament since the fall of communism. Marian Kotleba and his party repeatedly manifested strong anti-EU and anti-NATO views in their party newsletters, programme manifesto, public meetings, and demonstrations.<sup>37</sup> These statements, however, were not driven predominantly by a strong pro-Russian attitude, but rather by a rejection of the liberal, democratic values that EU and NATO represent. The pro-Russian attitude of LSNS was also complicated by a strong neofascist elements in the party ideology and activities. These included rejection of the Slovak National Uprising at the end of WWII (armed uprising against the fascist regime in central Slovakia by the military and partisans, militarily defeated by combined forces of Nazi Germany and elements of the Slovak army, but very significant politically and present in modern Slovak identity),<sup>38</sup> commemoration of fascist Slovak wartime state and its president Josef Tiso or placing known neo-Nazis on the candidate list in the 2016 parliamentary elections.<sup>39</sup> Such open neofascist tendencies existing in the party also prevented closer links with Russia, at least public ones. Despite these conflicting views on history, Russian influence was present in the form of shaping LSNS attitudes towards the EU and NATO, war in Ukraine, annexation of Crimea, and sanctions against Russia. LSNS adopted a clear pro-Russian position, accusing the US, NATO, and the collective West of provoking Russia and labelling the Maidan Revolution as a coup orchestrated by foreign powers – fully in line with Russian strategic narratives.<sup>40</sup>

A notable case of an anti-US attitude which benefitted Russian interests was an attempted blockade of the 2015 *Dragoon Ride* of US military vehicles through Slovakia to Hungary. This ride originating in Germany and passing through Czech Republic was a demonstration of solidarity and ability of NATO allies to protect member states after the Russian annexation of Crimea and occupation of Donbas and Luhansk in 2014. In response to this show of NATO military capabilities, a number of LSNS members joined by other demonstrators attempted, unsuccessfully, to block the entry of the US military convoy into Slovakia, calling the ride a “US occupation”.<sup>41</sup> Such negative attitudes towards NATO and the US were vividly illustrated also in the 2016 election’s programme

manifesto of LSNS, which included a pledge to withdraw from NATO, calling it a “criminal organisation” and a tool “to advance the power interests of the USA”.<sup>42</sup>

In continuation of the same approach, inspired also by the 2016 Brexit referendum, LSNS initiated a referendum to leave the EU and NATO in 2016. It was an attempt to capitalise on the wave of anti-EU and anti-NATO sentiment, instigated to a certain extent by Russian proxies and pro-Russian networks. LSNS started to collect signatures for a petition to initiate a referendum to leave EU and NATO in July 2016.<sup>43</sup> The initiative was unsuccessful and failed to gather the required 350,000 signatures, yet it served as an important mobilisation tool for LSNS.

On other occasions, Mr Milan Uhrik, then-MP of Slovak Parliament urged the prime minister Pellegrini not to support extension of the sanction’s regime against Russia, using the same narratives as the Russian Federation, blaming the West for deterioration of relations with Russia and claiming the sanctions to be inefficient and harming only Europe. In particular, Kotleba accused the West and the US of aggressive and provocative policy towards Russia, echoing the Russian narratives.<sup>44</sup> Marian Kotleba, founder and leader of the party, also used the theme of Slavic Brotherhood, one of the most prevalent pro-Russian narratives in Slovakia, in his unsuccessful 2019 presidential campaign, even on his billboards.<sup>45</sup>

### ***The case of Bohuš Garbar – a smoking gun of a direct Russian influence?***

As noted previously, cases of direct Russian influence on the far-right are very rare. Yet, one such case, connected indirectly to LSNS appeared in March 2022 when a video of a meeting between a Russian GRU operative and Mr Bohuš Garbar (external contributor of an influential pro-Russian online news portal Hlavne Spravy) appeared online.<sup>46</sup>

In the video, recorded allegedly by the Slovak Military Intelligence<sup>47</sup> and leaked to the press in March 2022, the Russian operative was handing out €1,000 as a payment to Mr Garbar for collection of classified information and recruitment of others during their meeting in summer 2021. Garbar, who was convicted on these charges and sentenced in February 2023 to a paltry three-year suspended sentence and a fine of €15,000<sup>48</sup> was a donor to LSNS during the 2016 parliamentary

elections.<sup>49</sup> According to published information, he donated €10,000 to the LSNS party in 2015 and in 2016. He had been working at that time as a journalist and it is highly unlikely that he could have afforded such a donation from his income alone. LSNS at that time denied connection to Garbar and knowledge of his Russian contacts.

Allegations of LSNS being clandestinely funded by Russia have appeared also in connection to the 2016 arrest of Polish pro-Russian activist and alleged Russian spy Mariusz Piskorski, head of the pro-Russian Change party<sup>50</sup> or in connection to the so-called Usovski email leaks in 2017. The leaked emails included communication of Alexander Usovski, a Belarussian far-right activist who received payments from Russian oligarch Malofeev and organised series of anti-NATO, pro-Russian demonstrations in many Central European countries, including Slovakia.<sup>51</sup> However, Slovak police investigation launched into these allegations and did not find any proof of such illicit Russian funding.<sup>52</sup> Experts interviewed for the analyses concluded, however, that by using a chain of proxy actors, any Russia-originated funding could have been easily laundered and the true origin of money hidden even from the police. The gifts of 2015 and 2016 by Garbar to the LSNS party potentially but not unlikely raise a suspicion of being an example of such clandestine funding operations.

LSNS's demise into insignificance started with the split in the party in 2021, when the Republic Movement was established. The old-school, proto-fascist, far-right ideology could not compete with the slick, modern communication of its successor. The final nail in the coffin was conviction of the party leader Marián Kotleba for a public display of sympathies to fascism in the *1488 checks case*,<sup>53</sup> i.e. a situation in which he distributed charity money for a highly symbolic, and associated with the far-right, amount of money.<sup>54</sup> The election result in the 2023 parliamentary elections just confirmed this demise since the party received a mere 0.84 percent of votes.<sup>55</sup>

### ***Republic Movement – Successor to LSNS***

Another notable case of indirect Russian influence in the political domain and a prime example of spreading pro-Russian attitudes in Slovakia is the example of a former deputy chair of LSNS, current member of European Parliament, and leader of Republic Movement: Milan Uhrik.<sup>56</sup> The Republic Movement came to existence as a result of a split in the LSNS in 2021 and currently dominates the

far-right spectrum with up to 10 percent of popular support. Uhrík rose to prominence after the 2019 European Parliament elections due to his provocative videos on social media attacking the EU as being overrun by migrants and threatening the traditional values.<sup>57</sup> Since then he has been among the staunchest supporters of Russia in the European Parliament (EP) and even after February 2022 he continued to repeat Russian narratives blaming the West, US, and NATO for the war in Ukraine. He has created a large online following and was the most successful Slovak politician on Facebook with 5.4 million interactions – shares, likes, and comments – in 2022.<sup>58</sup>

Analysis of his voting record in the EP concerning Russia carried out by Political Capital Institute shows that Uhrík is among the seven most pro-Russian MEPs from the Visegrad four (Czechia, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia) plus Austria.<sup>59</sup> The voting record is also well illustrated by some of his public statements in the European Parliament, using Russian narratives and framing, especially when it comes to war in Ukraine, or sanctions. According to Uhrík, it was the “secret services and NGOs” funded from “Brussels, but mainly from Washington” which organised “first the Maidan and then the civil war” in order to weaken Russia’s position in Europe.<sup>60</sup>

His public statements from EP, expressing pro-Russian views and accusing MEPs of double standards, were sometimes even picked up and shared by Russian media. A prime example is his speech shortly after the Russian invasion in March 2022, where he used the whataboutism trope, accusing the EP of double standards when it comes to sanctions, comparing US invasion to Iraq or conflicts in Libya or Syria. Moreover, he used the same narrative as Kremlin, accusing Ukraine of war crimes in Donbas and Odessa. Footage of this speech was shown by the Russia 1 TV channel and shared by the Telegram platform of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Lugansk People’s Republic.<sup>61</sup>

Two weeks before the Russian invasion into Ukraine, Uhrík sent a letter to the Russian ambassador, asking him whether Slovakia would become a military target for Russia, as a result of signing Defence Cooperation agreement (DCA) with the US. The tone and content of the letter vividly illustrate anti-US and anti-NATO narratives, rejecting “the confrontational line of sanctions, geopolitical pressure, expansion and colonial tendencies towards the Russian Federation”.<sup>62</sup> Unlike the LSNS party, Republic Movement and its representatives are welcome at the Russian Embassy. On 30 August 2021 Miroslav Suja, MP of the Republic

Movement, met with Russian Ambassador and the chair of Russian Duma foreign affairs committee during his visit in Slovakia.<sup>63</sup>

The official website of the Republic Movement also republished in July 2022 a lengthy article of Russian MFA Sergej Lavrov, where he accused the West of being responsible for all the ills in the world – instigating war in Ukraine, not respecting agreements with Russia, faking chemical attacks in Syria and against Sergej Skripal, etc. The article is preceded by a question: truth or Russian propaganda? Such verbatim reproduction of all Russian strategic narratives, without any attempt at disputing some of the obvious lies and misconceptions in the Lavrov’s article clearly points to acceptance of Russian perspective by the Republic party.<sup>64</sup> Such Pro-Russian and anti-Western views are not only present in public speeches or posts of Republic members. They are reflected also in the 2023 parliamentary election’s programme manifesto of the Republic Movement. In a clear continuation of LSNS policies, the Republic Movement announced yet another referendum on exit from NATO. The programme manifesto called NATO “a relic of the Cold War and a source of military tension and conflict in the world” and announced that after restoration of Slovakia’s defence capacity, a referendum on NATO membership should be held.<sup>65</sup>

Alignment with Russian strategic narratives are clearly manifested also in the official position of the party regarding the war in Ukraine as outlined on their official website. According to Republic, the main cause of the conflict in Ukraine was not Russian aggression, but rather the “expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) towards the Russian Federation”, as well as “the Ukrainian Government’s long-standing aggression towards the Russian minority in the east”,<sup>66</sup> mirroring the Kremlin propaganda.

In conclusion, the Republic Movement and its representatives have clearly adopted the Russian perspective on international relations, EU, NATO, post–Cold War security architecture, and the war in Ukraine. They have, as illustrated in numerous examples, acted in line with Russian strategic interests – rejecting sanctions, blaming the West, using “whataboutism” to deflect criticism of Russian actions, and adopting and spreading Russian strategic narratives. Yet, despite several documented meetings between Republic and Russian representatives, there is no publicly available evidence of a direct, financial, or material support provided by Russian actors to representatives of this party. Nevertheless, it is clear

that Russia is well aware of a positive pro-Russian sentiment existing in the Republic Movement (or at least ideological alignment between the two) and might try to cultivate and further expand its influence beyond mere sympathies and rhetoric. Moreover, Republic managed to get rid of the extremist label by shying away from open manifestations of antisemitism, outright racism, or adoration of fascist Slovak wartime state characteristic to its mother-party LSNS. The modern far-right rhetoric and skilful use of social media rewarded Republic with significant public support at the expense of the LSNS, which saw its public support collapse. This has also led to official acceptance of the Republic Movement and its representatives by the Russian authorities, illustrated by official meetings of Uhrík at the Russian Embassy in Brussels<sup>67</sup> or his fellow MPs such, as Miroslav Suja at the Russian Embassy in Bratislava.<sup>68</sup> Despite narrowly missing the 5 percent threshold needed to enter the parliament in the general elections held on 30 September 2023 (Republic got 4.75 percent,<sup>69</sup> it remains the most powerful far-right political party with a significant presence on social media and a natural ally of Russian interests in Slovakia.

### **Case Study 2: Slovak paramilitary group Slovak Conscripts**

The second case involving violent far-right groups or individuals connected to Russia is quite difficult to establish in Slovakia. Far-right and right-wing extremist groups due to police pressure and transformation into political parties have largely rescinded violence and there are no publicly known cases of actual violence linked to Russian influence. While right wing extremists often have negative views of the EU and NATO and admire Russia, violent hate crimes committed by right-wing extremists are not directly linked to Russian influence. Therefore, the best example of a violent group connected to Russian influence is the case of Slovak paramilitary group Slovak Conscripts (SB). While not representing a typical far-right group, it belongs to the wider nativist, vigilante milieu and shares some common ideological features with far-right groups.

SB is perhaps the best known and the most important Slovak paramilitary group in modern history of Slovakia. It functioned for ten years (2012-2022) and at the peak of its popularity had some 150-200 active members in more than ten regional branches, organised regular weekly trainings and an annual weeklong summer military exercise.<sup>70</sup> In addition, special seminars involved active Slovak military personnel and even Russian instructors. Due to the young age of its founder, the



ideology of the group changed from a loose antiestablishment nationalist group with xenophobic undertones to a more polished image consisting of patriotic narratives and political aspirations, culminating in cooperation with well-known Russian proxies in Slovakia. Pro-Russian attitudes based in Slavic Brotherhood narratives and Russian ideological influence were defining features of this group throughout almost its entire existence despite the changes in membership and public image. The group also came under close scrutiny of the security agencies and was (indirectly) mentioned in annual reports of the Slovak Intelligence Service and Military Intelligence.<sup>71</sup> Slovak Conscripts officially announced the end of their activities in October 2022 without providing clear reasons for doing so. According to the experts interviewed for this study, the group went through a serious internal crisis after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which led to a decision of its leader to officially conclude its existence.<sup>72</sup> For almost a year, there was no clear successor to the group. Yet recently a potential substitute appeared, using the name Volunteer Corps<sup>73</sup> without any visible reference to its predecessor or its pro-Russian leaning. However, due to its short existence it is too early to assess its activities and orientation.

### *History and Origins*

SB originated in 2012 following a three week-long training of its two founding members – Peter Švrček (at that time only 17 years old) and Michal Feling in Russia.<sup>74</sup> The course was organised by Russian organisation Stjag with ex-Spetsnaz instructors. The participation of Švrček and Feling was facilitated by another Slovak, Marek Rusyniak, who studied in Russia and was well connected to Russian nationalist organisations such as Narodny Sobor.<sup>75</sup> Despite the harsh conditions experienced by Švrček and Feling in the summer camp in Russia, the model of Russian military-patriotic education was an inspiration to set up a similar structure in Slovakia. It quickly became an important paramilitary group with a patriotic and nationalist character serving also as indoctrination to the pro-Russian, anti-Western worldview for young people, often teenagers who were mostly attracted to its ranks.

From the very onset, the individuals directing the group expressed strong pro-Russian sentiments and shared many views typical for the far right (nativism, rejection of liberal democracy, anti-EU, anti-NATO). A typical example was Tomáš Bičkoš, then-member of Slovak Conscripts leadership, who openly called US a fascist country and expressed his support for pro-Russian separatists in

Donbas, or Martin Lipocky, another leading figure of the group who has also participated in some of the anti-NATO demonstrations organised by Usovski in Bratislava.<sup>76</sup> Yet, in contrast with far-right groups, they never openly manifested racism nor expressed adoration for the totalitarian war time fascist Slovak state or right-wing ideologies. On the contrary, they tried to build their image on anti-fascist struggle, Slovak National Uprising, and patriotism. One of a few exceptions confirming the hostility towards democratic values from the early stages of its existence was an article written by Tomáš Bičkoš, the commander of the second unit of SB at the Meapatria website, where he called NATO a “pro-terrorist aggressive organization under the imperial US influence”.<sup>77</sup>

### *Russian Influence*

The influence of Russia in this group manifested in several notable cases. One of its founding members, Martin Keprta, decided in 2014 to join pro-Russian separatists fighting in Donbas and he stayed there ever since. He was identified in a Russian TV interview from Donbas in 2014 and later confirmed that he joined the pro-Russian separatists. He stated in an interview with Slovak media the reasons why decided to join the war: “Our aim is building New Russia (Novorossiya) and the recognition of the Donetsk independent republic. I am a member of the official army. It means that if the peace will continue I will remain in the barracks waiting when my homeland will call me to service once again.”<sup>78</sup>

While the leadership of SB tried to distance itself from Keprta, stating that he left the group prior to his travel to Donbas, similar views on the 2014 war in Ukraine, or annexation of Crimea as being legitimate were present among the SB leadership.<sup>79</sup> Perhaps the most telling sign of indirect Russian influence is the attitude of Peter Švrček to NATO and his links to other pro-Russian actors in Slovakia. Peter Švrček, as the supreme commander of SB, attended several anti-NATO rallies, as did some of his fellow SB members, while publicly denouncing Slovak membership in NATO.<sup>80</sup> Interestingly enough, as the Usovski email leaks revealed, these demonstrations were organised and paid for by Konstantin Malofejev, one of the patrons of the Russian far-right and conservative cause, using Usovski and his network of actors.<sup>81</sup> Over time, Švrček started to be involved in activities of other pro-Russian groups and networks operating in Slovakia. Aside from his appearance at demonstrations, he was a speaker at the 2018 National Conference presenting his ideas on neutrality and defence policy alongside many pro-Russian actors,<sup>82</sup> where he also met with Štefan Harabin

(former minister of justice, Supreme Court judge-turned conspiracy theorist, and staunch Russia supporter).<sup>83</sup> Štefan Harabin was also a candidate in the 2019 presidential elections, yet he only received 14 percent of votes (some 307,000 in total) in the first round and did not make into the second round.<sup>84</sup> Later on, Švrček formalised ties with Tibor Eliot Rostas – editor of an influential disinformation-spreading monthly magazine *Zem a Vek* (Earth and Age), who was recorded asking for Russian financial support in a Moscow meeting in 2015.<sup>85</sup> *Zem a Vek* was one of the first disinformation media outlets in Slovakia and the only one that also produced a glossy-printed 100 page-thick monthly magazine. It frequently featured various conspiracy theories and was, due to its content, included also in the list of disinformation media by an independent panel of experts.<sup>86</sup>

Another important connection to Russia is SB's link to a notorious Night Wolves motorcycle group. Peter Švrček participated in several meetings with a Slovak branch of this well-known Russian motorcycle group linked to Kremlin. According to other SB members, SB created its own motorcycle club Patriot.<sup>87</sup> Aside from the Night Wolves, examples of direct meetings between Russian actors and SB in the public domain are relatively rare. Members of SB received training from several Russian instructors, including ex-Spetsnaz and ex-GRU specialists such as Igor Zorin.<sup>88</sup> The last element of Russian influence is clearly visible in the public communication of SB on their social media. Until the day of Russian invasion into Ukraine, it was staunchly pro-Russian and repeated many of the Russian narratives. These included participation of leading figures of the SB at meetings against NATO,<sup>89</sup> public communication on SB's official Facebook page, accusing the US and the West of provoking Russia and rejecting any involvement in a potential conflict with Russia,<sup>90</sup> and rejection of NATO membership.<sup>91</sup>

SB officially ended their existence in October 2022 by a public announcement on their Facebook page, without providing any explanation as to the reasons.<sup>92</sup> According to expert interviews one of the main reasons was a disillusionment after the 2022 Russian invasion and conflicts in the group regarding its stance towards Ukraine and Russia. There was no clear successor to the SB following its dissolution.

The story of ten years of SB clearly demonstrates several risks:

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- There is ample potential for existence of pro-Russian paramilitary groups in Slovakia.
- Currently, state authorities have very limited tools to counter such activities.
- The wider paramilitary milieu is largely anti-Western and shares many of the Kremlin narratives.
- Young people are especially vulnerable to the appeal, camaraderie, and excitement offered by such groups.
- Russian actors are aware of this situation and have been/are trying to cultivate links with these groups by means of martial arts experts, Russian martial arts clubs, and commemorative events.
- These groups by large do not pose a real security threat but are an important vehicle for spreading of Russian propaganda narratives and could serve as a recruitment tool for other pro-Russian groups.

### **Current Measures in Place**

Since various forms of Russian influence permeated Slovak society for a long time, measures to counter it were, until recently, rather symbolic. An important milestone was adoption of a national Strategy for Combating Hybrid Threats in the Slovak Republic in 2018 by the government, which for the first time mentioned subversive efforts by foreign actors as a serious threat.<sup>93</sup> Yet, due to political reasons and the composition of the government, practical measures limiting Russian influence were tokenistic. The coalition government in the 2016–2020 period was composed of three parties – a social democratic SMER, the nationalist Slovak National Party, and a Slovak-Hungarian centre-right Most-Híd. The Slovak National Party in particular has been consistently blocking any meaningful measures to counter Russian hybrid influence in Slovakia. Frequent visits of its leader, Andrej Danko, to Moscow and his meetings with the leader of the Russian Duma, Vyacheslav Lychachev, were emblematic.<sup>94</sup>

A more systemic approach to Russian influence from the state authorities started to emerge in 2021 as a result of the new approach to the issue of hybrid threats and disinformation by the new government. A practical outcome of this change of approach was the adoption of the new Security Strategy of the Slovak Republic by the Slovak government and the Parliament.<sup>95</sup> This strategy provided a framework for subsequent steps and, for the first time, called Russia “a major

challenge to the security of our Euro-Atlantic area.”<sup>96</sup> One of the practical results of the strategy was to develop a policy including a new set of measures for countering hybrid threats. Such policy was adopted in March 2022 and is called the Action Plan for the Coordinated Countering of Hybrid Threats.<sup>97</sup> The action includes a number of practical taskings with a direct impact on limiting Russian influence efforts in Slovakia, such as increasing personal and technical capacities dedicated to this issue, public awareness campaigns or specific legislative changes. The action plan was supported by the implementation of an EU-funded national project involving the Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Defence, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Office of the Government with the main aim of increasing the resilience of Slovak public administration to hybrid threats. Although Russia is not mentioned specifically in the national project, its impact would limit Russian influence as well, since the Russian Federation is the main hybrid actor in Slovakia.

Despite having a relatively well-developed policy framework and even dedicating significant resources, there are still large gaps in countermeasures limiting Russian hostile influence, including the influence on the far right. One of the major issues, confirmed also by the expert interviews is a lack of coordination of active countermeasures. The system in place allows for collection of information across different ministries and agencies (via the National Security Analytical Centre based at Slovak Intelligence Service), yet the flow of information is often one-directional. Moreover, the coordination of countermeasures even in some of the most high-profile cases involving Russian influence was not adequate and suffered from lack of clear mandate and fractured responsibilities.

One particular area, which was mentioned also in the expert interviews, was insufficient financial investigation of foreign (Russian) funding for various entities. While Slovakia formally forbids any foreign funding for political parties and election campaigns, as the case of Garbar proves, it is rather easy to circumvent the barrier by simply transferring the money to a Slovak citizen or entity. The same applies for transparency of funding for various media enterprises. The existence of such a dense network of pro-Russian media in Slovakia at times when traditional media struggle to survive economically raises serious doubts as to the sources of their funding – even more so when in the past, attempts to get Russian funding for such media operations were exposed. Another set of countermeasures concerns the spreading of Kremlin propaganda, including

justification of war and denial of Russian war crimes on the internet and social media. Shortly after the Russian invasion started, a hastily adopted amendment to the law on cybernetic security allowed the National Security Authority to temporarily block websites if they were spreading “serious disinformation”.<sup>98</sup> As a result, NSA blocked four websites notorious for publishing Russian propaganda, allegedly also on the grounds they have been receiving Russian financial support.<sup>99</sup> Yet, this measure was only temporary and the blockade expired on 30 September 2022. New legislation, which should have replaced the hastily adopted one, did not pass the parliament due to political bickering.

The public and political debate of Russian influence in Slovakia intensified especially after February 2022, however, it remains polarised along the political preferences. While the government and its ministers of defence, foreign affairs, or even prime minister clearly stated that Russian influence and activities present a danger for Slovakia, such notions were rejected by the opposition, which criticised the alleged double standards and demanded normalisation of relations with Russia and an end to sanctions.<sup>100</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Russian influence on far-right groups is part of a larger effort employing both the existing vulnerabilities and a network of influence Kremlin has developed over the years. Information operations facilitated by a well-connected network of online and offline sources, recruitment, and indoctrination using sports (martial arts clubs) and culture serve as main elements of these efforts. Targets of such influence are predominantly segments of the society displeased with the current situation and their socioeconomic status – young people with strong patriotic or nationalist sentiment. Due to the high level of sympathies towards Russia and the corresponding anti-Americanism, such activities have a fertile ground to take root and expand. While at the beginning of the Russian invasion to Ukraine, Russian proxies and pro-Russian actors were in a state of shock since autumn 2022 they have regained their strength and are currently as strong as they were before the invasion. While in the months following the February 2022 invasion, voices blaming the war on the West, or even Ukraine, were marginal, currently such views are held by large segments of the population.<sup>101</sup> The outcome of the 30 September parliamentary elections is also a confirmation that the Russian influence in Slovakia and pro-Russian attitudes are not waning, but quite the

contrary. Political parties that openly criticised sanctions against Russia, blaming the West for provoking the war, succeeded in forming the new government.

## **Recommendations**

**Political campaigns financing.** Adopt more detailed legislation on the financing of political parties, movements, and electoral campaigns in order to increase the transparency of funding and expose illicit foreign funding. Sources of domestic funding for political parties and campaigns above a certain threshold must be traceable to their origin (final beneficiary), similarly to the case of public procurement.

**Media transparency.** Increase transparency of media ownership for all media formats, including online portals. Media should be required to disclose annually their financial data and sources of funding.

**Blocking of foreign sponsored disinformation.** Adopt an amendment to Cybersecurity Act that would allow blockade of websites spreading serious, foreign-funded disinformation or engaging in Foreign Information Manipulation and Influence (FIMI).

**Investigate cases of hybrid threats.** Adopt legislative changes allowing police to investigate cases of hybrid threats involving foreign entities and streamline exchange of information of such cases between intelligence services and law enforcement. Increase capacities dedicated to financial investigation of illicit foreign funding of hybrid actors – personal, technological, and institutional.

**Better coordination of efforts.** Create a central coordination mechanism or platform for practical and operational coordination of ministries and institutions involved in combatting hybrid threats. Amend the competencies of individual ministries to designate the entity primarily responsible for coordinating the fight against hybrid threats and disinformation.

**State alternative to paramilitary organisations.** Create a state-accredited and regulated alternative to paramilitary organisations, led by instructors from the ranks of current or former members of the armed forces or security forces. Such programme should be easily accessible, attractive, involving Slovak army veterans, and if possible, also western (American) guest lecturers as a counterbalance to pro-Russian paramilitary groups.

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**National strategic narrative.** Develop central strategic narrative, building upon positive historical moments and personalities as a tool to prevent polarisation and fragmentation. Launch public campaigns spreading positive national narratives highlighting Euro-Atlantic ties and benefits of EU and NATO membership in real life.

**Stop abuse of diplomatic status.** Introduce more effective control mechanisms to prevent abuse of diplomatic status by incoming personnel of foreign embassies and foreign missions. Decrease the number of Russian operatives in Slovakia by introducing parity of Russian diplomatic mission personnel in Slovakia with Slovak diplomatic mission in Moscow.



<sup>1</sup> Milo Daniel. “Russia: mighty Slavic brother or hungry bear next-door. The image of Russia in Central & Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans”, *GLOBSEC*, 2021. [https://www.academia.edu/46931984/Russia\\_mighty\\_Slavic\\_brother\\_or\\_hungry\\_bear\\_next\\_door\\_The\\_image\\_of\\_Russia\\_in\\_Central\\_and\\_Eastern\\_Europe\\_and\\_the\\_Western\\_Balkans](https://www.academia.edu/46931984/Russia_mighty_Slavic_brother_or_hungry_bear_next_door_The_image_of_Russia_in_Central_and_Eastern_Europe_and_the_Western_Balkans).

<sup>2</sup> Hajdu Dominika et al. “Globsec Trends 2023”, *GLOBSEC*, 2023. <https://www.globsec.org/sites/default/files/2023-05/GLOBSEC%20Trends%202023.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Milo Daniel. “Russia: mighty Slavic brother or hungry bear next-door. The image of Russia in Central & Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans”, *GLOBSEC*, 2021.

[https://www.academia.edu/46931984/Russia\\_mighty\\_Slavic\\_brother\\_or\\_hungry\\_bear\\_next\\_door\\_The\\_image\\_of\\_Russia\\_in\\_Central\\_and\\_Eastern\\_Europe\\_and\\_the\\_Western\\_Balkans](https://www.academia.edu/46931984/Russia_mighty_Slavic_brother_or_hungry_bear_next_door_The_image_of_Russia_in_Central_and_Eastern_Europe_and_the_Western_Balkans)

<sup>5</sup> Globsec Trends 2023.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Štúr Ľudovít. “Slovanstvo a svet budúcnosti” “[Slavic nations and the future world]”, 1867. [https://zlatyfond.sme.sk/dielo/359/Stur\\_Slovanstvo-a-svet-buducnosti/1](https://zlatyfond.sme.sk/dielo/359/Stur_Slovanstvo-a-svet-buducnosti/1).

<sup>9</sup> According to the CIA World Factbook, the ethnic composition of the Russian Federation is as follows: Russian 77.7 percent, Tatar 3.7 percent, Ukrainian 1.4 percent, Bashkir 1.1 percent, Chuvash 1 percent, Chechen 1 percent, other 10.2 percent, unspecified 3.9 percent (2010 est.) CIA, The World factbook, <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/russia/summaries/#people-and-society>

<sup>10</sup> Shekhovtsov Anton. “Is Aleksandr Dugin a Traditionalist? ‘Neo-Eurasianism’ and Perennial Philosophy.” *The Russian Review*, 2009, n. pag. Print. [https://www.academia.edu/76722529/Is\\_Aleksandr\\_Dugin\\_a\\_Traditionalist\\_Neo\\_Eurasianism\\_and\\_Perennial\\_Philosophy](https://www.academia.edu/76722529/Is_Aleksandr_Dugin_a_Traditionalist_Neo_Eurasianism_and_Perennial_Philosophy).

<sup>11</sup> See for example schism in Encyclopaedia Britannica <https://www.britannica.com/topic/schism>.

<sup>12</sup> According to the results of the Census of Population, Houses, and Apartments of the Slovak Republic as of January 1, 2021, more than half of the population of Slovakia (55.8 percent) subscribed to the Roman Catholic religion, which represents more than 3.04 million inhabitants. Source: Statistical office of the Slovak republic [www.scitanie.sk](http://www.scitanie.sk).

<sup>13</sup> One of the most important figures of Slovak nation building period, founder of modern Slovak language Ľudovít Štúr, described these ideas in detail in his book “Slovanstvo a svet budúcnosti” “[Slavic nations and the future world]” in 1867.

<sup>14</sup> Kollar, Ján; “Sláva bohyně a původ gména Slawůw čili Slawjanůw. S přídawky srownalost indického a slawského žiwota, řeči a bágeslowj ukazugjcjmi”, [The glory of the goddess and the origin of the name Slavs or Slavs. With additions to the similarity of Indian and Slavic life, speech and language], 1839.

<sup>15</sup> Perhaps the best-known monument of this kind is the Slavin overlooking the heart of Slovakia’s capitol Bratislava, commemorating the almost 7000 Red Army soldiers who died while liberating Bratislava. See more at: <https://www.visitbratislava.com/sk/miesta/slavin/>.

<sup>16</sup> Kysel’ Tomáš. “Noční vlci nikam neodišli, iba sa prezliekli. Oslavovali vo Volgograde, teraz prídu na Slavín”, “[The night wolves didn't go anywhere, they just changed clothes. They celebrated in Volgograd, now they will come to Slavín]“, *Aktuality.sk* May 5, 2023 <https://www.aktuality.sk/clanok/RZn9th3/nocni-vlci-nikam-neodisli-iba-sa-prezliekli-oslavovali-vo-volgograde-teraz-pridu-na-slavin/>.

<sup>17</sup> Council of the EU, “Russia’s aggression against Ukraine: the EU targets additional 54 individuals and 10 entities”, July 2022 <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/07/22/ru>.

<sup>18</sup> Hajdu Dominik., “Prieskum GLOBSECu ukázal, že každý tretí Slovák do 35 rokov nemá názor na okupáciu Československa v auguste 1968”, “[A GLOBSEC survey showed that every third Slovak under the age of 35 has no opinion on the occupation of Czechoslovakia in August 1968]”. <https://www.globsec.org/what-we-do/press-releases/prieskum-globsecu-ukazal-ze-kazdy-treti-slovak-do-35-rokov-nema-nazor-na>.

<sup>19</sup> “Poll: People are nostalgic about communism”, *Slovak Spectator*, June 26, 2021.

<https://spectator.sme.sk/c/20858226/poll-people-are-nostalgic-about-communism.html>.

<sup>20</sup> “Slovakia yet to plan solution to lower dependency on Russian energy”, *Euractiv*, March 23, 2023. Available at: [https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short\\_news/slovakia-yet-to-plan-solution-to-lower-dependency-on-russian-energy/](https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/slovakia-yet-to-plan-solution-to-lower-dependency-on-russian-energy/).

<sup>21</sup> Since summer 2022, the share of imports of natural gas from Russia fell from 85 percent to currently about 50 percent, European Commission, 2023 Country Report - Slovakia Accompanying the document Recommendation for a COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION on the 2023 National Reform Programme of Slovakia and delivering a Council opinion on the 2023 Stability Programme of Slovakia. [https://economy-finance.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-05/SK\\_SWD\\_2023\\_625\\_en.pdf](https://economy-finance.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-05/SK_SWD_2023_625_en.pdf).

<sup>22</sup> According to the official figures Eustream company, which is a state-controlled company operating the gas pipelines transiting Slovakia used to have roughly €280 million in profits from the gas transit until the Ukraine war. After the sanctions, the profit turned into a loss of some €12 million. <https://finstat.sk/35910712>.

<sup>23</sup> Examples of these fringe media include online radio Infovojna.bz, monthly magazine Zem a Vek or webpage Hlavne spravy. The connection of such media to Russia is quite difficult to establish, yet there were some cases proving at least attempts to acquire such support. One such case is a meeting of chief editor of Zem a Vek magazine in Moscow in 2015 (see details here: <https://dennikn.sk/blog/378330/ako-je-to-s-udajnou-nezavislostou-tibora-rostasa/>) or frequent visits of one of Hlave spravy contributors at Sputnik agency headquarters (see details here: <https://dennikn.sk/1288348/propagandu-pre-hlavne-spravy-pise-rus-ktory-sa-chodi-radit-do-agentury-kremla-odomknute/>). A more comprehensive overview of the murky funding of disinformation spreading fringe media is available here: <https://www.icjk.sk/259/Ako-zarabaju-dezinformacne-weby-Ziju-z-reklamy-aj-z-darov-fanusikov-a-utajenych-sponzorov>.

<sup>24</sup> In particular, Night Wolves is currently on EU sanctions list, but also its offshoot Brat za Brata (Brother for Brother).

<sup>25</sup> Until October 2022 the best example of such group was Slovak Recruits paramilitary group with open pro-Russian attitudes. Yet after the war in Ukraine its leadership split and the group was officially disbanded.

<sup>26</sup> Shekovtsov Anton. “Russia and the Western Far Right. Tango Noir”, Routledge 2018.

<sup>27</sup> Krekó Peter, Marušiak Juraj, Milo Daniel et al. “Marching towards Eurasia”, *Political Capital Institute*, 2015.

[https://www.academia.edu/19730490/Marching\\_towards\\_Eurasia\\_The\\_Kremlin\\_connections\\_of\\_the\\_Slovak\\_far\\_right](https://www.academia.edu/19730490/Marching_towards_Eurasia_The_Kremlin_connections_of_the_Slovak_far_right).

<sup>28</sup> Three experts knowledgeable on the subject were interviewed for the analysis, representing academic sector, NGOs, and national security area. Due to the sensitive nature of the issue, none of them agreed to be mentioned by name in the analysis.

<sup>29</sup> The documentary is available at HBO:

<https://www.hbomax.com/sk/en/feature/urn:hbo:feature:GYWQD9AyQuyVcCgEAAAAE?countryRedirect=1>.

<sup>30</sup> Drábik Jakub. “LSNS je neonacistická strana, usvedčujú ju jej spojenci aj vlastné činy”, “[LSNS is a neo-Nazi party, it is convicted by its allies as well as by its own actions]”, *DennikN*, October 31, 2019, or Cirner Michal. “The Entry Of AAn Extreme Right Party into the Slovak Parliament after the 2016 and 2020 Elections: The Return of Fascists?” In: *Balkan Social Science Review*, Vol. 16, December 2020, 175–197.

[https://www.academia.edu/86170151/The\\_Entry\\_of\\_an\\_Extreme\\_Right\\_Party\\_Into\\_the\\_Slovak\\_Parliament\\_After\\_the\\_2016\\_and\\_2020\\_Elections\\_The\\_Return\\_of\\_Fascists](https://www.academia.edu/86170151/The_Entry_of_an_Extreme_Right_Party_Into_the_Slovak_Parliament_After_the_2016_and_2020_Elections_The_Return_of_Fascists).

<sup>31</sup> Ruling of Supreme Court of the Slovak republic no. 3 SŽ 79/2005-54 from 1 March 2006.

<https://www.docdroid.net/rpXz32K/060301-rozsudok-ns-sr-o-rozpusteni-sp-ns.pdf>.

<sup>32</sup> Vražda Daniel, “Kotleba. Odkiaľ prišiel a ako je možné, že sedí v parlamente” [Kotleba. Where did he come from and how is it possible that he is sitting in parliament], *N Press*, 2020. [https://obchod.dennikn.sk/show/228/kotleba-druhe-vydanie#e2\\_product\\_description](https://obchod.dennikn.sk/show/228/kotleba-druhe-vydanie#e2_product_description).

<sup>33</sup> Many such cases are demonstrated in blogs of activist turned MP Ján Benčík:

<https://dennikn.sk/autor/jan-bencik/>.

<sup>34</sup> Európske Noviny. “Banskobystrický kraj prichádza kvôli Kotlebovi o eurofondy, varuje Fico”, “[The Banská Bystrica Region is losing European funds because of Kotleba, warns Fico]” February 26, 2015. <https://europske.noviny.sk/2015/02/26/bankobystricky-kraj-prichadza-kvoli-kotlebovi-o-eurofondy-varuje-fico/>.

<sup>35</sup> Forgács Jozef. “Kotleba nazval vlajku EÚ modrou handrou a oznámil, že ju dal odstrániť z výzdoby na úrade!”, “[Kotleba called the EU flag a blue rag and announced that he had it removed from the decoration in the office]”, *Dnes24.sk*, March 2014.

<https://www1.pluska.sk/spravy/z-domova/vlajku-unie-odstavil-marian-kotleba-znova-prejavil-jasne-svoj-nazor>.

<sup>36</sup> Marušiak, Juraj et al. “Marching towards Eurasia. The Kremlin connections of the Slovak far-right”. *Political Capital*, 2015.

<sup>37</sup> Mareš Miroslav. “How Does Militant Democracy Function in Combating Right-Wing Extremism? A Case Study of Slovakian Militant Democracy and the Rise of Kotleba – People’s Party Our Slovakia” (2018). In: Ellian, Afshin, Rijpkema, Bastiaan, (eds) “Militant Democracy – Political Science”, Law and Philosophy. Philosophy and Politics - Critical Explorations, vol. 7. Springer, Cham. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-97004-2\\_4](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-97004-2_4).

<sup>38</sup> Slovakia declared independence in March 1939 and became an ally of Nazi Germany with a fascist regime of its own. Slovak National Uprising was an armed rebellion in August 1944 against the Slovak fascist regime, which led to occupation of Slovakia by the Wehrmacht. While being militarily defeated, Slovak National Uprising is generally accepted as the most important historic legacy of Slovaks standing up to fascism and is considered to be the cornerstone of modern Slovak identity. LSNS called the Slovak National Uprising “a communist putsch” and rejected its legacy.

<sup>39</sup> Kysel’ Tomáš. “14 “náhod” v LSNS a kariére Mariana Kotlebu”, [14 “coincidences” in LSNS and the career of Marian Kotleba]” *Aktuality.sk*, June 8, 2020.

<https://www.aktuality.sk/clanok/795726/14-nahod-v-kariere-mariana-kotlebu/>

<sup>40</sup> Struhár Pavol. “Postoj Slovenskej Krajnej Pravice Ku Kríze Na Ukrajine – Prípád Strany Kotleba – Ľudová Strana Naše Slovensko” [The Attitude of the Slovak Far Right Towards the Crisis in Ukraine – The Case of the Kotleba Party – Peoples Party Our Slovakia]” Alexander Dubcek University of Trencin.

[https://www.academia.edu/36156310/POSTOJ\\_SLOVENSKEJ\\_KRAJNEJ\\_PRAVICE\\_KU\\_](https://www.academia.edu/36156310/POSTOJ_SLOVENSKEJ_KRAJNEJ_PRAVICE_KU_)

KR%C3%8DZE\_NA\_UKRAJINE\_PR%C3%8DPAD\_STRANY\_KOTLEBA\_%C4%BDUD\_OV%C3%81\_STRANA\_NA%C5%A0E\_SLOVENSKO.

<sup>41</sup> Slobodný Vysielač. “V prvej línii 21.08.2015 Marián Kotleba”, “[On the front line 21/08/2015 Marián Kotleba]”, August 21, 2015.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5cVpgkiUPqI>.

<sup>42</sup> Point no. 8 of LSNS programme manifesto, included in LSNS party newspaper *Naše Slovensko, noviny politickej strany Mariána Kotlebu*, February 2016.

<sup>43</sup> TASR, “Kotlebovci začali zbierať podpisy za referendá o vystúpení z EU a NATO”, “[The people of Kotleba’s party began to collect signatures for referendums on leaving the EU and NATO]” July 1, 2016. <https://www.teraz.sk/slovensko/kotlebovci-podpisy-vystupenie-dve-refere/204692-clanok.html>.

<sup>44</sup> “The West, led by the United States of America, with its aggressive and provocative policy, is trying to bring Russia to its knees at any cost and thus move closer to world domination... In the People's Party Our Slovakia we are of the opinion that the Slovak Republic should conduct a balanced foreign policy and should not participate in the geopolitical games and provocations organised by Western countries against Russia” Official website of the LSNS party, “Vyzývame P. Pellegriniho, aby nepodporoval protiruské besnenie”, “[We call on Mr Pellegrini not to support anti-Russian rampage]”, December 11, 2018.

<sup>45</sup> Facebook profile of Marian Kotleba. Marian Kotleba - kandidát na prezidenta Slovenskej republiky, February 13, 2019.

<https://www.facebook.com/photo?fbid=2233263840326055&set=pcb.2233263873659385>.

<sup>46</sup> The video was recorded by Slovak military intelligence and leaked to Dennik N, creating a huge public outcry. The video is available online with English subtitles:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NrS98C796xA&ab\\_channel=Denn%C3%ADkN](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NrS98C796xA&ab_channel=Denn%C3%ADkN).

<sup>47</sup> “Ruský špión spoznal TREST za vyzvedačstvo pre vojnového agresora z Ruska: AHA, ako dopadol!”, “[Russian spy pleads guilty to spying for Russia's wartime aggressor: look how he turned out]”, Plus Jeden deň, February 28, 2023. <https://www1.pluska.sk/spravy/z-domova/rusky-spion-spoznal-trest-vyzvedacstvo-pre-vojnoveho-agresora-ruska-aha-ako-dopadol>.

<sup>48</sup> Zígová Iva. “Prispievateľ Hlavných správ Bohuš Garbár vyzvedal pre Rusko, súd ho odsúdil na podmienku”, “[Main News contributor Bohuš Garbár spied for Russia, court sentences him to probation]”, *Aktuality.sk*, February 28, 2023

<https://www.aktuality.sk/clanok/uVMMKcO/prispievatel-hlavnych-sprav-bohus-garbar-vyzvedal-pre-rusko-sud-ho-odsudil-na-podmienku/>.

<sup>49</sup> Tódova, Monika. “Ako sa verbujú špióni na Slovensku: Povedal som v Moskve, že si dobrý chlapec”, “[How spies are recruited in Slovakia: I told Moscow you were a good boy]” *DennikN*, March 15, 2022.

<https://dennikn.sk/2767779/ako-sa-verbuju-spioni-na-slovensku-povedal-som-v-moskve-ze-si-dobry-chlapec-video/>.

<sup>50</sup> Cuprik Roman. “Bezpečnostné orgány taja či vyšetrujú napojenie Kotlebu na Moskvu”, “[Security authorities are investigating Kotleba's links to Moscow]”, *Denník SME*, July 21, 2016. <https://domov.sme.sk/c/20221054/bezpecnostne-organy-taja-ci-vysetruju-napojenie-kotleba-na-moskvu.html>. On Zmiana, see the “Polish” chapter of this volume.

<sup>51</sup> Holcova Pavla. “The man who wanted more”, *VSQUARE*, October 14, 2017.

<https://vsquare.org/the-man-who-wanted-more/>.

<sup>52</sup> Kyseľ Tomáš. “NAKA preverovala Kotlebu kvôli peniazom z Ruska”, “[NAKA investigated Kotleba for money from Russia]”, *Aktuality.sk*, October 3, 2017.

<https://www.aktuality.sk/clanok/526205/naka-preverovala-kotlebu-kvoli-peniazom-z-ruska/>.

<sup>53</sup> Kováč Peter. “Extrémistické šeky nebola náhoda, píše Najvyšší súd v rozsudku. Žilinka zvažuje, čo s ĽSNS”, “[The extremist cheques were not an accident, the Supreme Court said in its judgment. Žilinka is considering what to do with ĽSNS ]”, *SME daily*, July 6, 2022. <https://domov.sme.sk/c/22955201/kotleba-lsns-najvyssi-sud-sek-1488-rozsudok.html>, Najvyšší súd píše, že Kotleba šekmi na 1488 eur narušil verejný poriadok. Žilinka zvažuje, - SME.

<sup>54</sup> See: <https://www.adl.org/resources/hate-symbol/1488>.

<sup>55</sup> Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic, official results of the September 30, 2023, Parliamentary elections.

[https://volby.statistics.sk/nrsr/nrsr2023/sk/vysledky\\_hlasovania\\_strany.html](https://volby.statistics.sk/nrsr/nrsr2023/sk/vysledky_hlasovania_strany.html).

<sup>56</sup> Milan Uhrík was elected in the European Parliament in 2019.

[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meps/sk/197763/MILAN\\_UHRIK/home](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meps/sk/197763/MILAN_UHRIK/home). His personal website: <https://www.milanhrik.sk/#o-mne>.

<sup>57</sup> Mrvová Iva. “Suverénne najdrahšia reklama eurovolieb? Uhríkovo video z Bruselu”, “[The most expensive advertisement of the European elections? Uhrík's video from Brussels]” *Aktuality.sk*, July 4, 2019. <https://www.aktuality.sk/clanok/706033/suverenne-najdrahsia-reklama-eurovolieb-uhrikovo-video-z-bruselu/>.

<sup>58</sup> Struhárik Filip. “Najpopulárnejší politici na Facebooku v roku 2022 boli Uhrík, Fico, Blaha, Taraba a Mazurek. Čaputová predbehla Pellegriniho”, „[The most popular politicians on Facebook in 2022 were Uhrík, Fico, Blaha, Taraba and Mazurek. Čaputová overtook Pellegrini]”, *DennikN*, January 3, 2023. <https://dennikn.sk/3178587/najpopularnejisi-politici-na-facebooku-v-roku-2022-boli-uhrik-fico-blaha-taraba-a-mazurek-caputova-predbehla-pellegriniho/>.

<sup>59</sup> Szicherle Patrik, Molnár Csaba and Krekó Peter. “European Parliament: the primary source of immunity to foreign authoritarian influence?”, *Political Capital Institute*, February 2020. [https://politicalcapital.hu/library.php?article\\_read=1&article\\_id=2496](https://politicalcapital.hu/library.php?article_read=1&article_id=2496).

<sup>60</sup> Húsková Eva. “Uhrík šíri v Európskom parlamente proruské dezinformácie”, “[Uhrík spreads pro-Russian disinformation in the European Parliament]” *Antipropaganda.sk*, October 17, 2019. <https://www.antipropaganda.sk/uhrik-siri-v-europskom-parlamente-proruske-dezinformacie/>.

<sup>61</sup> See VK post of Armed Forces of Novorussia with this video: [https://vk.com/wall-35660695\\_360210?lang=en](https://vk.com/wall-35660695_360210?lang=en). A fragment of Uhrík's speech was published by the Telegram channel of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Lugansk People's Republic (LPR) [https://t.me/mid\\_lnr/4424](https://t.me/mid_lnr/4424).

<sup>62</sup> Milan Uhrík (REPUBLIKA): List veľvyslancovi Ruskej federácie, “[Letter to the Ambassador of the Russian Federation]” *Republika Movement website*, January 10, 2022. <https://www.dennik-republika.sk/milan-uhrik-republika-list-velvyslancovi-ruskej-federacie/>.

<sup>63</sup> “Miroslav Suja (REPUBLIKA): S potešením sme prijali pozvanie od Veľvyslanectva Ruskej federácie!”, “[We were delighted to accept the invitation from the Embassy of the Russian Federation!]”, *Republika Movement website*, August 30, 2021. <https://www.dennik-republika.sk/miroslav-suja-republika-s-potesenim-sme-prijali-pozvanie-od-velvyslanectva-ruskej-federacie/>.

<sup>64</sup> “Pravda či ruská propaganda? Prinášame článok ministra zahraničných vecí Ruskej federácie S.V. Lavrova”, “[Truth or Russian propaganda? We present an article by the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation S.V. Lavrov]”, *Republika Movement website*, July 21, 2022. <https://www.dennik-republika.sk/pravda-ci-ruska-propaganda-prinasame-clanok-ministra-zahranicnych-veci-ruskej-federacie-s-v-lavrova/>.

<sup>65</sup> English translation of Republika movement programme manifesto. “Program pre obranu a bezpečnosť”, „[Defence and security programme]” *www.hnutie-republika.sk*, <https://www.hnutie-republika.sk/obrana/>.

<sup>66</sup> English translation of text “For peace in Ukraine” published at Republika movement official website: <https://www.hnutie-republika.sk/nazory/#za-mier-na-ukrajine>.

<sup>67</sup> Madleňák Tomáš. “Ruský špión s diplomatickým krytím operuje v Bruseli, hoci ho chceli vyhostiť. Na recepcii u neho bol aj Uhrík”, “[A Russian spy with diplomatic cover is operating in Brussels, even though they wanted to expel him. Uhrík was also at the reception with him]”, October 24, 2023. <https://icjk.sk/278/Rusky-spion-s-diplomatickym-krytim-operuje-v-Bruseli-hoci-ho-chceli-vyhostit-Na-recepcii-u-neho-bol-aj-Uhrik>.

<sup>68</sup> Benčík Ján. “Ach tie náhody”, “[Oh the coincidences]”, *DennikN*, March 29, 2022. <https://dennikn.sk/blog/2787927/ach-tie-nahody/>.

<sup>69</sup> Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic, official results of the September 30, 2023 Parliamentary elections. [https://volby.statistics.sk/nrsr/nrsr2023/sk/vysledky\\_hlasovania\\_strany.html](https://volby.statistics.sk/nrsr/nrsr2023/sk/vysledky_hlasovania_strany.html).

<sup>70</sup> Madleňák Tomáš. “Slovenskí branci spolupracujú s poľskými extrémistami spájanými s útokom na Ukrajinu s proruským pozadím”, “[Slovak conscripts cooperate with Polish extremists linked to attack in Ukraine with pro-Russian background]”, *Investigative Centre of Jan Kuciak*, January 1, 2022. <https://www.icjk.sk/156/Slovenski-branci-spolupracuju-s-polskymi-extremistami-spajanymi-s-utokom-na-Ukrajine-s-proruskym-pozadim>.

<sup>71</sup> Slovenská informačná služba, Správa o činnosti SIS za rok 2017, 2018, “[SIS Activity Report 2017, 2018]”, <http://www.sis.gov.sk/pre-vas/sprava-o-cinnosti.html> and Vojenské spravodajstvo, Správa o činnosti Vojenského spravodajstva za rok 2015, 2016. “[Report on the activities of the Military Intelligence for 2015, 2016]”, <http://vs.mosr.sk/sprava-o-cinnosti-vs-2015/>.

<sup>72</sup> Debnár J. “Slovenskí Branci končia”, “[Slovak Conscripts are finished]”, *Aktuality.sk*, October 11, 2023. <https://www.aktuality.sk/clanok/WtKW6Yk/slovenski-branci-koncia/>.

<sup>73</sup> The group's public profile was created on October 6, 2023. <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=61552130790052>.

<sup>74</sup> Benčík Ján. “Peter Švrček a začiatky Slovenských brancov”, “[Peter Švrček and the beginnings of the Slovak conscripts]”, *DennikN*, February 21, 2019. <https://dennikn.sk/blog/1387292/peter-svrcek-a-zaciatky-slovenskych-brancov/>.

<sup>75</sup> Bráni, Radovan and Mesežnikov Grigorij. “*Hatred, violence and comprehensive military training*”, *The violent radicalisation and Kremlin connections of Slovak paramilitary, extremist and neo-Nazi groups*, *Political Capital Institute*, 2017.

<sup>76</sup> Benčík Ján. “Peter Švrček, veliteľ Slovenských brancov”, “[Peter Švrček, commander of the Slovak conscripts]”, *Dennik N blog*, February 16, 2019. , <https://dennikn.sk/blog/1379854/peter-svrcek-velitel-slovenskych-brancov/>.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Lovaš Karol. “Spoved’ Slováka, Ktorý Bojuje Za Proruských Separatistov”, “[Confessions of a Slovak Fighting for Pro-Russian Separatists]”, *Aktuality.sk*, February 23, 2015. <https://www.aktuality.sk/clanok/271050/nevzali-ho-do-armady-siel-k-separatistom/>.

<sup>79</sup> Bráni Radovan and Mesežnikov Grigorij. “*Hatred, violence and comprehensive military training. The violent radicalisation and Kremlin connections of Slovak paramilitary, extremist and neo-Nazi groups*”, *Political Capital Institute*, 2017.

<sup>80</sup> Benčík Ján. “Kto protestuje proti základniám NATO?”,[ Who is protesting against NATO bases?], *DennikN*, March 16, 2015.

<https://dennikn.sk/blog/72777/kto-protestuje-proti-zakladniam-nato/>.

<sup>81</sup> SITA, “Hackeri odhalili “otca” proruských akcií v krajinách V4, demonštrácie organizoval aj na Slovensku”, “[ Hackers uncovered the "father" of pro-Russian actions in the V4 countries, he also organised demonstrations in Slovakia]”, *SITA news agency*, March 14, 2017. <https://sita.sk/hackeri-odhalili-otca-proruskych-akcii-v-krajinach-v4-demonstracie-organizoval-aj-na-slovensku>.

<sup>82</sup> Zem a Vek, “Národná konferencia predstavila Manifest Slovenska a zvolila národného kandidáta na prezidenta”, “[ The National Conference presented the Manifesto of Slovakia and elected a national candidate for the presidency]”, *Zem a vek website*, June 25, 2018.

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<sup>83</sup> Facebook page of Peter Švrček, June 29, 2018.

<https://www.facebook.com/411650562234259/posts/1780817531984215/ň>.

<sup>84</sup> Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic, Election of the President of the Slovak Republic results, <https://volby.statistics.sk/prez/prez2019/sk/data01.html>.

<sup>85</sup> Benčík Ján. “Ako je to s údajnou nezávislosťou Tibora Rostása”, “[ What about the alleged independence of Tibor Rostás]”, *DennikN*, February 22, 2016.

<https://dennikn.sk/blog/378330/ako-je-to-s-udajnou-nezavislostou-tibora-rostasa/>.

<sup>86</sup> The project *konspiratori.sk* is a public database of web pages with deceiving, false, conspiratorial or propaganda spreading content. Website *zemavek.sk* received a score of 9.5 (out of 10) in the database. <https://konspiratori.sk/zoznam-stranok>.

<sup>87</sup> Cuprik Roman. “Inštruktor brancov: Slovenské ozbrojené zložky sú slabé, chceme im pomôcť”, “[ Instructor of conscripts: the Slovak armed forces are weak, we want to help them]”, *SME*, February 25, 2018. <https://domov.sme.sk/c/20767605/instruktor-brancov-slovenske-ozbrojene-zlozky-su-slabe-chceme-im-pomoc.html>.

<sup>88</sup> Expert interviews and Bránik, Radovan, Mesežnikov, Grigorij, “Hatred, violence and comprehensive military training

The violent radicalisation and Kremlin connections of Slovak paramilitary, extremist and neo-Nazi groups”, *Political Capital Institute*, 2017.

<sup>89</sup> Benčík Ján. “Ján a Erik, členovia siete velenia Slovenských brancov”, “[ Jan and Erik, members of the Slovak conscripts command network]”, December 3, 2018.

<https://dennikn.sk/blog/1312954/jan-a-erik-cenovia-siete-velenia-slovenskych-brancov/> or “Peter Švrček, veliteľ Slovenských brancov”, “[Peter Švrček, commander of the Slovak conscripts]”, November 28, 2018. Blog N: Peter Švrček, veliteľ Slovenských brancov ([dennikn.sk](https://dennikn.sk)).

<sup>90</sup> There have been numerous examples from the very beginning of Slovak Conscripts existence. One notable example is a post from April 11, 2021, which states: *FOR PEACE! – LET’S STOP DEFENDING FOREIGN INTERESTS, OUR TRADE WAS NEVER WAR. Let’s not get involved in foreign geopolitical games that threaten our own future. We therefore call on our diplomacy, if we still have any, to make every effort to preserve peace and stability, because only peace is the path to prosperity, because only peace represents life. The newly launched cold war and hate campaign against everything Russian is not and must not be in our interest. So let’s stop this madness while there is still time.*

<https://www.facebook.com/slovenskibranci1/photos/pb.100067073857116.-2207520000/2841747149414558/?type=3>.

<sup>91</sup> Slovak Conscripts Facebook page, “18 years in NATO - there is nothing to celebrate. We have to ensure our defence ourselves”. December 11, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/slovenskibranci1/photos/pb.100067073857116.-2207520000/2754156024840338/?type=3>.

<sup>92</sup> Hutko Dominik. “Slovenskí branci končia. Minister Nad’ sa im vysmial: Rozobrali sme vás ako lego”, “[Slovak goalkeepers are finished. Minister Nad laughed at them: We dismantled you like a lego]”, *Pravda*, October 12, 2022. <https://spravy.pravda.sk/domace/clanok/643351-slovenski-branci-koncia-minister-nad-sa-im-vysmial-rozobrali-sme-vas-ako-lego/>.

<sup>93</sup> Koncepcia pre boj Slovenskej republiky proti hybridným hrozbám, “[Strategy for Combating Hybrid Threats in the Slovak Republic]”, adopted by government decree no. 345/2018. <https://rokovania.gov.sk/RVL/Material/23100/1>.

<sup>94</sup> Aktuality.sk, “Danko sa v Rusku stretol so šéfom Dumy. Politika zo sankčného zoznamu by rád privítal v Bratislave”, “[Danko meets the head of the Duma in Russia. He would like to welcome a politician from the sanctions list to Bratislava]”, February 2, 2019. <https://www.aktuality.sk/clanok/667065/danko-sa-v-rusku-stretol-so-sefom-dumy-politika-zo-sankneho-zoznamu-by-rad-privital-v-bratislave/>.

<sup>95</sup> Bezpečnostná stratégia Slovenskej republiky, “[Security Strategy of the Slovak republic]”, as adopted on January 28, 2021 by the National Council of the Slovak republic. <https://www.nrsr.sk/web/Default.aspx?sid=zakony/cpt&ZakZborID=13&CisObdobia=8&ID=369>.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid

<sup>97</sup> Akčný plán koordinácie boja proti hybridným hrozbám, “[Action Plan for the Coordinated Countering of Hybrid Threats]”, adopted by the Slovak government decree no. 235 of March 30, 2022. <https://www.nbu.gov.sk/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/AKCNYPPLAN-KOORDINACIE-BOJA-PROTI-HYBRIDNYM-HROZBAM.pdf>.

<sup>98</sup> Kosno Lukáš. “Štát schválil blokovanie škodlivých aktivít na webe, opatrenie má limit”, “[State approves blocking harmful activities on the web, measure has a limit]”, *Žive.sk*, February 26, 2022. <https://zive.aktuality.sk/clanok/7kpbes0/stat-schvalil-blokovanie-skodlivych-aktivit-na-webe-opatrenie-ma-limit/>.

<sup>99</sup> Struhárik Filip. “Štát už mesiac tají konkrétne dôvody blokovania dezinformačných webov. V rozhodnutí argumentuje aj slovníkom slovenčiny”, “[For a month now, the state has been hiding the specific reasons for blocking disinformation websites. In the decision, it also argues the dictionary of the Slovak language]”, *DennikN*, March 21, 2022. <https://dennikn.sk/2791298/stat-uz-mesiac-taji-konkretne-dovody-blokovania-dezinformacnych-webov-v-rozhodnuti-argumentuje-aj-slovníkom-slovenčiny/>.

<sup>100</sup> Rejection of sanctions against Russia was present in the whole opposition. A typical example of rhetoric rejecting the EU sanctions against Russia as a consequence of its invasion was speech of then-MP Milan Mazurek on March 23, 2022. <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=326584839449151>.

<sup>101</sup> According to the GLOBSEC trends report of May 2023, the opinion that Russia is to blame for the war in Ukraine is believed by only 40 percent of the population. At the same time, the largest number of residents– (34 percent) believe that “the West, which provoked Russia” is responsible for the war, and 17 percent of respondents believe that Ukraine is responsible for the war. GLOBSEC Trends 2023. <https://www.globsec.org/sites/default/files/2023-05/GLOBSEC%20Trends%202023.pdf>.





## **Czech Republic: Echoes of Discontent**

### **Far-Right Populism and the Disinformation Dilemma**

**Veronika Víchová and Veronika Krátka Špalková**

The far-right political scene in the independent Czech Republic began to take shape in the 1990s, merging around the subculture of skinheads. It was characterised by an uncritical adoration of Nazism and open acts of violence.<sup>1</sup> Particularly in the second half of the 1990s and during the first decade of the new millennium, the far-right movement in the Czech Republic was associated with a multitude of violent activities, often resulting from interethnic tensions. These incidents frequently manifested as attacks on the Roma minority, which is relatively sizable in the Czech Republic.<sup>2</sup> According to a qualified estimate in the government document Strategy for Roma Equality, Inclusion and Participation 2021 to 2030, there are about 262,000 Roma living in the Czech Republic.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, there were anti-Roma demonstrations organised by various groups that were classified by the Czech Ministry of the Interior as far-right extremist organisations.<sup>4</sup>

A certain turning point for the development of the far-right scene in the Czech Republic was 2013, when the last organisations National Resistance and Autonomous Nationalists that had origins in the skinhead scene disbanded.<sup>5</sup> However, this only made room for other far-right, and at the same time more populist projects. It was precisely in 2013 that Tomio Okamura's Dawn of Direct Democracy party was founded, which already made it to parliament in the 2013 elections. However, the party soon disintegrated and was replaced by the Party of

Direct Democracy (SPD), which was founded and is still led by the same Tomio Okamura.

Experts consider the SPD to be a far-right project, which distances itself from Nazism and extremism as such, but uses populist tactics to push nationalist, conservative, anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim, and xenophobic themes.<sup>6</sup> Since then, the SPD has maintained its position in the parliament and is among the most vocal opposition, especially in topics related to Czech membership in the EU and NATO, migration issues, and the Czech foreign policy concept, which in recent years has been strongly pro-Western and anti-Russian. Therefore, the first case study presented in this chapter is closely related to this party.

The year 2015 marked another turning point in development of the far-right scene due to the great wave of migration.<sup>7</sup> In addition to the fact that migration became the main theme of the extreme right during this year,<sup>8</sup> there was also a big boom of disinformation in the Czech Republic. These two phenomena were immediately connected, and representatives of the far-right scene began to actively participate in the creation and dissemination of disinformation. The report on extremism on the territory of the Czech Republic in 2015, which is regularly processed by the Ministry of the Interior, directly states that although criminal activity in terms of violent behaviour has decreased, at the same time, criminal activity via the internet has increased (especially hate speech crimes). According to the report although organisations such as the Workers' Party of Social Justice (DSSS<sup>9</sup>) or the National Democracy (ND<sup>10</sup>) organised concerts and other events intended for followers of far-right extremism, criminal activity as such was very rarely recorded.<sup>11</sup>

It was only around 2015 that a visible connection between the Czech extreme right and pro-Russian activists in the Czech Republic was noticed. It was related to the international activities of the Russian Federation in Ukrainian territory in 2014.<sup>12</sup> The annual report of the Czech Security Information Service (BIS) for 2015 says:

Part of the extreme right presented itself prominently with pro-Russian positions, especially articles on the Internet and the organization of several events through which it wanted to make itself visible in the media. Some entities, which had not done so in previous years, also began to express themselves pro-Russian.<sup>13</sup>

Only the Russian annexation of Crimea acted as a detonator and disinformation projects began to flourish in the Czech information space, both via websites and

social media networks.<sup>14</sup> Part of the Czech extreme right sided with Russia and began to actively participate in the creation and dissemination of pro-Russian disinformation in the Czech information space, which began their long-term cooperation in this area.<sup>15</sup> This led to future modelling of the Czech far-right scene in the mould of its Russia-inspired and-supported counterparts in Western Europe. Conservatism, traditionalism, nativism, and ambivalence, if not outright hostility towards international organisations such as the EU or NATO, provided the basis and glue for this connection.<sup>16</sup>

The trend of connecting the Czech far-right and pro-Russian activists continued in the following years and was most evident in their online activities. The most recent Report on Extremism in the Czech Republic for 2022 processed by the Ministry of the Interior shows that the current risk from the point of view of right-wing extremism is isolated online communities. Specifically, the report states the following:

The National Democracy and the Workers' Party of Social Justice represented completely marginal entities that were unable to organize their own significant action in the monitored period. From the point of view of the relationship between the factions in Ukraine, they can be considered part of a community that resonates with pro-Kremlin narratives. about [sic] entities that help spread ideas generated by official Russian propaganda for the Central European region.<sup>17</sup>

The activities of Czech far-right and pro-Russian actors have significantly contributed to radicalisation of part of Czech society. In recent years, the Czech Republic has witnessed a rise in instances of anti-system behaviour among citizens without previous or evident ties to extremism.<sup>18</sup> These incidents involve sporadic acts of violence aimed at expressing defiance against political decisions or judicial authorities. Often, these actions are accompanied by calls for the resignation of governing elites or the encouragement of fellow supporters towards increased radicalisation and forceful transformation of democratic institutions.

This phenomenon extends beyond the Czech Republic, affecting various Western nations. Experts and political figures from some of these countries frequently point out that the radicalisation of citizens is significantly influenced by disinformation.<sup>19</sup> While domestic entities often propagate such content, its origins and initial sources are often international. In the Czech geopolitical context, this particularly involves the Russian Federation.<sup>20</sup> As a result of several successive waves of disinformation (encompassing topics such as migration, the coronavirus

pandemic, vaccination, anti-epidemic measures, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and related subjects), a segment of Czech society has begun to radicalise.

Nevertheless, respected Czech institutions that have been engaging with this issue over the long term (often stemming from the core of their existence) confirm the influence of disinformation on radicalisation. Among them is the BIS, which addresses this trend in its Annual Report for 2021.<sup>21</sup> The Ministry of the Interior likewise arrives at the same conclusion in its Report on Extremism and Prejudiced Hatred in the Czech Republic for 2022.<sup>22</sup> The National Centre Against Organised Crime (NCOZ) also describes these trends in its Annual Report for 2022.<sup>23</sup> In connection with disinformation concerning the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the NCOZ additionally notes that the primary sources are official Russian propaganda and Russian media.

The gravity of this trend is further affirmed by the Deputy Director for Criminal Police and Investigation, Vojtěch Motyka, who stated in an interview with *Seznam Zprávy* daily in February 2023 that the profile of a typical perpetrator in the context of contemporary hate crimes and the broader concept of extremism has markedly transformed. According to his remarks, the typical contemporary perpetrator of hate crimes lacks ties (or overt ties) to the extremist scene, with their behaviour being influenced and radicalised by disinformation activities.<sup>24</sup> He also confirmed this fact in the interview he gave for the purposes of this research, when he said:

A typical perpetrator of today is an ordinary citizen from the public, whose connection to the extremist scene is nonexistent or only hinted at by the fact that he attacks the same protected interest as the traditional extremist movement. Most of these typical offenders do it through social networks or using the internet, which is also characteristic now but different than before.

The Russian Federation exploits various tense situations to disseminate propaganda. Integral to this strategy is the creation of an impression among citizens that only two extremely contradictory stances exist regarding a particular issue. This mode of manipulation significantly contributes to online radicalisation. The disinformation online environment in the Czech Republic is established and fuelled with Russian support, albeit not always directly. Massive disinformation campaigns aimed at dividing Czech society, pitting groups against each other, or fostering radicalisation often originate from Russia and are sustained by Russian communication channels operating in the Czech language, such as Sputnik News.

The connection between far-right and pro-Russian activists is also confirmed by Ladislav Vrabel's demonstrations, which are the subject of the second case study. With the help of pro-Russian activities (such as an array of disinformation projects on social media or disinformation websites through which demonstrations were called for and then vividly broadcasted live), Vrabel's Czech movement managed to get a relatively large number of people to the protest events in the first place. The Czech Ministry of the Interior commented on the demonstration of 3 September 2022 as follows:

The Czech quasi-media scene supported the demonstration for a long time, however, its subsequent reaction is more interesting. On the one hand, it came practically immediately, which is not quite the rule even for planned events, and on the other hand, it came immediately supported by the propaganda of the state media of the Russian Federation.<sup>25</sup>

## **Methodology**

The two case studies present examples of how a combination of the extreme right and pro-Russian/Russian activists have contributed to the radicalisation of Czech society in recent years, with the first case directly involving violent behaviour aimed at causing bodily harm (potentially to life) and material damage. Methodologically, we approached the analysis by combining in-depth desk-based research with semi-structured interviews with experts in the field.

For the desk-based research, the authors primarily engaged with primary sources such as annual reports from relevant institutions for the given domain (e.g. BIS,<sup>26</sup> NCOZ<sup>27</sup>) and regular analytical texts produced by relevant institutions for the domain (such as the annual reports on extremism in the territory of the Czech Republic by the Ministry of the Interior<sup>28</sup>). Additionally, the authors consulted academic texts concerning radicalisation within the Czech or Central European geopolitical and social context, as well as texts exploring various factors that may initiate and perpetuate the process of radicalisation.

To provide specific context, the authors also utilised articles from mainstream media, especially for case studies where contextualising specific events, times, locations, actors, etc., was necessary. To enhance the depiction of the first case study, the authors conducted a semi-structured interview with a journalist who had extensively researched the case and personally interviewed the main actor. As for further interviews, the authors identified six experts from various

institutions (Ministry of the Interior, NCOZ, Centre Against Hybrid Threats, Police, etc.) who responded to both general inquiries contextualising the situation in the Czech Republic and specific questions related to selected cases.

## Case Studies

When selecting case studies for the Czech Republic, the authors made their decisions precisely based on the specific relationship between the Czech extreme right and pro-Russian activists. Even though extreme right-wing entities active in the Czech Republic do not have direct financial ties to Russia that could be proven (or, if they do, this information is not accessible to the public), their ideological closeness is more than evident. In some cases, this ideology manifested itself, for example, in the fact that members of far-right entities travelled to Russia or the annexed Crimea, participated in events at the Russian embassy, or directly cooperated in spreading pro-Kremlin propaganda. This characteristic of the relationship between the Czech far-right and pro-Russian activities generated two case studies, one of which is an example of violent behaviour, and the other is an example of direct cooperation between members of the far right and the pro-Russian activists.

The first case shows how the close association with Tomio Okamura's far-right SPD party and the excessive consumption of pro-Russian and anti-migrant propaganda resulted in the self-radicalisation of a Czech senior citizen. The outcome of senior Jaromír Blada's self-radicalisation process culminated in a terrorist act with the intention of raising awareness about the perceived threat posed by migrants originating from Africa and the Middle East (the circumstances will be described in detail in a separate sub-chapter dedicated to this case study).

The second case concerns the mass and gradual radicalisation of a certain population group, which resulted in several violent incidents at anti-government demonstrations. These demonstrations were organised by the newly formed movement and its supporters. This case was included because it fulfils the signs of an extremist movement in the sense of an effort to shift not only the political system away from a democracy of the country but also an effort to revolt against the political establishment, incitement to hatred of certain groups of the population, connections to certain political actors (including foreign ones), as well as connections with pro-Kremlin actors operating in the Czech Republic. These are demonstrations organised by Ladislav Vrábek, who has been actively

involved in projects connected with the Czech disinformation scene for a long time. For representation and the organisation of demonstrations, he founded an association called *The Czech Republic First!*<sup>29</sup>

## **Case study 1: First ever Terrorist Act on the Territory of the Czech Republic**

### ***Contextualisation - Migration Situation in Europe Prior to the Terrorist Act***

The migration wave to Europe in 2015 and 2016 was a significant and complex phenomenon characterised by a substantial influx of migrants and refugees from various regions, primarily the Middle East, Africa, and parts of Asia. The crisis was primarily triggered by a combination of factors, including ongoing conflicts in Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan, political instability in countries like Libya, and economic hardships in parts of Africa. The displacement and desperation caused by these circumstances led to a surge in people seeking safety and better opportunities, often making treacherous journeys across the Mediterranean Sea or through the Balkans. Many sought refuges in European countries as they hoped to escape violence, persecution, and poverty.<sup>30</sup>

The arrival of many migrants and refugees presented Europe with significant challenges. Countries along the Mediterranean coastline, especially Greece and Italy, bore the brunt of the initial arrivals due to their geographical location. However, the crisis quickly turned into a pan-European issue, prompting discussions about burden-sharing, humanitarian responsibilities, and the practicality of managing such a large influx.<sup>31</sup> The European response was varied and highlighted divisions within the EU. While some countries demonstrated solidarity and provided assistance, others erected fences and implemented stricter border controls. The lack of a unified approach exacerbated tensions among member states and led to disagreements over dividing the responsibility of hosting and supporting the migrants.<sup>32</sup>

The Czech Republic's response to the migration wave was characterised by a cautious and somewhat resistant stance, which aligned with the overall sentiments of certain Central-Eastern European countries. The Czech Republic, along with other countries in the Visegrád Group (Poland, Hungary, and Slovakia), expressed uneasiness about the potential implications of the migration crisis and advocated for stronger border controls and the preservation of national sovereignty.<sup>33</sup> The



Czech government opposed mandatory EU quotas for the distribution of refugees among member states, which were proposed by the European Commission to address the uneven burden sharing within the EU.<sup>34</sup> Similarly, the response of the Czech society reflected a mix of scepticism, security concerns, and a focus on maintaining national sovereignty. The government's reluctance to accept mandatory quotas and its preference for assisting refugees in their countries of origin were emblematic of the broader debates and divisions within the European Union during the migration crisis.<sup>35</sup>

### ***Contextualisation - How Russian Propaganda used the Migration Crisis to its Advantage***

The migration crisis turned out to be an ideal topic for targeted propaganda because thanks to a targeted massive disinformation campaign, the Russian Federation was able to encourage different views on the given situation in society among politicians and citizens. Pro-Russian propaganda and disinformation narratives often capitalised on the migration crisis in the Czech Republic, as well as in other European countries, to further their own geopolitical and ideological objectives. These narratives aimed to exploit the concerns and uncertainties surrounding the migration wave to fuel anti-European Union sentiments, undermine the credibility of Western institutions and sow discord among EU member states.<sup>36</sup> Several tactics, outlined below, were employed by pro-Russian sources to exploit the migration crisis.<sup>37</sup>

#### *Amplifying Fear and Instability*

Pro-Russian media outlets and disinformation networks amplified fears about the potential security threats posed by migrants, emphasising the possibility of terrorists infiltrating Europe among the refugees. They also propagated narratives that portrayed migrants as a cultural and social threat to European identity. They highlighted cases of crimes or disturbances involving migrants, sometimes exaggerating or misrepresenting facts to stoke anti-migrant sentiments.<sup>38</sup> These narratives were aimed at deepening societal anxieties and casting doubt on the EU's ability to manage the crisis.<sup>39</sup>

### *Questioning EU Policies*

Pro-Russian sources often criticised the EU's response to the migration crisis, portraying it as weak, ineffective, and chaotic. They used this to paint a negative image of the EU's decision-making processes and its ability to address complex challenges.<sup>40</sup> A number of narratives have also emerged that were intended to undermine citizens' trust in European institutions.<sup>41</sup>

### *Promoting Nationalism and Sovereignty*

Pro-Russian propaganda often praised Eastern European countries that resisted accepting migrants and framed this resistance as a defence of national sovereignty against perceived EU pressure.<sup>42</sup> This resonated with anti-EU sentiments present in some segments of the population.<sup>43</sup>

### *Blaming Western Policies for Causing the Migration Wave*

Some pro-Russian narratives tried to attribute the migration crisis to Western interventions and destabilisation efforts in countries like Syria and Libya. This aimed to present Russia as an alternative to Western influence and as a stabilising force in the region.<sup>44</sup>

### *Highlighting Divisions*

Pro-Russian actors sometimes highlighted divisions within EU member states over how to handle the crisis. This was intended to portray the EU as weak and divided, contrasting with the image of unity and stability that Russia sought to project.<sup>45</sup>

These tactics intended to exploit existing grievances and concerns within Czech society, aiming to erode trust in Western institutions and create fertile ground for alternative narratives that align with Russia's foreign policy goals.<sup>46</sup>

### ***First Czech Terrorist Attacker Jaromír Balda***

In June 2017, Jaromír Balda, a 71-year-old Czech senior citizen, felled two trees on the tracks, causing train accidents. Around the felled trees, the perpetrator left leaflets with the exclamation "Allahu Akbar!", which means "God is great" in

Arabic. Other similar leaflets, in which he tried to give the impression in bad Czech that they were written by individuals not proficient in Czech language, supposedly such as newly arrived Muslim migrants/refugees, were subsequently posted in public spaces and dropped into mailboxes.<sup>47</sup> He was hoping the act would be then blamed on such outsiders and lead to a backlash against them and also their migration away from the Czech Republic.

Balda was eventually sentenced to four years in prison for committing a terrorist act,<sup>48</sup> which was below the lowest possible limit due to impaired sanity. He was eventually paroled after serving two-thirds of his sentence.<sup>49</sup> Balda was among the prominent supporters of the far-right SPD party during the migration crisis. During the campaign before the elections to the Chamber of Deputies of the Parliament of the Czech Republic in 2017, he gave a donation to the SPD movement in the form of a free performance (hanging a banner on the fence of his house, an advertising sticker on his car, and 50 hours of plastering posters) worth about twelve thousand crowns (approximately \$522 USD or €489). He was photographed several times with the leader of the party and other members. Even though he was not a member of the party, he was involved in regional SPDs events.<sup>50</sup>

Although the SPD publicly distanced itself from Balda in the words of Tomio Okamura,<sup>51</sup> there is a lot of visual and other evidence that Balda was strongly influenced by this party and their rhetoric. This fact was also confirmed by the court, which pointed out in the judgment that Balda had become a “victim” of manipulation by public officials.<sup>52</sup> He was in an imaginary information bubble which caused him to believe disinformation about alleged hordes of Muslim refugees, heading to the Czech Republic (or allegedly already in the Czech Republic). These people would then harm Czech citizens (rape women, behead men, etc.).<sup>53</sup> Balda admitted in court that he was genuinely terrified when he said, “I had dreams about how they [Muslim immigrants] were here—how they cut our heads, shouted their religious slogans.”<sup>54</sup>

Kristina Ciroková, who filmed an interview with Balda for Czech news media channel *Seznam Zprávy* after he was released from prison, later confirmed that Balda’s fear was his main motivation for committing a terrorist act:

He described how he became terribly afraid of refugees. He received many chain emails containing fearful disinformation about migration, he also read

some articles from the media, which are described as disinformation. He said that he has friends in Germany, and they told him how they have a lot of migrants there and that it was terrible. He talked about how the Muslims were going to eliminate us because they gave birth to more children than us and their culture was somehow twisted [...] He was afraid that they would rape our women.<sup>55</sup>

Ciroková also added that although no direct link to a foreign power could be found here, it cannot be ruled out that the chain emails contained disinformation about migration that J. Balda received, could have originated in some troll farm from Russia.

In the published part of the interview, Balda himself admitted that he actively participated in SPD's regional events. He also said he drew support from the party because he liked its anti-immigration agenda. The Chairman of the Senate of the Regional Court in Prague, Jiří Wažik, who tried Balda then confirmed in an interview that: "the problem with [Balda's] behaviour was really politicians and other people who were trying to find simple solutions to complex problems."<sup>56</sup>

The influence of disinformation on Mr Balda's actions is also confirmed by other experts whom the authors interviewed for the purposes of this research. They also agree that the case was a turning point. The case clearly showed how disinformation can lead to misunderstandings/misinterpretations. It also significantly contributed to changing the thinking of relevant Czech institutions on extremism and the process of radicalisation. This is confirmed by the experts with whom the authors conducted semi-structured interviews for the purposes of this study, as evidenced by the following quotations. A good example is Major Stanislav Beránek, who works as an analyst at the National Centre against Organised Crime.

Since the 1990s, the view of extremism in the Czech Republic has been modulated by the German view which is very focused on symbolism, subcultures, and external signs. The problem is that subcultures will lack criminal activity if they are not criminal subcultures and do not commit criminal activity. This view, however, collided with the new extremism. People who are not members of any subcultures are starting to act extremist. That's why even Mr. Balda has never been recorded anywhere prior to his terrorist act. This is a qualitative shift with disinformation that people who do not have a subcultural background are becoming radicalized.<sup>57</sup>

The situation is similarly evaluated by the Ministry of Interior as was confirmed by one of said Ministry's officials in an interview:

It was a milestone; it was the first act of terrorism in the Czech Republic. At the same time, it is a symptomatic example, because it is one person radicalized also due to the influence of disinformation. A symptom of where the trend of violence is going, what are the threats to our national security. These are not organized groups doing big spectacular things, but individuals who can quite easily simply commit something that is significant and has a lasting impact on society.<sup>58</sup>

The influence of the SPD as well as the critical nature and uniqueness of this case are also confirmed by the analysts of the Ministry of the Interior (experts on extremism and radicalisation) Jiří Pětioký and Jakub Merc, who answered the author's question about the case of Mr Balda in writing as follows:

The case of Mr. Balda was exceptional mainly because it was an accomplished terrorist act. Furthermore, by the fact that it was not committed by a young radical, but by a seventy-year-old senior citizen. It was not a traditional right-wing extremist, but a supporter of the SPD movement who suffered from existential fears.<sup>59</sup>

### ***Political and Disinformation Influence Leading to the Terrorist Act?***

Tomio Okamura's SPD party is known for its nationalist and anti-immigrant stance. The party's response to the migration crisis was characterised by opposition to accepting refugees and migrants, as well as scepticism towards the EU's handling of the situation.<sup>60</sup> The SPD positioned itself as a staunch critic of the EU's policies regarding migration and advocated for stricter border controls and the prioritisation of Czech national interests. The party capitalised on the public's concerns and fears related to the migration wave, often using anti-immigrant rhetoric to appeal to its voter base.<sup>61</sup> Some key aspects of the SPD's response to the migration crisis included:

- **Opposition to Refugee Quotas:** The SPD strongly opposed the EU's proposed mandatory refugee quotas, which aimed to distribute refugees among member states. The party argued that decisions about accepting refugees should be made independently by each nation, without external interference.<sup>62</sup>

- **Scepticism of Multiculturalism:** The SPD expressed scepticism about the integration of migrants and refugees into Czech society, emphasising the importance of preserving Czech cultural identity. The party often presented itself as a defender of traditional Czech values against what it characterised as a threat from immigration.<sup>63</sup>
- **National Sovereignty:** The SPD highlighted the concept of national sovereignty and framed the migration crisis as a challenge to Czech self-determination. The party portrayed itself as a defender of Czech interests and national control over immigration policies.<sup>64</sup>
- **Security Concerns:** The party raised concerns about potential security risks associated with the migration wave, echoing fears of terrorist infiltration. This narrative aimed to garner support for more stringent security measures.<sup>65</sup>
- **Anti-EU Sentiments:** The SPD criticised the EU's response to the migration crisis, portraying the union as out of touch with the concerns of individual member states. This rhetoric reinforced the party's broader anti-EU stance.<sup>66</sup>

### ***SPD's Support of Russia***

The SPD has a track record of holding opinions that mirror the ideas/views put forward by Russia. A perfect example of this situation is the so-called Vrbětice case.<sup>67</sup> In 2014, two ammunition warehouses exploded in the Moravian village of Vrbětice.<sup>68</sup> In 2021, at a press conference, the political leaders of the time announced that the BIS had discovered that at least two Russian informants were responsible for the explosion.<sup>69</sup> The whole matter eventually resulted in a serious diplomatic rift during which some Russian diplomats were expelled from the Czech Republic<sup>70</sup> and, conversely, Czech diplomats were expelled from Russia.<sup>71</sup> In the end, the Czech Republic was put on the list of enemy countries by Moscow.<sup>72</sup> In this matter, the leaders of the SPD took a very reserved attitude towards the findings of the Security Information Service, repeatedly trying to trivialise these and foment distrust in their conclusions. They were very critical of the government's decision to expel Russian diplomats from the Czech Republic, and overall, their statements fit into the narratives that the official Russian propaganda media were putting forward<sup>73</sup> such as that Russia's accusation of the explosion in Vrbětice is part of a larger Western plan to proceed against Russia,<sup>74</sup> or that foreign intelligence services invented Russia's

involvement and are themselves responsible for it.<sup>75</sup> Simultaneously, SPD also aligned with Russia, narrative wise, on Moscow's hybrid and the full-scale invasions of Ukraine in 2014 and 2022. SPD ruled out assistance to the Ukrainian army and to Ukrainian refugees in the Czech Republic whose number reached approximately 370 thousand according to a consortium of non-governmental organisations working with migrants.<sup>76</sup>

SPD chairman Tomio Okamura together with SPD MP Jaroslav Foldyna have also demonstrated their support for pro-Russian paramilitary groups in the Czech Republic.<sup>77</sup> These are Czechoslovak soldiers in reserve and the National Militia. These groups do not only express themselves aggressively against the West and spread pro-Russian propaganda, but they also support the unrecognised and Russian-controlled separatist republics in the Donbas. In the past, the group Czechoslovak soldiers in reserve for peace sent Czech citizens to fight for these entities' organisations.<sup>78</sup>

Jaromír Balda was an ordinary Czech retiree before his involvement with the SPD and engagement with disinformation sources. The migration wave and the inundation of shocking disinformation, conspiracy theories, and often direct falsehoods compelled him to take a deeper interest in the subject and become politically active. Initially a consumer of disinformation, he gradually aligned himself with its creators, crafting and disseminating chain emails filled with misinformation about migrants and migration in general. This process highlights his gradual radicalisation.

His connection to the SPD was relatively narrow as he expressed his decision to support this party due to its strongly rejecting, even xenophobic, stance towards migration. However, the SPD is not only characterised by its rejection of migration but also profiles as a pro-Russian party. Its members associate with problematic individuals from the Russian Federation, openly endorse Russian foreign policy, and significantly contribute to disseminating disinformation, often originating from Russia, within the Czech information environment. Members of this party actively contribute to the culmination of the disinformation environment and indirectly collaborate with other Russian and pro-Russian actors operating in the Czech Republic. Jaromír Balda thus became a victim of manipulation both by Russian and pro-Russian actors spreading disinformation.

## **Case Study 2: The Interplay of Pro-Kremlin Movements and Anti-Establishment Sentiments as Unique Channels for Dissent**

On the first weekend of September 2022, Wenceslas Square in Prague witnessed a gathering of a notable magnitude in the Czech context. Approximately 70,000 individuals congregated to voice their dissatisfaction with the Czech government's policies.<sup>79</sup> The demonstration, aptly named Czech Republic First! was organised by Jiří Havel and Ladislav Vrabel. Garnering the support of numerous organisations, political factions, and like-minded individuals, their primary agenda revolved around challenging the present Czech administration and ardently demanding its resignation due to the demonstrators' discontent with the government's approach to the ongoing energy crisis, inflation, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

These demonstrations have cast a spotlight on the intricate web that ties potential foreign influences – most notably from Russia – to anti-establishment activities, the convergence of far-right and far-left entities, and the menace of disinformation. This case study delves into these events, highlighting their complexities, where genuine grievances converge with externally orchestrated disinformation and evolving radical mindsets.

### ***Ladislav Vrabel: Spreader of Disinformation in Excessive Debts***

Ladislav Vrabel, the prominent figure behind the Czech Republic First! movement first started to express his political views publicly on his social media around 2015, while voicing his dissent towards Islam and the Middle Eastern refugees.<sup>80</sup> His fame deepened as he started challenging the prevailing narrative around COVID-19, sometimes resorting to disinformation. His journey as an online activist has not been without its controversies.<sup>81</sup> In early 2023, Vrabel was detained by the police for scaremongering. The root of his contention was a video Vrabel uploaded in November 2022 in which he asserted that the Czech government was planning to target Russia with nuclear-equipped fighter jets. He even forewarned of a possible retaliation: “If our government proceeds with this, Russia might counter-attack, sending nuclear missiles our way.”<sup>82</sup>

The court weighed innating that Vrabel's declarations potentially alarmed a sizable portion of the populace. As a result, he received a four-month suspended sentence, with conditions extending to over a year and a half.<sup>83</sup> Not one to stand down, Vrabel sought to contest this judgment. However, the appellate court



echoed the initial decision, reaffirming the four-month suspended sentence set over eighteen months.<sup>84</sup>

In February 2023, the České Budějovice Regional Court made another significant decision regarding Vrabel: it declared him bankrupt. The court pointed out that Vrabel did not make genuine efforts to pay off his creditors. Instead, he seemed to be assisting in pulling out funds that were already earmarked by the insolvency overseer. Vrabel brushed off the court's verdict, labelling it as a political trial.<sup>85</sup> By the time of this decision, his debts amounted to a hefty CZK 2.7 million (roughly €107,000, or \$115 000 USD). During the subsequent seventeen months of bankruptcy proceedings, he managed to repay a meagre CZK 14,500, barely scratching the surface at 0.5 percent of his total debt.<sup>86</sup>

However, that was not the sole financial red flag around Vrabel. While Vrabel vocally criticised the government's COVID-19 policies, branding them as *genocidal* towards the unvaccinated, he was simultaneously seeking COVID-19-related business aid. He secured CZK 2.3 million from the Ministry of Industry and Trade. This sum was channelled through three companies where he acted as the managing director. Interestingly, these companies were listed as belonging to his Serbian wife, Bojana Vurdejla.<sup>87</sup>

### ***Demonstrations against the Government: a Colourful Palette across the Political Spectrum with a Common Goal***

The demonstrations Vrabel organised in 2022 and 2023 were remarkable not only for their size but also for the diverse tapestry of political affiliations they brought together. The demonstrations transcended traditional political divides, drawing in an eclectic mix that ranged from staunch communists to far-right nationalists and EU critics.

Some key figures appearing on stage during the demonstrations included a pro-Russian political scientist, and chairwoman of the Alliance of National Forces party, Vladimíra Vítová, notorious for her commentary on refugees arriving in the Czech Republic flaunting high-end gadgets.<sup>88</sup> Another voice from the right was Zuzana Majerová Zahradníková, leader of the Trikolora movement and a former MP. Her faction regularly promotes referendums on Czech membership in the EU. In its program, Trikolora specifically claims it will “support all initiatives which will result in strengthening of our sovereignty, or to the loosening of our relations with the EU, including withdrawal from the EU.”<sup>89</sup>

Contrasting these right-leaning voices were individuals like Josef Skála – a staunch communist known for his steadfast defence of Joseph Stalin’s policies – and Lubomír Volný (formerly an MP with the right-wing SPD).<sup>90</sup> Volný had notably labelled Ukraine’s president, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, a “mass murderer” on social media – a claim thoroughly investigated by the police but subsequently deemed noncriminal.<sup>91</sup>

At one of the demonstrations, an intriguing addition to the mix was Christine Anderson, a German MEP representing the Alternative for Germany, a German right-wing populist political party with a notable focus on Euroscepticism and strengthening ties with Russia (more on this party in the German chapter of this edited volume).<sup>92</sup>

The Czech government remained steadfast in its criticism of these protests. Prime Minister Petr Fiala stated that the event was organised by pro-Russian entities with extremist inclinations and operating counter to the Czech Republic’s best interests. He also alluded to the recurrent Russian disinformation campaigns targeting Czech territory and its susceptible populace.<sup>93</sup> Later on, the prime minister clarified that his critique was aimed not at the attendees but the organisers whom he labelled as constituents of the Russian 5<sup>th</sup> column. He also said that the organisers of the demonstrations want to make the Czech Republic “a vassal of Moscow once more.”<sup>94</sup>

By May 2023, Vrabel led a transformed set of demonstrations under the banner of the “Together for Peace and Freedom” campaign. This rally was tinged with a heightened sense of urgency and concern. Several speakers warned against the US government’s purported interest in establishing military bases within Czech territory. Police intervened with an arrest of an individual on charges of endorsing genocide – a person previously known to authorities.<sup>95</sup> Demonstrations are being convened with changing regularity also during autumn 2023.

While the faces at the forefront might have been changing or the names of the rallies altered, the demands of the demonstrations throughout both years remained more or less consistent. Despite the varied backgrounds of the demonstrators, there was a unified and continuous call for the resignation of the Czech government, a re-evaluation of relations with Russia, particularly concerning gas contracts, and a reconsideration of the Czech Republic’s role in international alliances such as NATO and the European Union, but also the UN and the World Health Organization. Several demonstrations also called for curtailing the influx of Ukrainian refugees.<sup>96</sup>

Another thing common for all the demonstrations were the pro-Russian narratives expressed by the speakers from all around the political spectrum. These narratives have been a direct follow-up to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, which marked a significant shift in the nature of the dynamics between the far-right (and far-left) extremist scene, pro-Russian activists, and dis-informers. Pro-Russian narratives gained more significant prominence over time, particularly in discussions about energy security, economic challenges, and migration.

The BIS in its 2022 annual report<sup>97</sup> stated that the anti-government demonstrations in 2022 have been significantly influenced by Russian propaganda, aimed at solidifying Russian interests within the EU. Despite the lack of concrete evidence of a direct financial connection between the Russian Federation and the demonstration organisers, the BIS report indicates a strategic use of local actors to advance Russian agendas. Pro-Russian narratives were intertwined with public issues, leading to anti-government demonstrations which were then used by Russia to propagate its narrative within the EU's information space.

### ***Who are the Protestors? Profiles, Behaviours, and Societal Context***

The demonstrations have drawn a complex and varied crowd, reflecting deep-seated dissatisfaction and socioeconomic concerns among the populace. The demonstrators' profiles are as diverse as the speakers on the stage, ranging from those brandishing symbols of the communist era to others displaying Russian flags and emblems. This blend of ideologies underscores a unifying thread of discontent with the government's policies and the nation's trajectory.

A striking aspect of these demonstrations is the assortment of flags and symbols. Participants carried banners of the Communist Party, Czech National Social Party, and even the far-right extremist DSSS. Some even waved Russian Federation flags or wore T-shirts featuring Russian president Vladimir Putin, signifying a blend of nostalgia, political dissent, and in some cases, direct support for Russian policies.<sup>98</sup> Despite the relative peace maintained during the protests, as per police reports, there were instances of divisive behaviour. The crowd's reaction to the Ukrainian flag at the National Museum, leading to demands for its removal and subsequent police intervention, illustrates the underlying tensions within the Czech society and the potential for escalation.<sup>99</sup>

Recent surveys by the STEM agency<sup>100</sup> reflect widespread dissatisfaction in the Czech Republic. More than half of the population is unhappy with the country's situation, with 62 percent viewing the future with uncertainty or fear. Financial worries are prevalent, with 30 percent anticipating a worsening of their household's financial situation. Trust in the government is notably low, with only 25 percent expressing some degree of trust, while a significant majority expressed distrust or indifference.<sup>101</sup>

This data underscores a broader context in which these demonstrations occur. The protests are less about the specific ideologies displayed and more about a general discontent with the socio-economic status quo. The variety of political leanings and opinions within the crowd makes it challenging to uniformly label or describe the demonstrators. However, the trend of individuals with no history of extremism gravitating towards these protests is a significant development. It suggests a growing dissatisfaction that, if ignored by the state and government, could lead to an increasing tendency of the public to express political views through potentially radical or extremist avenues.

In summary, the diverse array of symbols and sentiments expressed at the protests, particularly those displaying Russian flags and emblems, highlights a notable Russian influence among some participants. This presence is not merely symbolic but points to a potentiality of Russia leveraging these sentiments to its advantage, a concern that cannot be easily dismissed and has been suggested also by the BIS. The fact that some of the protestors are openly displaying pro-Russian symbols in a sociopolitical context marked by general discontent and distrust towards the government indicates a complex intertwining of local and foreign influences.

It would be hard to overlook the possibility that Russia, known for its strategic interests in influencing foreign affairs, might capitalise on this unrest. This development has raised alarm within the Czech Republic (including the political representation), signifying the seriousness of the situation and the urgent need for the government to address both the domestic causes of dissatisfaction and the implications of foreign influences on its soil. This confluence of internal discontent and external interests presents a delicate challenge for the Czech government, requiring careful navigation to maintain national integrity and societal cohesion.

## **Communication towards Trust-Building: a “Mission Impossible” for Czech Democratic Institutions?**

The Czech Republic, in the face of escalating disinformation campaigns, finds itself at a crossroads. Despite the thorough analysis of vulnerabilities through the 2016 National Security Audit<sup>102</sup> and the 2022 Analysis of the Czech Republic’s preparedness to face a serious disinformation wave,<sup>103</sup> there is a notable gap in effective tools and capacities to respond to serious disinformation attacks. Intelligence services, security institutions, and experts across various sectors consistently underline the ongoing disinformation campaigns.<sup>104</sup> The unpreparedness of Czech institutions to cope with a so-called infodemic has been further demonstrated during the COVID-19 pandemic, during which the rise of disinformation channels, old and new, together with a chaotic and uncoordinated communication of the government, may have led to harm to public health itself.

This onslaught of misinformation has destructive societal impacts, further eroding public trust in democratic institutions, which is already very low, and fostering polarisation and radicalisation. Czech society’s current resistance to disinformation is markedly low, lacking built-in defence mechanisms against these effects. Dis-informers, leveraging the openness of democratic societies and digital platforms, disseminate their agenda more effectively and efficiently than those combatting misinformation. Furthermore, due to the low level of trustworthiness democratic institutions have amongst the population, it puts them into a precarious position, since fighting disinformation requires a certain level of trust, transparency, and dependability.

In comparison to many other countries, including Latvia and the United Kingdom, the Czech Republic’s organisational, personnel, and technical capacities to counter serious disinformation waves are insufficient. Czech’s closest partner and neighbour, Slovakia, for example, has been employing almost twice as many personnel in the area of strategic communication and countering hybrid threats before the latest Slovak Parliamentary elections in 2023. The Czech Republic does exhibit competence in identifying actors and their links, particularly in cases of suspected criminal offenses, with the involvement of the police and intelligence services.<sup>105</sup> Furthermore, while the Czech legal system possesses unique legal instruments to counter Russian influence, including the so-called Magnitsky legislation which enables the government to put Russian oligarchs on its very own sanctions list, it often falls short in quick and effective application.<sup>106</sup>

However, the state's reliance on repression and attribution as primary tools against disinformation is not enough. A more proactive approach is needed, focusing on prevention and equipping citizens with the tools to navigate misinformation, or simply to build resilience of individuals who are vulnerable not only to disinformation, but also fearmongering, hateful expressions, and radicalisation. Furthermore, all the teams and units working on either monitoring and analysing disinformation and hybrid threats, or strategic communication, are located at the Ministries of Interior, Defence, and Foreign Affairs. While the security and foreign policy aspect of disinformation is important, what can be drawn from the case studies chosen for this publication are often not the issues that would be the main concern of people vulnerable to disinformation. Resorts like public health, social issues, or finance should be involved in systematic communication towards the citizens.

Quality information literacy in schools is imperative. Currently, this responsibility falls disproportionately on the nonprofit sector, which is unsustainable in the long term. Information literacy education should be integrated into the national curriculum to foster critical thinking and media savvy among younger generations. As Czech institutions struggle with trustworthiness amongst the Czech population and struggle to reach audiences to build their resilience against disinformation, strategic communication should be the right and proven tool to do so. Currently, strategic communication efforts are fragmented, existing within the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Interior, and Defence without a unified mandate or coordination.

To address the part of the population distrustful of democratic institutions and vulnerable to pro-Russian narratives, the state must engage these citizens systematically and through appropriate channels. This requires a more robust and coordinated system. The work needs to be broadened to include other ministries such as health, finance, and labour and social affairs. Strategic communication should address not just foreign and security policy but also topics of direct concern to Czech citizens. A centralised coordinating leadership from the cabinet office could unify these efforts, ensuring consistency and efficiency in the state's communication strategy.

Each ministry should have its own strategic communication experts who should not be subordinate directly to politicians or political spokesmen but clearly mandated with communication of the institution itself. Their efforts should be responsible not only to the government but also to experts and the wider public.

Especially in a time of necessary austerity and budget cuts, using resources effectively is essential. While the Czech Republic has a lot of tools to counter Russian influence, including the Magnitsky legislation or the mechanism to screen foreign investments, these tools require a lot of analytical personnel in order to have any impact. Where the state lacks behind in its capacities, cooperation with nongovernmental and private sectors could be crucial for positive progress. Engaging with NGOs, academic institutions, and the private sector can provide a multifaceted approach to countering Russian influence and disinformation, leveraging a wider range of expertise and resources. Collaborations with private companies might also help with using modern, efficient, and technological solutions for monitoring the information spaces or tracking ownership of companies and identifying Russian financing. Strengthening capabilities in digital forensics and analytics will help in more effectively tracking the sources and patterns of Russian influence, be it in the information space or in the economic sector. This involves investing in technology as well as training personnel in these specialised fields.

## **Conclusions and Summary**

The Czech Republic's journey since the 1990s has been marked by the evolving nature of its far-right political scene, initially centred around skinhead subculture, and characterised by violence and ethnic tensions. This historical backdrop set the stage for the current challenges posed by far-right extremism, disinformation campaigns, and pro-Russian activism. The far-right movement, initially dominated by violent acts and anti-Roma sentiments, has transformed into a more sophisticated threat, leveraging disinformation, and aligning with pro-Russian agendas. Disinformation campaigns in the Czech Republic, particularly intensified since 2015, have exploited societal fractures. These campaigns have been intricately linked with pro-Russian activism, further polarising the society. The pandemic exacerbated the disinformation issue, providing a fertile ground for spreading misinformation and fuelling distrust towards democratic institutions and public health measures.

The Czech Republic currently lacks comprehensive tools and strategies to effectively counter these disinformation waves. Despite efforts like the National Security Audit, the response has been insufficient, especially in comparison to other European countries. To combat these challenges, a multifaceted approach

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is essential. This includes enhancing information literacy in education, fostering public-private partnerships, investing in digital forensics, and strengthening international cooperation. Additionally, a unified strategic communication framework across various ministries and regular public awareness campaigns are crucial.

The situation in the Czech Republic reflects a broader global trend where democratic societies grapple with the dual threat of far-right extremism and disinformation. The country's experience underscores the need for proactive and comprehensive strategies that not only focus on suppression and attribution but also prioritise prevention, education, and societal resilience. Addressing these challenges requires not just national efforts but also international collaboration, given the borderless nature of digital information and propaganda.

While the Czech Republic has made strides in recognising and analysing these threats, there remains a significant need for action. Implementing the recommended strategies will be vital in safeguarding the nation's democratic integrity and social cohesion against the insidious effects of disinformation and far-right extremism.



<sup>1</sup> Charvát Jan. “Radicalization of Czech society: a new phenomenon, or the result of long-term developments? | Heinrich Böll Stiftung | Prague Office - Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary,” *Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung*, 2023. <https://cz.boell.org/en/2023/01/03/radikalizace-ceske-spolecnosti-novy-fenomen-nebo-vysledek-dlouhodobeho-vyvoje>.

<sup>2</sup> Marková Zuzana. “Skinheads, rasismus a extremismus před 30 lety | Plus.” [Skinheads, racism and extremism 30 years ago | Plus.], Český rozhlas Plus, 2021. <https://plus.rozhlas.cz/skinheads-rasismus-a-extremismus-pred-30-lety-8619988>.

<sup>3</sup> “Vláda schválila Strategii rovnosti, začlenění a participace Romů 2021–2030,” [The Government approved the Strategy for Roma Equality, Inclusion and Participation 2021–2030], *Vláda ČR*, 2021. <https://vlada.gov.cz/cz/ppov/zmocnenkyne-vlady-pro-lidska-prava/aktuality/vlada-schvalila-strategii-romske-integrace-2021---2030-188268/#>.

<sup>4</sup> An example of such demonstrations can be found in the ‘Report on extremism on the territory of the Czech Republic in 2012.’ At the beginning of 2012, an ultranationalist Workers’ Party of Social Justice organised a Demonstration against Roma violence in the city of Varnsdorf, which was attended by approximately 400 individuals, out of which 150 were far-right extremists. Later that year, the same organization organised a Protest against crime, black racism, and throwing police officers out of windows. (“Zpráva o extremismu na území České republiky v roce 2012.” [Report on extremism in the territory of the Czech Republic in 2012], 2013. Ministerstvo vnitra. <https://www.mvcr.cz/soubor/zprava2012pspcr-pdf.aspx>.) Similarly, in 2013, the most significant activities of the far-right scene were a series of anti-Roma demonstrations, as documented in the ‘Report on extremism on the territory of the Czech Republic in 2013.’ (“Zpráva o extremismu na území České republiky v roce 2013.” [Report on extremism in the territory of the Czech Republic in 2013], 2014. Ministerstvo vnitra. <https://www.mvcr.cz/soubor/zprava2013-web-pdf.aspx>)

<sup>5</sup> Charvát Jan. “Radicalization of Czech society: a new phenomenon, or the result of long-term developments? | Heinrich Böll Stiftung | Prague Office - Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary,” *Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung*, 2023. <https://cz.boell.org/en/2023/01/03/radikalizace-ceske-spolecnosti-novy-fenomen-nebo-vysledek-dlouhodobeho-vyvoje>.

<sup>6</sup> Havlík Vlastimil and Alena Kluknavská. “Our people first (again)! The impact of the Russia-Ukraine War on the populist Radical Right in the Czech Republic\*,” *European Center for Populism Studies*, 2023. <https://www.populismstudies.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Download-Report-on-Czech-Republic.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup> Morillas Pol. “Illiberal Democracies in the EU: the Visegrad Group and the Risk of Disintegration,” *CIDOB*, 2017.

[https://www.cidob.org/publicaciones/serie\\_de\\_publicacion/monografias/monografias/illiberal\\_democracies\\_in\\_the\\_eu\\_the\\_visegrad\\_group\\_and\\_the\\_risk\\_of\\_disintegration](https://www.cidob.org/publicaciones/serie_de_publicacion/monografias/monografias/illiberal_democracies_in_the_eu_the_visegrad_group_and_the_risk_of_disintegration).

<sup>8</sup> Danics Štefan. “Pravicové populistické strany a radikalizace společnosti / Right populist parties and radicalization of society,” Conference paper. Edited by Jaroslav Ušiak and Dávid Kollár. *Bezpečnostné forum*, 2019. [https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Adnan-Dzafic/publication/365435696\\_Bezpecnostne\\_forum\\_2019\\_DESTROYING\\_IDENTITY\\_-\\_BETRAYAL\\_OF\\_MULTILATERALISM\\_OF\\_BOSNIAN\\_SOCIETY/links/6374e97637878b3e87b75ccb/Bezpecnostne-forum-2019-DESTROYING-IDENTITY-BETRAYAL-OF-MULT](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Adnan-Dzafic/publication/365435696_Bezpecnostne_forum_2019_DESTROYING_IDENTITY_-_BETRAYAL_OF_MULTILATERALISM_OF_BOSNIAN_SOCIETY/links/6374e97637878b3e87b75ccb/Bezpecnostne-forum-2019-DESTROYING-IDENTITY-BETRAYAL-OF-MULT).

<sup>9</sup> The Workers’ Party of Social Justice is a Czech ultra-nationalist radical extraparliamentary political party with an emphasis on the social aspect, which was founded on 29 January 2004. It profiles itself as a patriotic and strongly Eurosceptic party (Charvát, Jan. 2012. “Dělnická strana: hegemon české krajní pravice v novém tisíciletí.” [The Workers’ Party: hegemon of the Czech extreme right in the new millennium], ResearchGate.

[https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Jan-Charvat/publication/344784392\\_Delnicka\\_strana\\_hegemon\\_ceske\\_krajni\\_pravice\\_v\\_novem\\_tisicileti/links/5f901e3392851c14bcd87a7d/Delnicka-strana-hegemon-ceske-krajni-pravice-v-novem-tisicileti.pdf](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Jan-Charvat/publication/344784392_Delnicka_strana_hegemon_ceske_krajni_pravice_v_novem_tisicileti/links/5f901e3392851c14bcd87a7d/Delnicka-strana-hegemon-ceske-krajni-pravice-v-novem-tisicileti.pdf).

<sup>10</sup> The National Democracy is a Czech nationalist extra-parliamentary political party that ranks among far-right political entities. It has been operating as a political party since 2008, before that it operated as a movement under various names (*iROZHLAS*. 2019. “Ministerstvo vnitra podle soudu nemusí vyřadit Národní demokracii ze zpráv o extremismu.” [According to the court, the Ministry of the Interior does not have to exclude the National Democracy from reports on extremism], 23 April 2019. [https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-domov/ministerstvo-vnitra-extremismus-narodni-demokracie-soud-zaloba-zprava\\_1904231704\\_lac](https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-domov/ministerstvo-vnitra-extremismus-narodni-demokracie-soud-zaloba-zprava_1904231704_lac).)

<sup>11</sup> “Zpráva o extremismu na území České republiky v roce 2015,” [Report on extremism in the territory of the Czech Republic in 2015], *Ministerstvo vnitra*, 2016. <https://www.mvcr.cz/soubor/zprava-o-extremismu-na-uzemi-ceske-republiky-v-roce-2015.aspx>.

<sup>12</sup> For example, in 2014, the National Democracy publicly expressed its support for the Russian regime and Vladimir Putin through a letter to the Russian ambassador, Sergey Kiselev, thus clearly opposing the NMA party of this country: “*We would like to express our support to you and, through you, to the President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin and the entire Russian nation in the efforts to ensure order, security and stability in Ukraine, which has been disrupted in recent weeks thanks to the actions of Western forces. The West’s fight against Russia, which it did not end in the slightest with the breakup of the USSR, it is fueled by a deep hatred for your powerful country, which has not resigned to its important role in world politics.*” (Židková 2017)

<sup>13</sup> “Výroční zpráva Bezpečnostní informační služby za rok 2015,” [Report on extremism in the territory of the Czech Republic in 2015], *BIS*, 2016. <https://www.bis.cz/public/site/bis.cz/content/vyrocnizpravy/2015-vz-cz.pdf>.

<sup>14</sup> Rychnovská, Dagmar and Martin Kohút. “The Battle for Truth: Mapping the Network of Information War Experts in the Czech Republic,” *New Perspectives* 26 (3): 57–88, 2018.

<sup>15</sup> “Výroční zpráva Bezpečnostní informační služby za rok 2014 Obsah,” [Annual report of the Security Information Service for the year 2014 Contents], *BIS*, 2015. <https://www.bis.cz/public/site/bis.cz/content/vyrocnizpravy/2014-vz-cz.pdf>.

<sup>16</sup> Futàk-Campbell, Beatrix. “Political Synergy: How the European Far-Right and Russia Have Joined Forces Against Brussels,” *Atlantisch Perspectief* 44 (1): 30–35, 2020.

<sup>17</sup> “Zpráva o extremismu na území České republiky v roce 2022,” [Report on extremism in the territory of the Czech Republic in 2022], *Ministerstvo vnitra*, 2023. <https://www.mvcr.cz/soubor/zprava2022-pdf.aspx>.

<sup>18</sup> Krásenská, Daniela. “Přibylo trestných činů z nenávisťi. Proč to může být i “dobrá” zpráva.” [Hate crimes have increased. Why it can also be “good” news], *Seznam zprávy*, 2 June 2023.

<sup>19</sup> Roberts-Ingleson Elise M. and Wesley S. McCann. “The Link between Misinformation and Radicalisation,” *Perspectives on Terrorism*, vol XVII, no. 1 (March): 36–49, 2023.

<sup>20</sup> Golis Ondřej. “Dokázal, že Rusko na nás útočí dezinformacemi. ‘Klíčovou roli hrají Zeman a Facebook,’ říká analytik.” [He proved that Russia is attacking us with disinformation. ‘Zeman and Facebook play a key role,’ says the analyst], *iROZHLAS*, 13 March 2019. [https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-domov/frantisek-vrabel-dezinformace-fake-news-rusko-facebook\\_1903130001\\_ogo](https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-domov/frantisek-vrabel-dezinformace-fake-news-rusko-facebook_1903130001_ogo).

<sup>21</sup> “The attitudes and rhetoric of some anti-covid activists gradually became radicalized over the course of the year, but they were unable to reach a wider spectrum of the public with their opinions and protest activities.” (“Výroční zpráva Bezpečnostní informační služby za rok 2014” [Security Information Service Annual Report 2014], 2015).

<sup>22</sup> “Various quasi-media platforms and accounts on digital platforms have brought with them a trend of aggressive and invasive behavior and the “normalization” of lying. Their outputs have a strong radicalizing potential.” (“Zpráva o extremismu na území České republiky v roce 2022”, [Report on extremism in the territory of the Czech Republic in 2022], 2023) <https://www.mvcr.cz/clanek/extremismus-vyrocní-zpravy-o-extremismu-a-strategie-boje-proti-extremismu.aspx>.

<sup>23</sup> “In various forms and to varying extents, aggression against Ukraine is justified, approved and expressed in support. The source is primarily official Russian propaganda and Russian media. Not only alternative media, certain websites and information portals, but also users of social networks and users of various applications are used for this activity. As a result of this activity, there is polarization of society, protests, as well as support for Russia and the invasion of Ukraine. This leads to the creation and strengthening of the so-called an anti-institutional movement that mobilizes against the state, its organization, institutions and demands comprehensive or partial changes, especially by means of a revolutionary, not a legal, path.” (“Výroční zpráva NCOZ 2022”, [NCOZ Annual Report 2022], 2023).

<sup>24</sup> Krásenská Daniela. “Přibýlo trestných činů z nenávisti. Proč to může být i “dobrá” zpráva.” [Hate crimes have increased. Why it can also be "good" news], *Seznam zprávy*, 2 June 2023.

<sup>25</sup> “Kvazi-mediální reflexe demonstrace ze dne 3. září 2022 - Centrum proti hybridním hrozbám,” [Quasi-media reflection of the 3 September 2022 demonstration - Center Against Hybrid Threats], *Ministerstvo vnitra*, 2022. <https://www.mvcr.cz/chh/clanek/kvazi-medialni-reflexe-demonstrace-ze-dne-3-zari-2022.aspx>.

<sup>26</sup> “Výroční zpráva Bezpečnostní informační služby za rok 2015 Obsah,” [Annual report of the Security Information Service for the year 2015 Contents], *BIS*, 2016.

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<sup>27</sup> “Výroční zpráva NCOZ 2022.” [NCOZ Annual Report 2022]. National headquarters against organised crime of the criminal service and investigation of the Police of the Czech Republic, 2023. <https://www.policie.cz/clanek/vyrocní-report-ncoz-2022.aspx>.

<sup>28</sup> “Zpráva o extremismu na území České republiky v roce 2012,” [Report on extremism in the territory of the Czech Republic in 2012], *Ministerstvo vnitra*, 2013.

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<sup>36</sup> Wesolowsky Tony. “Kremlin Propaganda In Czech Republic Plays Long Game To Sow Distrust In EU,” *Radio Free Europe*, 2016. <https://www.rferl.org/a/czech-kremlin-propaganda-plays-long-game-sow-eu-distrust/27802234.html>.

<sup>37</sup> An overview of pro-Russian disinformation projects on social networks and websites can be found on the pages of the National Fund for Independent Journalism

(<https://www.nfnz.cz/dezinformacni-a-konspiracni-media/>), on the pages of the Atlas

Konspirací project ([http://www.atlaskonspiraci.cz/Hlavni\\_strana](http://www.atlaskonspiraci.cz/Hlavni_strana)), or on the website

Konspiratori.sk (<https://konspiratori.sk>), which also profiles the Czech environment.

<sup>38</sup> For example, there were a number of disinformation narratives that drew attention to the criminal activities of migrants in European countries, usually with an emphasis on the sexual undertones of the alleged criminal acts. (Klingová, Katarína, and Miroslava Sawiris. 2016.

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<sup>39</sup> Nestoras Antonios. n.d. “Russia as a security provider\_ok.indd,” *Institute of European Democrats*, 22 August 2023. [https://www.iedonline.eu/download/2019/IED-Research-Paper-Russia-as-a-security-provider\\_January2019.pdf](https://www.iedonline.eu/download/2019/IED-Research-Paper-Russia-as-a-security-provider_January2019.pdf).

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<sup>41</sup> The European Union, for example, has been accused of deliberately planning the wave of migration. The aim is to introduce a new law on the protection of minorities, which can be interpreted as censorship, so that European governments can silence protesting citizens. (“DISINFO: The EU has been preparing the invasion of migrants for a long time.” 2021. EUvsDisinfo. <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/since-2008-the-eu-has-been-demanding-an-amendment-to>.)

<sup>42</sup> This is a repeatedly appearing pro-Russian narrative that was also used during the migration wave. According to this narrative, various countries are allegedly losing their sovereignty, in this case mainly the states of Central and Eastern Europe that did not agree to the quotas. The EU is allegedly trying to be the boss, and countries like the Czech Republic have nothing to say about it. (“5 Narratives to Foster Distrust.” 2021. EUvsDisinfo. <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/5-common-pro-kremlin-disinformation-narratives/>.)

<sup>43</sup> Melford Clare. “The impact of disinformation campaigns about migrants and minority groups,” *European Parliament*, 2021.

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<sup>44</sup> Schoemaker J. G. “Allegations of Russian Weaponized Migration Against the EU,” *Militaire Spectator*, 2019. <https://militairespectator.nl/artikelen/allegations-russian-weaponized-migration-against-eu>.

<sup>45</sup> “The pro-Kremlin narrative about migrants,” *EUvsDisinfo*, 2017. <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/the-pro-kremlin-narrative-about-migrants/>.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> “Důchodce nechal najet dva vlaky do stromu, podle policie chtěl podnítit nenávisť vůči muslimům. Hrozí mu doživotí,” [The pensioner let two trains run into a tree, according to the police, he wanted to incite hatred towards Muslims. He faces life in prison], *ČT24* 2018. <https://ct24.ceskatelevize.cz/domaci/2404243- duchodce-nechal-najet-dva-vlaky-do-stromu-podle-policie- chtel-podnitit-nenavist-vuci>.

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<sup>49</sup> “Soud podmíněně propustil Jaromíra Baldu, který byl jako první Čech odsouzený za terorismus,” [The court released Jaromír Balda on parole, who was the first Czech to be convicted of terrorism], *ČT24*, 2020. <https://ct24.ceskatelevize.cz/domaci/3237752-soud-podminene-propustil-jaromira-baldu-ktery-byl-jako-prvni-cech-odsouzeny-za>.

<sup>50</sup> “15. duben 2019 - Reportéři ČT,” [April 15, 2019 - CT reporters], *Česká televize*, 2019. <https://www.ceskatelevize.cz/porady/1142743803-reporteri-ct/219452801240014/>.

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<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> Kristina Ciroková is a journalist with whom the authors conducted a semi-structured interview for the purposes of this study. Direct quotes and paraphrases are from this interview unless otherwise noted.

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<sup>58</sup> Júlia Buzalková is an expert from the Ministry of the Interior Centre Against Hybrid Threats, with whom the authors conducted a semi-structured interview for the purposes of this study. Direct quotes and paraphrases are from this interview unless otherwise noted.

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<sup>86</sup> Rogner Šimon. “Pořadatel protivládních demonstrací Vrabel se odvolal proti podmínce za šíření poplašné zprávy,” [The organizer of the anti-government demonstrations, Vrabel, has appealed his probation for spreading alarmist news], *ČT24*, 2023.

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<sup>104</sup> For example, the Czech security service BIS warns against Russian disinformation campaigns regularly in its annual reports: <https://www.bis.cz/annual-reports/>.

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## Sweden: Of Politicians and Militants

Morgan Finnsjö

### **Russian Influence on Sweden's Far Right: a Matter of Life and Death**

In the winter of 2016, Gothenburg, Sweden's second largest city, suffered a series of terror attacks. On three occasions across three months, anonymous perpetrators used improvised explosive devices (IEDs) to target asylum seekers and leftists. Luckily, the crudely timed devices failed to kill anyone, though one man who accidentally discovered one of the bombs was caught in a blast and left permanently maimed. It would turn out that behind the bombings were three active members of the neo-Nazi Nordic Resistance Movement, and that two of them had been given paramilitary training by their Russian allies in a camp outside St. Petersburg mere months before carrying out the terror attacks in Sweden. These revelations would lead directly to the subsequent designation of the Russian Imperial Movement as a terror group by the US State Department.

The case of the Nazi bombers of Gothenburg, which will be detailed below as one of the two case studies of this chapter, is one of recent history's clearest examples of the lethal dimension of Russian influence on right-wing extremists in the West.

Less violent, but perhaps no less troubling, is the case of the Sweden Democrats, a party of the radical right which has become a central force in Swedish politics – and which has brought with it into the halls of power individuals whose alignment with the Kremlin's agenda is so blatant that, when brought to light, it has repeatedly caused national scandal. These scandals are the subject of the second of this chapter's case studies, both of which will be preceded by an overview of relevant context.

## Historical Context: Sweden and Russia

In Swedish public discourse and policymaking, Russia has long been considered a primary geopolitical adversary. This view has been the dominant tendency of the Swedish political establishment since the 16th century up to the present day.<sup>1</sup> Positioning itself as Western-oriented but neutral during the Cold War, Sweden in this period nevertheless covertly developed close ties with NATO, in what has been described by historians as a “hidden alliance”.<sup>2</sup> A brief period of optimism about Russia in the 1990s, in light of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the decline of Russian military and economic power, which fuelled hopes of a democratisation of Sweden’s eastern neighbour, gradually gave way to a renewed caution during the rule of Putin.<sup>3</sup>

In 2014, after the invasion of Crimea by Russia, Swedish-Russian relations deteriorated. The Swedish Security Service for the first time since the Cold War publicly pointed to Russia as a national security threat and stated its assessment that the Kremlin was “preparing for war, or threatening to use armed force, against Sweden”.<sup>4</sup> In 2015, Russian diplomats were accused of espionage and asked to leave the country. By 2016, the Security Service said that Russia was engaged in psychological warfare against Sweden, targeting both policymakers and the public through complex and malign influence operations.<sup>5</sup>

The invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 strongly galvanised Swedish politics and public opinion against Russia. In May 2022, the Government of Sweden published an analysis developed by a committee composed of members from all parties in the parliament in which Russia’s aggression against Ukraine was labelled as a flagrant crime against international law and against the European security order.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the analysis stated that Swedish security had been significantly impaired as a result. The paper also underscored that politically, “Russia is developing in an increasingly totalitarian direction”.<sup>7</sup> A few days later, the Government of Sweden formally took the decision to end the country’s long-standing policy of “freedom from alliances” (alliansfrihet) by applying for Swedish membership in NATO.<sup>8</sup>

## **The Swedish Far Right and Russia**

### ***The Extreme Right***

Right-wing extremism in Sweden, which has been designated by various bureaucratic appellations and monitored by Swedish police and security agencies since the 1940s, has a history that in its modern form, dates back to 1924 when the first Swedish Nazi party was established.<sup>9</sup>

In the last decades, and up until recently, this milieu was dominated by the rise of the neo-Nazi Swedish Resistance Movement, known since around 2015 as the Nordic Resistance Movement (NRM). Founded in 1997, the NRM is known for its cult-like organisation, strict bureaucratic hierarchy, embrace and glorification of violence, fanatic adherence to antisemitism and Nazi ideology, and openly stated revolutionary goals. In 2015, stressing the unity of its branches in all the Nordic countries, it took the name Nordic Resistance Movement. It rejects any allegiance to Swedish society or institutions, which it decries as corrupted by and merely a branch of Zionist Occupation Government (ZOG), a neo-Nazi term synonymous with “global Jewish conspiracy”. The NRM claims to be fighting to liberate the Nordic race from a plot of subjugation and ultimately extermination by Jews and their agents.<sup>10</sup>

Since 2018, after the group failed spectacularly to achieve its objectives in the general election, internal disagreements led to a split that saw many of its most hardened members quitting the group. The NRM has lost its hegemonic position, and once more opened up the Swedish white supremacist milieu for a diversity of groups vying for prestige, such as a wave of Active Clubs.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, the NRM, which since 2015 has been distinctly pro-Russian in its orientation, is spending part of its energy maintaining a careful balance of unity within its ranks, in the light of the strongly polarising effect within Swedish white supremacy that Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine has had.<sup>12</sup>

### ***The Radical Right***

In the middle of the previous decade, political scientists noted an “end to Swedish exceptionalism” with regards to the radical right.<sup>13</sup> The exceptionalism in question referred to the longstanding failure of Swedish radical right-wing political parties to achieve relative electoral success, which had distinguished Sweden from most European countries. The situation changed with the rise of the

Sweden Democrats party (SD), founded in 1988 by veterans of the Swedish neo-Nazi and neo-fascist milieux. The SD developed a political brand of nationalism, populism, xenophobia, and authoritarianism that saw them elected to parliament in 2010.<sup>14</sup> Subsequently, the SD increased its vote share in each general election, gradually overcame the *cordon sanitaire* erected around it by the traditional political parties, and in the elections of 2022 became the single most popular party of the Swedish right, taking about a fifth of the vote.<sup>15</sup> After formalising a political alliance with the centre-right, the SD has since functioned as a collaborative partner of the ruling coalition of Prime Minister Kristersson and has been allowed to place their staff in the Government Offices, where the SD works closely with the ruling parties,<sup>16</sup> even as it continues to interact with the country's right-wing extremist milieu. Examples of such interactions include inviting a notorious radical from an antisemitic, Islamophobic, and pro-Kremlin group to the parliamentary offices of an SD MP and letting a white supremacist write a Kremlin propaganda piece for a media outlet operated by an SD politician.<sup>17</sup>

### ***Arktos, Dugin, Neofascism, and the AFS***

Alongside neo-Nazism, Sweden has a long tradition of neo-fascism, particularly of the Identitarian tendency.<sup>18</sup> A key actor to emerge out of this milieu was the Swedish publishing house Arktos, founded around 2009, which in the 2010s translated – into English and several other European languages – and published a considerable number of far-right and fascist works, including those of Russian far-right imperialist ideologue Aleksandr Dugin, who in 2012 visited Stockholm to speak at one of many international conferences hosted by Arktos.<sup>19</sup> It is arguable that the Swedish far-right played a significant role in bringing Dugin and his ideas to the attention of a new generation of Western audiences.

The influence of the Swedish neo-fascists also helped stimulate the split between the SD and its youth wing, the latter being expelled en masse in 2015, because of their contacts with individuals associated with Identitarianism.<sup>20</sup> The leaders of the youth wing would go on with their goals, in 2018 establishing the white nationalist political party Alternative for Sweden (AFS), which became more unabashedly pro-Russian in its orientation than the SD.<sup>21</sup>

### ***Conspiracism, “Anti-Globalism,” and Anti-Government Extremism***

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020, Sweden’s conspiracy theorist milieu built bridges and sometimes made common cause with traditional right-wing extremist actors.<sup>22</sup> As a result, parts of the milieu have radicalised and gravitated to a network of conspiracist-friendly far-right alternative media outlets and conferences. This fringe of the political and media landscape in Sweden is today where pro-Kremlin sentiment is most openly expressed and where Russian government narratives are most frequently reproduced and amplified. However, to a less conspicuous extent, this embrace of pro-Kremlin narratives is also observed in more well-established far-right spaces, such as the outlets and channels associated with the Sweden Democrats, the Nordic Resistance Movement, and the wider white supremacist milieu.<sup>23</sup>

### ***The Evolution of Far-Right Attitudes towards Russia***

For much of their history, the Swedish far-right shared the rest of the country’s traditional perspective on Russia as a national adversary. A notable phenomenon of the Swedish right-wing extremist movement was a tendency to lionise, often in ritualistic forms, the historical figure King Charles XII of Sweden, a late-17<sup>th</sup> century monarch who, as the bellicose ruler of the erstwhile Swedish Empire, invaded Russia.<sup>24</sup> However, the extreme right’s hostility to Russia was at least as much predicated on the violent anti-communist element of their ideology, Russia being the heart of the Soviet Union, as on any adherence to traditional Swedish geopolitical habits.

The situation changed after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The gradual crystallisation of the illiberal agenda of Vladimir Putin, and the conceptualisation of Russia as an opponent of “globalist values”, all served to enhance the appeal of Russia within the Swedish far right, itself opposed to liberal democracy and reactionary in its values.<sup>25</sup> In this situation, we may observe that, in the words of Anton Shekhovtsov, “there is nothing unnatural in the contemporary relations between Putin’s Russia and the Western far right, because the former is allegedly a fascist or, at least, a radical right regime.”<sup>26</sup> This ideological affinity, as we shall see, has transcended even the traditional hostility of Swedish chauvinists towards Russia.



Across the Swedish far-right spectrum, Russia has come to be held up discursively as a great geopolitical, ideological, and social counterweight to what is construed as a decadent, corrupt, malevolent, and dangerous globalist establishment predominant in the West. One sign of the growing appreciation of Russia's geopolitical role was when the influential Swedish Nazi leader Stefan Jacobsson joined the board of Alliance for Peace and Freedom, a pan-European party of right-wing extremist groups which upon forming in early 2015 declared their intention to seek “deeper relations with Russia”.<sup>27</sup>

While Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 was controversial enough for the Swedish far right to polarise into two camps – one smaller, more pro-Ukrainian and one larger more pro-Russian, with many on the fence – the overall image of Russia as an alternative to, and indeed a guarantee against, the final triumph of globalism has largely persisted.<sup>28</sup>

## **Case Selection**

For this chapter's case studies, the SD party and the NRM have been selected. Each group occupies an opposite pole of the Swedish far-right spectrum: the SD represents the radical right, with a major presence in the Swedish Parliament and the support of a fifth of the electorate. The NRM, meanwhile, is the paradigmatic example of a Swedish violent right-wing extremist and white supremacist group: very limited in size but strikingly influential in the transnational white supremacist milieu. While the two groups are political rivals and differ from each other in many crucial respects, they are both sprung from the same political origins, and for all their divergence they still share certain ideological traits and strategic concerns. It is, in this context, unsurprising to find that each group also exhibits a persistent attraction to the far-right notion of Russia as the anti-West.

## **Case Study 1: The Nordic Resistance Movement and Russian Influence**

In late October 2021, the Russian government propaganda channel broadcast a programme discussing the fact that the US State Department had designated the fascist Russian Imperial Movement (RIM) a terror group.<sup>29</sup> In the programme, RIM members are interviewed about their ties to the Swedish Nazis, cited by the US as the reason for the terror designation. The Russian fascists deny any

responsibility for the bombings carried out by the NRM members they trained. Anatoly Udodov, who is introduced as “a quiet pensioner” and expatriate, explains to the viewers that he has been RIM’s official representative in Sweden for the past thirty years. Udodov concedes that he did meet the Swedish Nazis in Russia, though he claims he merely gave them sightseeing advice. He says he did meet one of the convicted attackers, Viktor Melin, in jail on several occasions, something that “the Swedish intelligence service really did not appreciate”. The purpose of Udodov’s visits to the terrorist, he says, was merely to say hello and have a cup of coffee. He adds with a smile that Melin was recently released from jail and that he “writes in flawless Russian”.

Udodov goes on to recount what he told the Swedish security service when they asked him why he, a Russian, associated himself with the NRM: “I told them that [the NRM] is the only political organisation in Sweden that has a positive attitude towards Russia and Russians, and because they are against Sweden joining NATO.”

The show presenter, Aleksey Larkin, speaking to the camera, explains to the viewers that the NRM “is, to speak plainly, fascist.” But, he adds, “on the other hand, there is in Sweden today quite simply no other opposition to the liberal establishment. And so, it happens sometimes that at NRM rallies and events, skinhead nazis and ordinary civil servants stand side by side to criticize the politics of the European Union.”

To say that Udodov’s and Larkin’s characterisation of the NRM’s role in Swedish politics is inaccurate is putting it mildly. But it offers a telling glimpse of the Russian regime’s perspective on the instrumental value of Western right-wing extremists. In few cases, if any, this attitude has had more dire consequences than in that of the NRM-RIM partnership, which is the subject of the present case study.

### ***NRM, RIM, the Terror Attacks in Gothenburg, and their Aftermath***

On the evening of 11 November 2016, a bomb exploded near a leftist bookstore in central Gothenburg, causing serious destruction. On the afternoon of 5 January 2017, another bomb exploded close to a hotel in the outskirts of Gothenburg being used by the Board of Migration to house asylum seekers, severely injuring a cleaner and maiming him permanently. On the early afternoon of the 25<sup>th</sup> of the

same month, a bomb was discovered at another asylum housing area in the vicinity of Gothenburg; the device was live but had failed to explode and was subsequently disabled by police. Government explosives experts later determined that all three of the explosive devices could have killed people in the vicinity, including children, and largely failed to do so by sheer chance.<sup>30</sup>

In late January 2017, police began to detain suspects in connection with the bombings; ultimately, three men belonging to the NRM were charged and prosecuted: Jimmy Jonasson, Viktor Melin, and Anton Thulin. All three had been involved with the NRM for years, and Melin was a leading member.<sup>31</sup> The prosecutor produced evidence provided by the Swedish Security Service showing that Melin and Thulin had received combat training in Russia in the fall of 2016, at a camp in the vicinity of St. Petersburg. The camp was operated by Partisan, a fascist paramilitary outfit with close ties to the Russian far-right group RIM – which has since been classed a Specially Designated Global Terrorist organisation by the US<sup>32</sup> – and connections to the Russian army. Partisan provided combat training for the RIM’s armed wing, the Imperial Legion, and for its allies.<sup>33</sup>

The RIM, founded in 2002, has had representatives in Sweden since at least the early 2010s, and has had friendly ties to the NRM since at least 2012. In 2015, the RIM’s leader, Stanislav Vorobyev, its Swedish representative, Anatoly Udodov, and the director of the Partisan paramilitary training program, Denis Gariev, made a clandestine visit to a top-level NRM gathering in Sweden. Gariev’s presence at the meeting remained a closely guarded secret until 2017.<sup>34</sup> At the meeting, the RIM leadership expressed its friendship with the NRM and donated a sum of money, thought to be some 30,000 SEK. While the RIM is seemingly autonomous from the Russian government, “it cannot”, in the opinion of the Swedish Government’s Center for Preventing Violent Extremism, “be ruled out that the donation to the NRM originates from Russian regime-adjacent sources”.<sup>35</sup>

It is likely that Melin and Thulin were offered an invitation to the Partisan training program at the 2015 NRM-RIM summit. They ended up training at the camp the following year. According to the Swedish Security Service, Melin and Thulin trained with Partisan for eleven days, some twelve hours a day, practicing paramilitary tactics, the use of AK-47 rifles, and more. In the Gothenburg bombing trial, the prosecutor argued that Melin’s and Thulin’s training in Russia proved that the men had both the inclination and the training to carry out violent

acts. Similarly, the Swedish government's assessment is that the NRM's ties to the RIM may have strengthened the former's overall capacity to carry out acts of political violence.<sup>36</sup>

It should be noted that while the prosecutor emphasised Jonasson's, Melin's, and Thulin's membership in the NRM and the combat training which the latter two had received because of their membership in the group, he did not allege that the men, in planning and carrying out the attacks, had been acting on the orders of the NRM's leadership. To the contrary, evidence was produced in the form of text messages sent between them suggesting that they were dissatisfied with the moderation of the organisation and felt that they should take matters into their own hands and "go a step further than what the Nordic Resistance Movement officially espouses".<sup>37</sup> It appears, therefore, that the trio, having been radicalised and trained by the NRM – and by the RIM – at some point went rogue, or at least, acted of their own volition and without orders, in carrying out the Gothenburg terror attacks. They did so, however, without leaving the organisation, in which all three remained active up until their arrests.

Though the trio was charged with serious felonies, these did not include formal terror charges – a controversial decision, which the prosecutor justified by arguing that it would have been too difficult to obtain a conviction, given the narrow design of the anti-terror laws that Sweden was implementing at that time. Under the current, updated laws it would have been easier to charge the men with terrorism.<sup>38</sup> At the time, however, the prosecutor did argue in the indictment that the attacks may well be considered acts of terror in all but the strictly legal sense. The US State Department, for its part, has explicitly called the bombings "a series of terrorist attacks",<sup>39</sup> and Swedish officials have at various times discussed these events in the context of terrorism.<sup>40</sup>

In early July 2017, Jonasson, Melin, and Thulin were all convicted in the District Court of Gothenburg for their involvement in the attacks and sentenced to prison. The verdict was appealed, and in late September 2017, the Court of Appeal for Western Sweden gave the final ruling. The appellate court found insufficient evidence to prove beyond a reasonable doubt that any of the men were behind the second of the three bombs; thus, no one was convicted of that crime. The other charges stuck, however, and all three men were sent to prison.<sup>41</sup> Thulin, who was given a relatively light sentence of one year and ten months, quickly rejoined the white supremacist milieu upon being released. In 2019, he was arrested in Poland,

where he was undergoing illegal weapons training. The Polish security service, having deemed him “highly dangerous to public security”, subsequently ordered his expulsion.<sup>42</sup> In April 2020, the US Department of State designated the Russian Imperial Movement as Specially Designated Global Terrorists – the first white supremacist group to be added to the list. In explaining the designation, the State Department specifically referenced the training they provided to the Swedish NRM members who would then go on to commit the attacks in Gothenburg.<sup>43</sup> In 2022, Anton Thulin, who has remained actively involved with Swedish organised white supremacy, was personally designated a terrorist by the US State Department because of his “continued pursuit of terrorist training”.<sup>44</sup>

From 2015 onwards, the NRM began to assume a more pro-Russian stance on the war and in geopolitics. The RIM-NRM meeting in 2015, noted above, was significant in this respect. Not only may it have led to an invitation being extended to NRM members to train with Partisan in St. Petersburg, but in general, it appears to have marked a pivot point where the NRM entered into closer relations with the RIM than before. Earlier, the NRM had tended to take a more ambiguous position on the war in Ukraine, in a context where the wider Swedish white supremacist milieu had overall exhibited greater sympathy with Ukrainian nationalists. But from 2015 onwards, in allying with the Russian Imperial Movement, the NRM became typical of a wider shift towards more pro-Russian sentiment among Swedish white supremacists, moving away from supporting the Ukrainian right-wing extremists in the spring of 2014.<sup>45</sup>

Notably, in the subsequent years, when members of the Nordic Resistance Movement received at least one recruitment request from Ukrainian nationalist fighters, the NRM members who received the request consulted their superiors, who told them not to accept.<sup>46</sup> This circumstance should be seen in light of the NRM’s friendly ties with the RIM during this period.

Another, less consequential but striking sign of NRM-RIM friendship – and of acceptance of pro-Russian positions by the NRM as a result of it – is a conversation broadcast by the NRM as a podcast episode on 11 December 2015, between members of the NRM and a representative of the RIM referred to as Nikolay Eremeev, said to be part of the RIM’s foreign affairs division.<sup>47</sup> When the RIM member is asked about the future of Finland, Eremeev suggests the country might once again become a part of a restored Russian Empire once globalism has been defeated. Remarkably, the NRM members, whose

organisation has always openly stated its own intention to turn Finland into part of a pan-Nordic Nazi state, do not speak up to reject the scenario offered by Eremeev, in stark contrast to their typical dogmatic attitude.<sup>48</sup>

### ***Kremlin-Originating Narratives on Nordfront***

After the RIM's 2020 terrorist designation, the NRM became more cautious in matters related to Russia. The beginning of a Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine pushed the NRM into an even more ambivalent position vis-à-vis the conflict. Such a situation is exemplified by the organisation's members and sympathisers arguing the matter against one another in social media spaces.<sup>49</sup> Nevertheless, while NRM leaders have made several doctrinal statements to the effect that "both sides are bad" in the Russia-Ukraine war, and that "white peoples should not be fighting each other", the NRM's channels, notably its main propaganda website Nordfront, continue to frequently publish pro-Russian narratives, sometimes directly echoing Kremlin talking points and uncritically reporting the statements of Russia's foreign ministry and Kremlin spokespeople.<sup>50</sup>

A user poll published on 5 June 2023 on Nordfront, with 1,770 votes cast, asking Nordfront's readers "Which side are you on in the war between Ukraine and Russia?" resulted in roughly 38 percent answering Russia and 28 percent Ukraine, with the rest expressing either neutrality or opposition to both.<sup>51</sup>

### ***Analysis***

Although the RIM's relation to the Russian government is ambiguous and has been described as one of "adversarial symbiosis", for the purposes of this analysis, especially considering their strategic toleration by the Kremlin, they will be considered a vector of Russian influence. This means that their activity can be either observed or expected to advance the interests of the Kremlin, irrespective of their own intentions.<sup>52</sup>

Russian influence over the NRM in the past several years has two sources. The first is active diplomacy by the Russian Imperial Movement, which has long maintained a presence in Sweden and, since at least 2012, has been courting the NRM in different ways. The second is Russia's projection of soft power through

various forms of propaganda, to which the NRM has been susceptible for the same reasons as the SD party: a deeply rooted ideological predisposition within the broader far right, in spite of internal differences on other issues, to detest liberal democracy and approve of anyone positioning themselves to oppose it – which in recent years has meant the Kremlin.

The direct influence of the RIM, in particular, has had catastrophic consequences. By providing material support in the form of paramilitary training for NRM members, they enhanced the capacity, which in turn sharpened the intention of those members to commit acts of terror on Swedish soil, as ultimately happened. It is particularly concerning that one of those individuals, Anton Thulin, continues to be actively involved in organised white supremacy in Sweden and is considered a terrorist threat by the US. Overall, further violence emanating from the RIM's involvement with the NRM cannot be ruled out.

The influence of Russian propaganda on the NRM is ongoing and manifest in how their propaganda machinery continues to echo Kremlin talking points. This, in turn, together with the rest of Sweden's far-right alternative media sphere in Sweden – a clearing house for racist, conspiracist, and pro-Russian discourse propaganda – continues to influence the growing sector of the Swedish population that is reached by far-right media and inclined to read, watch, and listen to its output.

## **Case Study 2: SD and Russian Influence**

### ***The SD and Russia: Introduction***

The rise of the Sweden Democrats has created an unprecedented situation in Swedish politics. As a result of the formal alliance between the SD and the Kristersson Cabinet, a radical nationalist party formed in the late 1980s by neo-Nazis, and which has been reluctant and inconsistent in distancing itself from its extremist and racist elements, and whose representatives, alone amongst the parties of the Swedish Parliament, rail against the European Union while praising autocratic leaders like Viktor Orbán, now has a decisive influence on Swedish domestic and foreign policy.<sup>53</sup>

In January 2022, questions were raised – not for the first time – about the SD's views and its reliability in matters of foreign policy when commentators brought

attention to a position on strategic and defence policy adopted by the party in 2018. The position stated that the “Sweden Democrats want Sweden to respect the balance between the great powers”. The phrase “the great powers” has been widely understood to refer to the United States and Russia, and the position of “balance” in the Swedish context suggests one of treating Russia’s geopolitical interests as legitimate. After the position drew scrutiny and widespread criticism, the SD suddenly removed it from their official documents.<sup>54</sup> The episode is illustrative of the SD’s persistent ambiguity with regard to Russia. On the one hand, the party’s own instinct is to adopt positions that offer no opposition to the Kremlin’s imperialism and on the other hand, the party pays lip service to the consensus of Swedish public opinion and the political establishment by backtracking from such positions once they draw too much attention and flak.

The SD has joined other Swedish parties in condemning the Russian invasion of Crimea and of the aggression of 2022 and has backed sanctions against Russia. In 2018 they described Russia as a security threat which is going “in a very negative direction.”<sup>55</sup> In April 2023, an SD politician and former member of parliament travelled to Ukraine as a private citizen to volunteer in its defence.

Alongside these occasional gestures of opposition to the Kremlin, however, and crucially for the research question in this volume, the SD also has a track record of incidents suggesting that they are willing to make use of, and themselves be useful to, Russian influence. Salient incidents will be discussed in chronological order below, followed by an analysis.

The incidents can be thought of as taking various forms, ranging from the party tolerating the presence of, or resisting calls to discipline, party representatives who express extreme pro-Kremlin views and narratives, or who interact closely with others who do; to party representatives meeting with Russian regime-connected businessmen to discuss funding for party projects; or employing individuals with known connections to the Kremlin’s agents; systematically collaborating with the Russian propaganda machine, et cetera.

Together, these incidents paint an overall picture of a party vulnerable to infiltration, exploitation, and influence by actors who are either known or unknown agents of Russian influence, and demonstrably unwilling to do anything about it.



### *The Carl Meurling Affair between 2011 and 2015*

In the fall of 2016, contacts were revealed between top SD officials and the Russia-connected businessman Carl Meurling. Meurling had sought to influence the SD's Russia policy, while offering major funding for one of the SD's media projects.<sup>56</sup> Meurling was the CEO of RISE Capital, a Swedish-registered company founded in 2013 that, by 2016, had billions of crowns worth of infrastructure development contracts in Russia. At the time, RISE Capital listed as its financial partners four Russian banks – VTB, Vnesheconombank, Sberbank, and Gazprombank, all of which were under either EU or US sanctions after the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014—and among its other “key partners”, under the heading “active cooperation”, the Russian federal Defence and Transport ministries.<sup>57</sup> The company's chairman was Gerard Lopez, a self-described friend of Vladimir Putin. Lopez at the time was the subject of controversy in the UK because of his major donations to the Conservative Party during the Brexit campaign.<sup>58</sup> RISE Capital's main owner was Igor Snegurov, who was alleged to have won the company's contracts in Russia as a result of his personal ties to directors of Gazprom.<sup>59</sup>

In April 2011, Meurling had dinner at the home of Erik Almquist, at the time a member of parliament for the SD and a top party official. The following month, Almquist wrote an email to the party's top leadership saying that Meurling had expressed an interest in providing several million crowns in financing to a new SD-affiliated media outlet.<sup>60</sup> Later the same month, Meurling sent an email to an SD MP, Margareta Sandstedt, then the mother-in-law to the party leader Jimmie Åkesson. Sandstedt represented the party in the Swedish Parliament's European affairs committee. The committee was at that time discussing the issue of the Russian-Georgian conflict. Meurling's email referenced his acquaintance with Almquist and his control over 400 million crowns in Russian investments. In the email, Meurling stated that the Russian-Georgian war was started by Georgia, and strongly urged Sandstedt to argue in the parliament's EU committee against European and Swedish interference with the unfolding conflict. He encouraged her to argue against Sweden criticising Russia in connection with Georgia, going so far as to provide her with a detailed list of talking points, arguments, and rhetorical techniques to use.<sup>61</sup>

Although apparently Meurling never ended up investing in the SD's media outlet, he sent other emails in this period to top SD officials, communicating with Almquist as well as Kent Ekeröth, one of the party's most extreme

representatives, who has founded and operated a series of racist and extreme right-wing alternative media outlets adjacent to the party over the years.<sup>62</sup> He also kept in touch with Gustav Kasselstrand, at that time the chairman of the party's youth wing, who would later be expelled and go on to found the pro-Russian white nationalist party, Alternative for Sweden (AFS). Meurling's contacts with and apparent support for Kasselstrand continued until at least 2015 when the latter aggressively took control over the SD's important Stockholm branch before being expelled from the party amid accusations of extremism. Kasselstrand would go on to do consulting work for a large Russian agricultural company before founding AFS.<sup>63</sup>

### ***Erik Almqvist's Covert Propaganda Role between 2012 and 2015***

In 2012, footage emerged of Almqvist and Ekeröth in a drunken altercation with people in the street in 2010. Moreover, the footage directly contradicted Almqvist's flat denials to the media concerning these events. The "iron pipe scandal" – so-called because the footage showed the SD politicians picking up metal pipes as makeshift weapons – caused Almqvist's supposed resignation from the party.<sup>64</sup> However, the party immediately hired him as a media consultant, ostensibly to help develop the commercial viability of the party's media activities.<sup>65</sup> In 2015, it was revealed, however, that the party had secretly made Almqvist the covert editor-in-chief of one of the party's media outlets, Samtiden, where he wrote pro-Kremlin editorials under a pseudonym. After the situation was exposed by investigative journalists, Almqvist moved on to eventually work with the white supremacist and pro-Russian media apparatus AlternaMedia, run by the right-wing extremists Vavra Suk and Sanna Hill, who have served as election observers during the rigged 2018 presidential election in Russia, at the invitation of a committee of the Duma. Suk is on record as saying in 2020 that Putin sets a good and democratic example for Europe to follow.<sup>66</sup> During that time, Almqvist has several times travelled to Putin's Russia and to occupied Crimea to act as so-called international expert and election observer, telling Russian media that elections have been free and fair.<sup>67</sup>

In spite of his now open extremism and pro-Russian stances, Almqvist's media outlet within the AlternaMedia apparatus, Exakt24, was invited along with an exclusive few other outlets to cover the SD's official election watch party in 2022. That election night, Exakt24's studio broadcast was hosted by Almqvist together

with the influential and extreme Sweden Democrat activist and former MP Kent Ekeröth, who after the election would return to active politics as a regional councillor for the SD.<sup>68</sup>

***David Bergquist, between 2012 and 2018: “Putin, I beseech you”***

David Bergquist is a far-right activist who has publicly expressed right-wing extremist views since at least 2010 – such as putting “the Holocaust” in quotation marks and suggesting that the Swedish people are themselves today undergoing a Holocaust, referring to a neo-Nazi political party as merely “social conservatives”, and stating that “the Second World War was about defeating a bolshevik invasion of Europe”. He held a leading position on the local and regional levels in the Sweden Democrats from 2011, serving as chairman of a local party branch in the affluent suburbs of Sweden’s capital and of a regional party division in eastern Stockholm County.<sup>69</sup> Notably, while holding this position, Bergquist, over a period of years from at least 2012, repeatedly posted pro-Putin statements on social media. In 2013, he wrote in a post on Facebook: “Putin, I know you are a very good person. I beseech you: Come here and depose our traitor of a prime minister and restore order in your poor western brother-country.”<sup>70</sup> In spite of this, and despite promoting pro-Nazi propaganda, Holocaust denial and antisemitic conspiracy theories, the party took no action against Bergquist.<sup>71</sup> In January 2017, Bergquist stated on Facebook “It is in Putin’s interest that SD gains influence [through the 2018 general elections], especially in defence policy in that we want precisely what he wants: That Sweden should have a functioning and strong defence and that we should be free of alliances and stay out of NATO”.<sup>72</sup>

Bergquist was expelled from the party shortly after his 2018 re-election to his municipal assembly, for reasons unrelated to his extremist statements or posts about Russia.<sup>73</sup> He went on to join a far-right activist network, whose strong pro-Russian and conspiracist leanings are expressed in a steady stream of media output, typical of the new convergence between the far-right and radicalised conspiracism mentioned in the introduction of this chapter.<sup>74</sup>

### *The Sweden Democrats in the European Parliament*

A 2022 investigation by the EU-friendly think tank Stockholm Free World Forum into the voting record of Swedish EU parliamentarians found that the Sweden Democrat MEPs, Peter Lundgren, and Kristina Winberg, had an overall Kremlin-friendly voting record in the period 2014–2019. This markedly distinguished them not only from other Swedish MEPs, but also from all other Nordic MEPs, including Eurosceptics.<sup>75</sup> For example, on 16 September 2014, the European Parliament voted with a majority of 535 to 127 to ratify the Association Agreement between the European Union and Ukraine. In the minority voting against ratification were the SD.<sup>76</sup> On 23 October 2014, the EU Parliament condemned Russia’s closing down of the international human rights organisation Memorial; the SD voted against the resolution.

In 2015, following public criticism of their pro-Russian voting record, the SD’s then-acting chairman and leader of the party’s parliamentary group, Mattias Karlsson, claimed the party’s MEPs were only following the lead of the British UKIP and French Front National parties, and admitted that this had led to some “problematic” votes with regards to Russia and Ukraine, insofar as they did not track with the SD’s official party line (which was formally critical of Russia).<sup>77</sup> Karlsson’s remarks were echoed by a later leak of internal SD communications showing leading officials admitting in frustration that the party had more or less mindlessly voted with UKIP in the European Parliament because the party had failed to develop an independent political agenda in that forum.<sup>78</sup>

However, mere incompetence or negligence cannot account for the SD’s egregious record in Strasbourg, where they exhibited a clear ideological affinity for the pro-Russian camp. In June of 2015, the European Parliament passed a resolution with 494 to 135 votes expressing that “[t]he EU must critically reassess its relations with Russia, which are profoundly damaged by Russia’s deliberate violation of democratic principles, fundamental values and international law with its violent action and destabilisation of its neighbours”.<sup>79</sup> MEPs also called for greater transparency with regard to Russian support for European parties. The SD’s two representatives joined a group of far-right MEPs, including Marine Le Pen, in rising to their feet in the chamber to protest what was being said.<sup>80</sup> In the vote itself, the SD abstained as part of a minority of 69 MEPs.<sup>81</sup>

Since 2019, the SD has become less consistently Kremlin-friendly in its voting and has been forced by the pressure of public opinion to moderate its stance still further after Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine.<sup>82</sup> Notably, however, when, on 15 February 2022, with the threat of a full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia at its peak, the European Parliament voted to approve emergency financial aid to Ukraine, the three SD MEPs all abstained.<sup>83</sup>

### ***The Egor Putilov Affair, 2016***

In 2016, several Swedish newspapers began to unravel a convoluted series of revelations about an aide working for the SD in their parliamentary offices, who had been hired that year by the extreme SD MP Kent Ekeröth.<sup>84</sup> The aide, a Russian-born immigrant, was revealed to be engaged in highly disingenuous media practices using a bewildering number of pseudonyms, and having profited from suspicious business dealings with a Kremlin-connected Russian businessman. As more details emerged about the man's track record, suspicions of Russian influence immediately arose.

The aide was named Alexander Fridback but had been covertly writing as a controversial anti-immigration blogger and freelance journalist under the pseudonym Egor Putilov.<sup>85</sup> Putilov's blog posts and articles were frequently shared and referred to by leading SD as well as by far-right alternative media outlets. Fridback's identity as Putilov, along with other aliases, was exposed after he succeeded in getting a fake op-ed he had written published in a major tabloid. The piece was written under yet another fabricated identity ("Tobias Lagerfeldt"), and apparently posing as progressive refugee rights' activist, Putilov's false persona argued that undocumented immigrants be given the right to vote – a highly controversial position in the Swedish public discourse.<sup>86</sup> Under his Putilov pseudonym, he then commented on "Lagerfeldt's" article, pretending not to be the author, in order to inflame the debate.<sup>87</sup>

Following the exposure of Fridback's multiple identities, as well as his record of deceptive practices, he was labelled a *disinformer* by Swedish newspapers.<sup>88</sup> Journalists subsequently began to scrutinise Fridback's record and piece together a timeline of his activities in Sweden, which began in 2003 when he first applied for asylum under the name Yuri Popov, but was denied.<sup>89</sup> In 2007, now under the name Alexander Yarovenko and with a different identity and story, he successfully obtained a residency permit and immigrated to Sweden. In the years

since 2003, he has used seven different names or pseudonyms; for the sake of clarity, the man will be referred to by the name he has since most commonly assumed, which is Egor Putilov. In 2010, Putilov became a Swedish citizen. In 2011, he changed his name to Fridback and successfully applied to have his place of birth reregistered in Swedish records from Yaroslavl in Russia to a town named Luxemburg in Dagestan, so that his place of birth appeared as simply “Luxemburg”, identical to the Swedish spelling of the Western European country of Luxembourg.<sup>90</sup> Between 2012 and 2015, Putilov worked as an agent for the Board of Migration, where he was reported by his colleagues for suspicious behaviour. After leaving the agency, Putilov’s personnel file went missing from agency records.<sup>91</sup> During this period, Putilov had also unsuccessfully sought employment with the Civil Contingencies Agency – a public security agency charged among other things with countering malign informational influence – expressing a desire to work with countering Russian disinformation. In 2018, new evidence came to light that Putilov had faked his 2007 identity and given false information to the Swedish immigration authorities, on the basis of which he had been granted residency.<sup>92</sup>

Notably, in 2014, two years prior to starting to work as an aide for the SD in parliament, Putilov purchased a property from a Russian citizen whose name Sweden’s public broadcaster, who broke the story, did not publish, but who was referred to as “an influential businessman, and now [in 2016] a convict, from Saint Petersburg”, who was “described by Russian media as a criminal, and connected to the Russian authorities”.<sup>93</sup> Fridback bought the property from the businessman for six million crowns, which was half the amount that the businessman had paid for it when he bought it a few years earlier. Subsequently, two months after purchasing the property, Fridback sold it again for double what he had paid, making several million crowns of profit. National security experts solicited for comment by Swedish Radio said that Putilov constituted a potential national security risk. In late September, the day after these revelations were published, Putilov resigned from the SD’s parliamentary offices.<sup>94</sup> Later, in 2019, when he was working privately for the SD politician Kent Ekeröth, and tried to obtain press credentials as a reporter in parliament, it was revealed Putilov has “had contacts with Russian intelligence services”, according to the Security Service, which has not disclosed any further details on this point.<sup>95</sup>

***Kent Ekeroth, RT, Egor Putilov, and Dick Abrahamsson between 2010 and 2023***

Kent Ekeroth served in parliament from 2010 to 2018, when he dropped out of national politics due to repeated scandals related to his private life, including several incidents of physical violence in public.<sup>96</sup> Returning to politics in 2022, he currently serves as a regional councillor for the SD in Dalarna County. Ekeroth is notable for his extreme positions, racist statements, conspiracy theories, and considerable influence in far-right circles as the founder, financier, and operator of a series of key far-right and xenophobic alternative media outlets: Politiskt Inkorrekt, Avpixlat, and Samnytt.<sup>97</sup> He has also played a key role in the SD's international networks, where he has interacted with other Eurosceptic and pro-Russian oriented parties, serving in such roles as treasurer of the pan-European political party European Alliance for Freedom.<sup>98</sup>

On at least eight occasions in the period between 2010 and 2015, Ekeroth appeared as a guest on various shows on the Russian propaganda network RT to promote his views.<sup>99</sup> These appearances were likely part of a deliberate SD communications strategy. In 2011, in the aftermath of Anders Breivik's terror attacks in Norway,<sup>100</sup> the top party official Erik Almqvist wrote in an email to several party heads that "since [the RT] have an international audience and usually report in a way that is politically favourable to us, I definitely think we should say yes [to make appearances on RT]".<sup>101</sup> SD officials have also become part of Russian propaganda more indirectly. In 2017, top party representatives travelled to Syria for a meeting and photo-op with the Russia-allied Assad regime. In addition to being photographed by the Syrian state-controlled media agency Sana, which reported that the SD representatives were critical of the Western sanctions on the country, the politicians also gave an interview to the right-wing populist and Russia-friendly outlet *Nyheter Idag*, controlled by the former SD politician Chang Frick. The Russian propaganda outlet Sputnik then published a piece on the Syria visit headlined "Swedish MPs' Visit to Syria Raises Questions About Sanctions, Stockholm's Policy", extensively quoting their interview with Frick.<sup>102</sup>

Ekeroth was Putilov's employer and in 2016, he also brought the latter on at least one official, government-paid trip to Greece. There the two of them produced anti-migrant propaganda for use on Ekeroth's far-right media outlet Avpixlat.<sup>103</sup> In September, at the same time as the Putilov affair was being unravelled by journalists, another parliamentary aide for the SD, Ekeroth's political secretary

Dick Abrahamsson, also came under scrutiny. Abrahamsson had in the preceding years been affiliated with a right-wing extremist, conspiracist, and antisemitic party, The Free.<sup>104</sup> In 2016 it was revealed that Abrahamsson had, some half a year before being hired by Ekeroth, filmed an extremist propaganda video for Stefan Jacobsson, a pro-Russian white supremacist and former leader of the neo-Nazi “Party of the Swedes”.<sup>105</sup> In addition, he had posted strongly pro-Putin and pro-Kremlin statements and conspiracy theories, such as the claim that RT is “the only [network] that reports reality”, and that it was Ukraine who in 2014 shot down the plane MH17 – a commercial passenger plane that in reality was shot down above eastern Ukraine by Russian-controlled forces, a crime which Russia has tried vigorously to deny,<sup>106</sup> – and that “Putin is a statesman to bow to”.<sup>107</sup> These revelations led to Abrahamsson’s removal from his position but did not stop Ekeroth from continuing to employ him or Putilov. The latter became a staff writer<sup>108</sup> and eventually editor-in-chief<sup>109</sup> for Ekeroth’s website, Samnytt. In the meantime, Putilov’s press accreditation to parliament, where he had previously worked as an SD aide, was denied in 2019 on the grounds of him having had contact with Russian intelligence, according to the Security Service.<sup>110</sup>

After leaving his position as Ekeroth’s political secretary, Dick Abrahamsson has posted open antisemitism and Holocaust denial on social media, including on the Russian platform Vkontakte. Sometime around 2021, he began operating his own recording studio for filming interviews and other video media. Kent Ekeroth has repeatedly made use of Abrahamsson’s studio to film his own interviews for Samnytt, including with leaders of the SD party, such as the then-party secretary, Richard Jomshof, during the 2022 election campaign, and the party’s economic-political spokesperson in 2023.<sup>111</sup>

### ***The Pavel Gamov Affair, 2017***

In September 2017, the SD MP Pavel Gamov, a member of the parliament’s European affairs committee, travelled to Russia to act as an election observer for a regional election without the knowledge or approval of the Swedish OSCE delegation.<sup>112</sup> Before going on the trip, Gamov informed the party, which claims that it counselled him against it. During his stay in Russia, Gamov gave several interviews to Russian media, in which he said he was impressed by the Russian vote counting machines. Gamov later stated that his flight and hotel expenses were covered by an obscure, newly established NGO named European Council



on Democracy and Human Rights (ECDHR), based in Poland, which has stated that it was privately financed. When asked by Swedish journalists, the chairman of ECDHR, the Polish far-right politician Janusz Niedźwiecki, denied having paid for Gamov's trip, and insisted that his organisation, like Gamov, had been "guests" in Russia, invited by the Russian Peace Foundation, led by Leonid Slutsky, a close associate of Vladimir Putin who came under US sanctions in 2014.<sup>113</sup> Niedźwiecki would later be arrested in Poland and charged with espionage and collaboration with Russian secret services, facing up to fifteen years in prison if convicted.<sup>114</sup> In November of 2017, the SD expelled Gamov from the party, citing "bad conduct towards women and foreign hosts" during his trip to Russia.<sup>115</sup> Gamov would later become a prominent member of the white nationalist and pro-Russian AFS party.<sup>116</sup>

### ***The Stefan Borg Affair, 2018***

In 2018, it was revealed that the SD's arguably most powerful local politician, Stefan Borg, who at the time was set to gain the chairmanship of the executive agency of Hörby Municipality, had in the preceding two years extensively and in his own name written, shared and promoted right-wing extremist material on social media, including antisemitism, Great Replacement propaganda, and pro-Russian narratives. Among other things Borg wrote that "Russia is a stabilizing and peace-creating power" in the Middle East.<sup>117</sup> It was also revealed that Borg had been a member of what one expert on Russian disinformation called "one of the more pronounced pro-Russian propaganda groups on the Swedish side of Facebook",<sup>118</sup> where, among other things, Borg dismissed the security agencies' notion of Russia as a security threat to Sweden as a conspiracy theory, mused about moving to Russia, suggested that Russian election observers should be invited to observe Swedish elections, and frequently referred to RT.<sup>119</sup> After his online activity was revealed, Stefan Borg walked back many of the things he had written, and a couple of weeks later resigned from his new position.<sup>120</sup> He continues to serve as an SD politician in Hörby as of November 2023.

### ***The Roger Richthoff Affair, 2022***

On 20 March 2022, the MP Roger Richthoff, the SD's senior representative in the Swedish Parliament's defence committee, and who until November of 2021 was the SD's defence-political spokesman, approvingly shared an antisemitic, pro-

Russian conspiracy theory video on Facebook alleging that “Russia is liberating the Ukrainian people after eight years of genocide and ethnic cleansing”, and that “on the other side is the American deep state and NATO which have used Ukraine for the manufacture and export of biological weapons”.<sup>121</sup> Furthermore, in the video, such biological weapons were said to be a part of a wider plan and intended to make a “Holocaust” on Christians, whereas Jews would be immune to them. The video also claimed Jews are financing “the Nazis in Ukraine” who are committing war crimes against “Christian Russians”.<sup>122</sup> In the month prior to sharing this video, Richthoff had also given interviews to right-wing extremist and pro-Russian alternative media outlets, discussing defence policy in his capacity as defence committee member. Richthoff resigned from the SD and the defence committee in the wake of widespread outrage after his sharing of the pro-Russian video was revealed, though he kept his seat in parliament.<sup>123</sup> He later joined the white nationalist and pro-Russian Alternative for Sweden party, founded by former SD members, subsequently becoming a party board member.<sup>124</sup>

### *Analysis*

After having made the above observations, the following points may be adduced. The fact that the SD has for many years been moving in a political space which we may refer to by shorthand as ambiguously pro-Russian has also made it vulnerable to infiltration, exploitation, and influence by actors who are either known or unknown agents of Russian influence. It cannot be ruled out that the SD has repeatedly been instrumentalised for the Kremlin’s objectives; indeed, there is suggestive evidence to this effect. Particular individuals like Kent Ekeröth exhibit a pattern of behaviour – such as knowingly working with an individual, Egor Putilov, whose employment by the SD was widely considered to pose a national security threat – that suggests they are willing to make use of, and themselves be useful to, Russian influence.

There is a dialectic at work in the SD’s appreciation of Russia insofar as it exhibits one: on the one hand this appreciation arises organically and spontaneously on the part of the SD; on the other hand, this only occurs because Russian soft power as projected through mass media has constructed an ideological notion of Russia that appeals to western reactionaries.<sup>125</sup> It is important to understand this appreciation in negative as well as in positive terms: the SD and its supporters admire Russia just as much for what it is *not*, and for what it *opposes* – namely,

the politically correct, corrupted by Cultural Marxism, globalist, liberal-progressive, decadent, globalist West – as for what Russia is posited to be in and of itself.

In order to coherently understand why the SD exhibits this mode of relation to Russia, the party must be comprehended in terms of its basic and straightforward ideology: a mixture of far-right radical nationalism – the legacy of its neo-Nazi roots – and reactionary populism, fuelled by an outspoken disgust with liberal-democratic institutions and progressive values, especially insofar as they run counter to the SD's central objective: to ethnically homogenise Sweden. The fact that the party has gradually entered the halls of power and formally joined the so-called establishment has done nothing to diminish the central importance of ideology in understanding and predicting the party's behaviour and that of its officials.

Radical and ideologically puritan members of the SD, more in touch with the party's reactionary ideological essence, some of whom have great influence, tend to be more pro-Russian, while key leaders, party mandarins, and the rank and file are often more ambivalent in their attitude towards Russia. The sum of these two different attitudes has been to keep the party drifting back and forth within the pro-Russian part of the political spectrum. The presence of a competing third force – the party's desire to avoid provoking too much public outrage and the normative pressures of the rest of Sweden's political establishment – has not been enough to pull the Sweden Democrats into the mainstream of Swedish political attitudes towards Russia. However, this force has slowly grown stronger over the years, and following the February 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, it may become powerful enough – at least for a time – to curb the tendency to overt pro-Russian phenomena in the party.

The activities of individuals who may be termed adjacent to the party – such as the former top SD official Erik Almqvist, now a leading purveyor of far-right propaganda through an alternative media apparatus – illustrate how a formal, but far from serious, separation from the party allows for openly engaging in direct or indirect pro-Russian propaganda activity without any repercussions for the SD as such. Far from condemning the pro-Putin alternative media sphere largely populated by persons adjacent to the SD, party leader Jimmie Åkesson has publicly spoken in praise of its importance. Several SD politicians, including top

officials, have given interviews to Almqvist's pro-Russian and extreme-right outlet Exakt24 and have shared its content on social media.

An illustrative example of the mutual affinity between far-right alternative media and the Sweden Democrats is the former SD politician Frick, who is currently an influential right-wing activist, former stringer for RT's subsidiary Ruptly, and alternative media operator. Frick recently drew scrutiny when it was revealed he had played a decisive role in inviting the Danish right-wing extremist hate preacher Rasmus Paludan to Sweden in order to stage a burning of the Qur'an in front of the Turkish Embassy, which triggered a major diplomatic crisis between Sweden and Türkiye, and prompted remarks from the Foreign Secretary of Finland suggesting a Russian connection to the event.<sup>126</sup> Despite Frick's being paid and regularly appearing as a show host in the Sweden Democrats' party-run YouTube channel's programming, SD party officials claimed, when questioned about the matter, that since Frick was not a full-time employee of their channel, they had little to do with him and did not consider themselves accountable for his actions.<sup>127</sup> In such ways, the SD's long-running pattern of obfuscation, denials, and use of covert or overt proxies for their own messaging allows the party to speak and act on both sides of virtually any issue, including that of Russia.

Overall, the picture that emerges is one of indirect but clear Russian influence over the Sweden Democrats, largely through soft power, which the party is ideologically predisposed to respond favourably to. Its gestures of opposition to Russia appear disingenuous and calculated to control the damage caused by repeated revelations of pro-Kremlin sympathies and linkages. Whatever putative concerns the SD might have about the threat of Russian imperialism to Swedish security, the party's intuitive appreciation for Putinism as an ideological ally is the primary factor in its behaviour.

## **Analysis of Current and Potential Countermeasures**

### ***Existing Policies and Countermeasures***

Currently, the Swedish authorities are poorly equipped to deal with the problems highlighted in this volume. There are no government bodies directly dedicated to addressing the threat of foreign malign influence targeting domestic extremism, and those agencies whose competences are concerned with this issue appear to lack practical tools as well as a theory or doctrine of countermeasures, other than

occasionally funding research that points to the issue. The specific issue of Russian influence on the Swedish far right is also largely absent from the political agenda, other than as a recurring criticism of the Sweden Democrats on the level of foreign policy. The most relevant government institutions are briefly discussed below.

Three agencies in particular are charged with preventing and countering extremism in Sweden: the Police Authority, the National Council for Crime Prevention through its bureau, the Centre for Preventing Violent Extremism, and the Security Service, all of which are organised under the Ministry of Justice.<sup>128</sup>

The Centre for Preventing Violent Extremism has published an analysis of the interactions between the NRM and the Russian Imperial Movement, providing the public and other agencies with information about this phenomenon after the fact.<sup>129</sup>

The Security Service is tasked with countering antagonistic threats to national security and, to some extent, actively monitoring domestic extremism as well as threats emanating from abroad. Much of the Security Service's work, however, is shrouded in an exceptional degree of secrecy, and could neither be described nor assessed in any meaningful way except by government insiders, making its failure to prevent the terror attacks in Gothenburg in 2016/2017 difficult to evaluate as part of a broader analysis.

In recent years, the Security Service has begun to more aggressively take steps to have non-citizens involved in extremism on Swedish soil expelled from the country. A relevant example was the expulsion of Sergei and Igor Kushev, twin brothers and Russian citizens who, in 2021, were forced to leave Sweden after a 2019 decision of the Board of Migration not to grant them residency.<sup>130</sup> In addition, they were given a 10-year re-entry ban barring them from movement into the Schengen Zone. The brothers had, since at least 2018, been participating in the activities of the Swedish branch of the Nordic Resistance Movement, including hand-to-hand combat training, propaganda distribution, indoctrination sessions, meetings, and at least one public rally that turned violent. They were also part of an NRM group that in 2018 travelled to the annual weeklong public forum for politics and civil society in Almedalen, Gotland, in proximity to Sweden's top politicians and officials, in order to intimidate them and the general public with their presence. After the Board of Migration's decision in 2019, however, the Kushev brothers were placed in a detention facility from where they

made several unsuccessful appeals, until their expulsion in 2021. Much of the administrative process is classified, but public documents make clear that the Security Service's assessment that the two men were "a risk to public order and security" played a role in the Board of Migration's decision. Similar administrative measures have been taken to expel at least one other foreign right-wing extremist in recent years.

Insofar as foreign influence is a national security threat, it falls as well within the purview of the Security Service, but in recent decades two new agencies have been established that are supposed to counter the malign effects of foreign influence in particular: the Civil Contingencies Agency and, as of 2022, the Psychological Defence Agency, both of which are organised under the Ministry of Defence.<sup>131</sup>

The Psychological Defence Agency upon its creation took over the duties of the Civil Contingencies Agency as regards informational influence, but the latter says it still plays "an important role in psychological defense".<sup>132</sup> The PDA has attempted to build public resilience against disinformation through efforts such as publishing a manual for communicators in public administration about how to identify and correctly deal with antagonistic influence operations.<sup>133</sup> Furthermore, it funds independent research related to its area of responsibility through the Psychological Defence Research Institute at Lund University. It is unclear, however, to what extent this is effective with regards to the problem under discussion in this chapter.

The Psychological Defence Agency says that its Operations Department works to analyse informational influence activities, propose countermeasures, and develop methods with which to equip other agencies;<sup>134</sup> and that its Capability Development Department works to strengthen overall psychological defence at the level of population. However, the agency, having only existed since the beginning of 2022, has not yet proven what this means in practice, nor the efficacy of its work. To the contrary, in August of 2023, in the midst of what the Swedish government described as a "targeted influence campaign" against Swedish authorities, in which Russia and Iran among others were involved, the Psychological Defence Agency was provided with new instructions and a bigger budget, in an implicit acknowledgement that existing policies were inadequate to meet current challenges.<sup>135</sup> The agency produces counter-messaging communications in order to neutralise harmful disinformation, but it is

questionable whether such communications – apparently confined mainly to its official website – are being deployed effectively.

Crucially, however, agencies operating under the umbrella of the Ministry of Defence are prohibited from turning their attention to domestic entities by steering documents, as well as by strong constitutional norms and longstanding traditions. They are tasked only with guarding against threats and malign influence emanating from abroad; as soon as such threats “make it across the Swedish border”, as it were, in the form of successfully influencing a domestic entity, they are no longer the purview of the defence agencies. From the perspective of the Psychological Defence Agency, Swedish right-wing extremists are necessarily seen as potential victims of foreign influence, rather than as potential antagonists. Moreover, domestic extremists, though seen as a particular vulnerability to malign foreign influence, are not the object of the PDA’s general resilience-building efforts; rather, the general public is. However, there are apparently no internal security agencies that are constitutionally empowered or technically equipped to deal with the problem of foreign influence on domestic extremists either.

In theory, there is one government body that might acquire a mandate to specifically address the issue of Russian influence on domestic extremists: the National Security Council (NSC), a novel administrative institution that was only recently established and is still in evolution.<sup>136</sup> Created in order to centralise strategic control over and coordinate the work of the several agencies involved in various aspects of national security, the NSC currently consists of the prime minister, the ministers of justice, defence, civil defence, finance, and the leaders of the parties of the ruling coalition.<sup>137</sup> The NSC answers to the prime minister but is effectively directed by a national security advisor, appointed by the government and assisted by special staff.<sup>138</sup> It remains to be seen what role, if any, the NSC will take in dealing with the question under discussion in this chapter.

### ***General Assessment and Policy Recommendations***

It is difficult to conclude that existing policies and countermeasures are effective in neutralising the risks posed by Russian influence on the Swedish far right. Overall, the Swedish authorities appear impotent in this regard. On the other hand, much of the attention and the monitoring of the problem that is lacking in the public sector can be found in Swedish civil society, which is a strength that

might productively be drawn upon, especially if funded and empowered by the government. The following recommendations are offered for consideration:

- The Swedish government should order the Security Service to publish an analysis of the threat of Russian influence on Swedish right-wing extremism, informing the public as to its view of the threat, especially in the wider Western context, as well as an evaluation of the agency's own efforts to combat it thus far, and a discussion of how the agency seeks to address or not to address the problem going forward.
- The NSC should develop a specific competency and coordinating function to counteract the influence of foreign powers on domestic extremists and the consequences thereof. This function should in a structured and systematic manner advise and instruct relevant agencies how to counter the threat, so that it does not slip through the cracks of the patchwork of portfolios and areas of responsibility of the Swedish security agencies.
- The Swedish government should task either an agency or public body, or should encourage and finance civil society entities, to engage in public counter-messaging to neutralise malign disinformation campaigns. Such efforts should target and combat not only a few specific, large-scale bursts of disinformation as they have until now, but also those disinformational narratives that emanate from the intersection of domestic extremism and hostile foreign powers' influence activities – in other words, to take an example, such narratives as the Great Replacement conspiracy theory, racist and Islamophobic discourses, et cetera, which may well originate with domestic extremists but which are strategically amplified by hostile foreign powers such as Russia. This counter-messaging should be more proactive, aggressive, and pervasive than current efforts.
- Swedish members of parliament should be required to notify the speaker of parliament as well as the chairman of whatever committee they are a member of before meeting with any agents or representatives of adversarial foreign powers, establishing a record of such meetings.
- The Swedish parliament should institute a new body or a function, composed of a joint session of the defence, justice, cultural, and constitutional committees. This body should be empowered to hold annual hearings in parliament, with the purpose of investigating and identifying, through the production of public reports, any inappropriate dealings, or relations of malign influence between Swedish entities and adversarial foreign powers. This body



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should be given subpoena powers sufficient to compel testimony and evidence from any citizen, including any member of parliament. Furthermore, this body should also have the ability to initiate a special session, beyond its annual or regular sessions, if warranted by exceptional circumstances.

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## Poland: Ex Oriente Lux<sup>1</sup>

Przemysław Witkowski

Poland is a challenging area for Russia to gain political influence. In Poland, founding an openly pro-Russian party is practically impossible due to historical reasons. First, a large part of Poland was occupied by Russia for 123 years. Then, during the interwar period, Poland remained a target of Soviet influence and sabotage operations.<sup>2</sup> For 45 years after World War II, Poland was forcibly incorporated into the Eastern Bloc and against the will of its citizens was ruled by the pro-Moscow communist party. In effect, after 1989, Poland chose a clearly pro-Western political course. Membership in the EU is supported by 74 percent of Poles,<sup>3</sup> and 92 percent are in favour of NATO membership.<sup>4</sup> Also, all the main political parties (both the right-wing populist United Right coalition, as well as the liberals, Christian democrats, and social democrats who will form a new government coalition after 2023) directly support Ukraine and the sanctions imposed on Russia. This situation is the reason why the leading partners for the Russian side have become the radicalised factions of the right and left, often extremists or supporters of niche ideologies.<sup>5</sup> It was from these groups that came the protests against the presence of NATO troops in Poland,<sup>6</sup> lack of support for the Ukraine war,<sup>7</sup> as well as participants of conferences organised by Russia,<sup>8</sup> political initiatives,<sup>9</sup> and declarations of support for separatists in Donbas.<sup>10</sup> Extreme groups are not only hungry for attention and political significance but also have an additional advantage for the Russian Federation. They are ideological laboratories where new ideas that favour Moscow can be generated.

Due to the apparent shift of the political scene towards the right, and the lack of definition of extremism in Polish law, there is no clear delineation between violent right-wing extremists (VRWE) and the political mainstream in Poland. This is also due to the weak involvement of state authorities in prosecuting hate crimes, as well as the fact that after 1989, all efforts to survey or outlaw extremist

organisations were compared to the oppressive activities of the secret police during the Polish People's Republic and were quickly dismissed as such.<sup>11</sup> Since Moscow is unable to create a pro-Russian party in Poland, it is enough for it to nurture an extremist idea and allow for its public and political solidification and growth. This way, after some time, more mainstream Polish publicists, academics, and politicians will take notice and hail it as a “refreshing impulse,” “return to the roots,” or a set of “true values.”<sup>12</sup>

That is why, when we take a closer political look at this pro-Russian milieu, it is clearly a combination of the most radical, anti-democratic wings of the right and left, which enter into various hybrid alliances and sprout from this mutually growing mycelium into dozens of micro-parties. These organisations are composed of a broad palette of former pro-Soviet communists, nationalists, religious zealots, national-Bolsheviks, monarchists, neo-Eurasianists, self-appointed officers of civil militias, anti-scientific conspiracy theorists, and antisemites.<sup>13</sup> Two trends can be observed within this milieu: monarchist, nationalistic, ultra-religious, anti-Semitic politicians of the far-right Confederation party, and the national Bolshevik milieu. They stand out for several reasons. Among the first group, MP Grzegorz Braun stands out significantly in terms of propagating Russian narratives, intensive participation in the operation of pro-Russian political networks, and anti-Ukrainian excesses. Additionally, he regularly speaks to the Russian government media and met with a person expelled from Poland by the Polish counterintelligence as *persona non grata*.<sup>14</sup> He will thus constitute the first case study of this chapter, analysing the Russian influence on the Polish far-right/REMVE milieu.

The second current mentioned – the Polish national Bolsheviks – seeks access to the Polish defence and security structures services, such as the army, police, national guard, and paramilitary groups. Its members willingly undergo military training. Additionally, their network of foreign collaborators includes Donbas separatists and terrorist organisations from the Middle East. At the same time, the leaders of this current/milieu are involved in Russian propaganda activities in Poland, Russia, occupied parts of Ukraine, Syria, Iran, and Lebanon. They also committed a terrorist attack, hence the choice to discuss in greater detail in this chapter is Falanga, the leading Polish national Bolshevik organisation.<sup>15</sup>

With the intensification of the armed conflict in Ukraine, Poland, the primary country on NATO's eastern flank and an essential ally of Kyiv, has become one of the critical fields of operation of the Russian services and their collaborators.

Already in 2014 and 2015, the increased activity of Russian agents of influence was noticeable.<sup>16</sup> As time passed, their activity only increased. A multitude of small entities of the extreme right and extreme left became a key battleground for the Russian state and its security services. However, numerous, diverse sources allow us to trace Russian influence in Poland. The mechanism of Russia's politically harmful actions in the whole Central-Eastern Europe (CEE) is well described in the texts of Anton Shekhovtsov<sup>17</sup> and Andreas Umland.<sup>18</sup> The Polish context of this activity of the Russian Federation was discussed in more detail in the books by Grzegorz Rzeczkowski,<sup>19</sup> Klementyna Suchanow,<sup>20</sup> Agnieszka Graff, Elżbieta Korolczuk,<sup>21</sup> Tomasz Piątek,<sup>22</sup> Mariusz Sepioło,<sup>23</sup> and the author of this chapter. Articles by Jakub Woroncow,<sup>24</sup> Julia Dauksza,<sup>25</sup> Anna Mierzyńska,<sup>26</sup> Daniel Flis,<sup>27</sup> and the author of this chapter<sup>28</sup> also made a significant contribution towards demonstrating the connections between Polish political actors and Moscow.

### **Case Study 1: Grzegorz Braun, Confederation MP**

Leonid Swiridov, the Belarus-born representative of the Sputnik agency (a well-known disseminator of Russian disinformation), features in a peculiar photograph with the aforementioned Braun. The photo was most likely taken in Moscow in December 2018, years after Swiridov's expulsion from Poland at the request of the country's counter-intelligence agency.<sup>29</sup> This photo is a neat demonstration of how numerous conspiracy theories (anti-vaccination, anti-Semitic, anti-Masonic) and religious zealotry, professed by Braun in this case, can connect with alleged Russian influence and produce fascinating political returns, from Russia's point of view. These amounted to a monthslong anti-Ukrainian campaign which carried dangerous consequences for Poland's internal security, international standing, and stability.

Braun's party, Confederation, is an umbrella organisation, consisting of nationalists, ultra-conservatives, anti-vaxxers, and Catholic religious zealots. In the 2019 and 2023 parliamentary elections, Confederation won 6.81 percent<sup>30</sup> and 7.16 percent<sup>31</sup> of the votes, respectively. Currently, it is being represented by eighteen out of 460 MPs who sit in the Polish Parliament and is the most significant party on the Polish far-right. Braun leads one of its co-elements, the Confederation of the Polish Crown, the most pro-Russian part of Confederation.

Braun's radicalisation, which led him to support Russia openly, began in 2010 with a plane crash in Smolensk. In the accident, the Polish President Lech Kaczyński and other members of the political elite died while on the way to commemorations of the Katyń massacre.<sup>32</sup> Braun has become a proponent of a conspiracy theory about that crash. He believes that the passengers had been kidnapped and killed before the start. He posits that Presidents Barack Obama and Vladimir Putin put the plot in motion and the latter carried out the massacre.<sup>33</sup> During this period, Braun converted to Catholic traditionalism, began to attend masses in Latin, and in 2014 decided to run for president. His slogan was *Church – School – Shooting Range*. In his platform, he advocated for prison sentences for women who underwent abortion, and suggested having homosexuals whipped publicly.<sup>34</sup> Simultaneously, he came out as an ardent anti-vaxxer.<sup>35</sup> According to him, Poland should leave NATO and form alliances with Belarus, Iran, Turkey, and China.<sup>36</sup> He received 0.83 percent of the votes cast in the 2015 elections, but he declared these rigged and in a pre-6 January 2021 move, attempted to occupy the building of the National Electoral Commission.<sup>37</sup> Ultimately, only a few dozen supporters were with him in the building. The police intervened and forced the occupiers out, rendering Braun's coup entirely unsuccessful. After the elections, however, Braun was more politically successful while scoring 12 percent in the elections for the president (mayor) of Gdańsk, and then over 5 percent in Podkarpacie constituency for the European Parliament. Finally, 31,148 votes carried him to a parliamentary seat in 2019.<sup>38</sup>

The process of winning political office saw Braun take an anti-Semitic turn. In his opinion, "international Zionist cadres" are "linked to American imperialism," and the goal of the Zionist movement is to maintain and strengthen the "world Jewish nation."<sup>39</sup> Israel is seen as a tool for achieving this goal. He sees Germany, allegedly clear of its guilt for the Holocaust, as the instigator of an anti-Polish campaign which is aimed at propagating the notion that Poland was responsible for the Jewish disaster. For Braun the goal of the campaign is to effectively establish a "Jewish archipelago-sovereignty" in the region from Stettin to Odessa, the so-called "Judeo-Polonia."<sup>40</sup> According to Braun, this process is to be supervised by the US Army. After the agreement between the governments of Poland and the US on enhanced defence cooperation was ratified in August 2020, he called this document Colonisation plus, and Occupation plus.<sup>41</sup> He called for the US ambassador to be considered *persona non grata*<sup>42</sup> and announced revelations that she was a Chinese agent.<sup>43</sup>

If one were to judge these positions as extreme, then a look at his political collaborators provides any casual observer with ample evidence that these are, effectively, standard views in this milieu. Wiktor Węgrzyn, Braun's election agent, defended the Kremlin-supported motorcycle gang, the Night Wolves, who wished to tour Poland.<sup>44</sup> Rafał Mossakowski, Braun's political right-hand man with whom he led the occupation of the National Electoral Commission,<sup>45</sup> runs the Warsaw-based non-governmental organisation Education Centre Powiśle and the YouTube channel of the far-right magazine Magna Polonia. The latter is one of the main hubs in Poland for spreading conspiracy theories, fake news, and a far-right vision of the world. Mossakowski has also been organising regular anti-Ukrainian demonstrations since 2017.<sup>46</sup> Mossakowski organised many of his public events, including meetings with some of the most active supporters of the Kremlin among the Western far-right such as Nick Griffin of the British National Party and Roberto Fiore of New Force.<sup>47</sup> Holocher, the editor-in-chief of Magna Polonia, was also a member of Braun's staff and publishes Braun's texts in the magazine he runs. Holocher's statements today contain vicious anti-Ukrainian propaganda.<sup>48</sup> Braun's party expert on security and a member of the party's National Bureau is Sławomir Ozdyk,<sup>49</sup> a propagator of the Great Replacement conspiracy theory,<sup>50</sup> who regularly speaks to the Kremlin media<sup>51</sup> and maintains a string of contacts in the transnational REMVE milieu.<sup>52</sup> Among Braun's closest collaborators is Agnieszka Piwar from the Polish branch of Sputnik and the pro-Russian weekly magazine Myśl Polska. Andrzej Zapałowski is also an MP from the Confederation on behalf of Braun's Korona – one of the micro-parties which together make up Confederation. He takes an active part in the Russian disinformation apparatus. His statements have been published dozens of times by Sputnik,<sup>53</sup> the Ruposters and Pravda TV stations, and the Regnum and NewsBalt news agencies.<sup>54</sup> He believes that the Ukrainian lobby rules in Poland. He considers cooperation with Ukraine to be pointless because, in his opinion, it is a failed state and ruled there by the Banderite regime (after Stepan Bandera – the leader of Ukrainian nationalists) which is why Zapałowski demands the construction of a 3-meter fence with a length of 500km on the Polish-Ukrainian border.<sup>55</sup>

The Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine has not changed anything in the opinion or behaviour of Braun and his supporters. On the contrary, his anti-Ukrainian attitude has only strengthened and intensified. Opposition to condemning Russia, strengthening anti-Ukrainian attitudes, geopolitical conspiracy theories, fake news, and presence in the Russian media – this is what

Grzegorz Braun's last two years looked like. To a large extent, his public activity was channelled into activities directed against Ukrainian refugees and efforts to withdraw Polish support for its eastern neighbour. During the years 2022 and 2023, Braun:

- demanded that Ukrainian refugees should not be allowed to enter Poland;<sup>56</sup>
- demanded that Polish money not be spent on helping the refugees;<sup>57</sup>
- organised anti-Ukrainian conferences in Polish Parliament;<sup>58</sup>
- was the only MP to vote against resolutions condemning the Russian genocide in Ukraine.<sup>59</sup> He, as one of the two MPs, also abstained from voting on a resolution “condemning the illegal referenda held by the Russian authorities in the occupied territories of Ukraine” and took steps to stop issuing visas to citizens of the Russian Federation;<sup>60</sup>
- abstained while voting on Poland's consent to Sweden and Finland joining NATO;<sup>61</sup>
- opposed the recognition in the Parliament of Russia as a state sponsoring terrorism;<sup>62</sup>
- falsely<sup>63</sup> accused Ukrainian migrants of murder committed in May 2022 in Warsaw;<sup>64</sup>
- organised an all-Poland initiative Stop the Ukrainization of Poland with a conference in parliament and demonstrations all over Poland;<sup>65</sup>
- demanded to close the Polish-Ukrainian border when the ban on men of military age leaving Ukraine is lifted;<sup>66</sup>
- together with politicians from the Alternative for Germany and the Flemish Interest, called for the lifting of sanctions imposed on Russia, the abolition of subsidies for wind and solar energy, and the abolition of what they consider to be ideological taxation on fossil fuels;<sup>67</sup>
- started to propagate the Polish version of the Great Replacement conspiracy theory. In his version of this narrative, Poles are to be replaced by Ukrainian refugees, and the whole displacement of these people to Poland is a planned operation to change the ethnic structure of Poland.<sup>68</sup>

While Braun's anti-Ukrainian initiatives do not receive broader support in Poland, and the attendance at the events he organises is low (from ten to 300 people), they are widely noticed in the pro-Kremlin media and positioned as an important opposition to Poland's policy of supporting Ukraine.<sup>69</sup> Braun's publications are discussed by the News Front channel, one of the main transmitters of Russian

propaganda, which Western countries officially recognise as part of the assets of Putin's services.<sup>70</sup> Braun's statement and stills from the demonstration he organised were also included in the 60 Minutes programme, broadcast on the first program of Russian public television.<sup>71</sup> When Braun and his supporters walked through the streets of Warsaw on 11 November as participants in the Independence March, the banner he was holding, Stop the Ukrainisation of Poland, was presented in the Russian media as the official slogan of this largest cyclical demonstration in Poland. The real slogan of this manifestation in 2022 was Strong Nation – Greater Poland.<sup>72</sup>

Braun might seem like a fringe persona, but his outlets for dissemination and their outreach are growing. At the same time, the representation of his party in the Polish Parliament increased from one to four MPs, and the positive attitude towards assisting Ukraine is decreasing in Polish society.<sup>73</sup> As a result, Braun's pro-Russian and anti-Ukrainian stance is beginning to gain more and more support. This may consequently threaten to weaken Polish support for Ukraine in its defensive war and strengthen Russian influence in Poland.

### **Case Study 2: Falanga**

The clearest example of violent activities related to Russia in Poland is the case of the national Bolshevik group Falanga. Its leaders came from nationalist circles and underwent rapid radicalisation in the early 2000s and early 2010s, at the same time becoming followers of the concept of neo-Eurasianism created by Alexander Dugin. Their activities combined extensive propaganda (publishing Dugin's books, running a pro-Russian website and journalistic trips to Russia, Ukraine, Syria, and Lebanon) with paramilitary activity. They also developed numerous contacts with separatists from Donbas, terrorist groups from the Middle East, and ultimately, Falanga members carried out an act of political violence, if not outright terrorism, on the territory of Ukraine.

Falanga began as a splinter group from the nationalist youth organisation All Polish Youth (MW). After leaving MW they joined the neofascist group National Radical Camp (ONR).<sup>74</sup> ONR itself was an offspring of the Polish neo-fascist milieu and featured many of the Polish skinheads, especially from the south of the country, who adopted the name of the Polish pre-war fascists as their own.<sup>75</sup> The new entity did not shy away from violence, aggressive slogans, or



demonstrations. They attacked left-wing concerts and physically confronted political opponents, anarchists, gays, migrants, Roma, and socialists.<sup>76</sup>

Bartosz Bekier led the ONR Masovia so-called brigade. He was instrumental in creating an event that is known as one of Europe's largest REMVE congregations – a rally/march held in Warsaw annually to commemorate Poland's Independence Day (thus, the name of the event is Marsz Niepodległości – Independence March).<sup>77</sup> Bekier, driven by this success, dreamed of taking over the entire organisation. He attempted an internal coup in early 2009 but eventually left the ONR with the whole Masovian brigade and created a new group, Falanga.<sup>78</sup> The organisation established branches around Poland relatively quickly and this gave Bekier the impression that he would quickly become an important player on the REMVE scene. The group soon evolved from classical fascism towards national Bolshevism, and from Polish-centric nationalism to Dugin's neo-Eurasianism. It preached anti-liberalism and anti-capitalism, and opposition to NATO and the US. Falanga also dabbled in attempts to create far-right and far-left alliances of the extremes which would include Maoists or even Stalinists.<sup>79</sup>

Bekier had ambitions to be recognised as an intellectual. For several years at the Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University, under the supervision of the Director of the Institute of Political Science of Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University, Radosław Zenderowski, he prepared his doctorate. The topic of the doctorate was not politically neutral. It focused on the political thought of Hitler's collaborators from Slovakia – the Ludaks/Hlinkists.<sup>80</sup> The Falangites also run Xportal, Xradio, Xportal.tv, and ReVolta publishing house, where they publish books by Aleksander Dugin.<sup>81</sup> In the Xportal itself, one can also find texts by many fascists and neo-fascists, including Dugin,<sup>82</sup> Evola,<sup>83</sup> the leader of the Romanian Iron Guard Corneliu Codreanu Zelea<sup>84</sup> and the leader of the British Union of Fascists Oswald Mosley,<sup>85</sup> as well as numerous conversations with Dugin<sup>86</sup> and others, including with the leader of Donetsk separatists Denis Pushilin,<sup>87</sup> Roberto Fiore,<sup>88</sup> Nick Griffin,<sup>89</sup> or the leader of Hezbollah Sayyid Hassan Nasrallah.<sup>90</sup> A common thread throughout these articles, interviews, and conversations is the authors' or interviewees' sympathy for the Kremlin.

However, Falanga was not limited only to theoretical geopolitical considerations but also took advantage of trips to Russia's allied countries. In June 2013, Bekier and his colleagues took part in a trip of the European far-right to Syria and Lebanon, organised by pro-Russian Polish-Syrian politician Nabil al-Malazi. There, they visited, among others, the Lebanese base of Hezbollah, where the

leader of the Falange had the opportunity to shoot with a heavy machine gun, and the headquarters of the Syrian Social-Nationalist Party in Beirut.<sup>91</sup> Additionally, Bekier visited prisons in Damascus, where he took photos of opponents of Syrian dictator Assad being tortured there, suggesting that “they will not suffer for too long.”<sup>92</sup> Contacts with Russia’s Middle Eastern allies were so fruitful that the logos of the mentioned organisations appeared on Falanga banners, and activists of the Bekier group appeared with their flags at demonstrations and pickets. In addition to the Hezbollah and SPSN logos, these also feature the logo of the third group – also supported by Russia, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine – General Command.<sup>93</sup>

Interest in war and terrorism is not only the theoretical consideration of the Falangists. The Bekier family has long military traditions. The great-grandfather, grandfather, and father of the future Falanga leader were soldiers. His father, Col Andrzej Bekier, was deputy military attaché of the Polish Embassy in Prague and a member of the UN Observer Mission during the war in Georgia.<sup>94</sup> He was also stationed in the US for several years, and Bartosz grew up there. Bekier affirms the military traditions of his family. In addition to wearing uniforms, Falange members were advised to join paramilitary formations and the army. The chief of the Lesser Poland region brigade, Michał Prokopowicz, was primarily responsible for military matters in the organisation. Prokopowicz junior has a long history of using violence. He regularly carried a baton and pepper spray with him. He regularly ripped off a sign from the Krakow office of transgender-MP Anna Grodzka. Among Falanga members, he is allegedly considered a mentally unstable person.<sup>95</sup> At the same time, he worked as a security guard, studied national security, and completed internships with the police.<sup>96</sup>

In 2014, Falanga members infiltrated the Krakow Rifle Unit Number 2039 of the Social Educational Organisation Strzelec. Strzelec (literally translated “Shooter”) is a paramilitary and patriotic formation, a continuation of the Riflemen’s Association that existed in the interwar period. It aims to prepare young people for military service and the formations of civil defence, border guard, police, and fire brigade. Training includes shooting, parachute training, rappelling, field medicine, and martial arts. In Rifle Unit Number 2039, Falangists commanded platoons, were responsible for recruitment, and commanded the entire unit.<sup>97</sup> Additionally, several Falanga Members served in the regular Polish Army.<sup>98</sup>

The paramilitary activity of this group, however, does not end with the exercises in Strzelec. In July 2015, Falanga members organised volunteer Anti-Bandera<sup>99</sup>

patrols on the Polish-Ukrainian border.<sup>100</sup> Dressed in military uniforms and armed with rifles, they roamed the border mountains and pretended to defend Polish borders against the false flood of illegal immigrants from Ukraine. The video of this activity, recorded by the Falangists, has been broadcast on the Russian television network NTV.<sup>101</sup> In the photos from the border, Falangists from Unit Number 2039 were recognised by the media.<sup>102</sup> Despite this, in June 2016, their unit was invited to participate in NATO manoeuvres and codenamed Anaconda-16.<sup>103</sup>

Meanwhile, Falanga's views on NATO are, to put it mildly, not favourable, as testified by their burning of the organisation's flag during a couple of their demonstrations.<sup>104</sup> Prokopowicz was also the author of part of the pro-Russian party Change (*Zmiana*) manifesto, which was devoted to defence issues.<sup>105</sup> He postulated Poland leaving NATO, and reorientation towards "other countries in the region" because "American imperialists" "risk the lives of millions of Poles and want to expand their sphere of influence in the East."<sup>106</sup> When Bekier went on a visit to Donetsk in 2014, he was accompanied by one of the members of Unit Number 2039,<sup>107</sup> and others took part in pickets in support of Russian separatists in Donbas in front of the Ukrainian embassy with flags of Donetsk separatists.<sup>108</sup>

After numerous media reports, the commander-in-chief of *Strzelec* removed the Falangists from this paramilitary unit's ranks.<sup>109</sup> Falangists chose to bid farewell to their erstwhile patrons in a peculiar way: explosive material was found in the post-industrial vacant buildings where the members of *Strzelec* were to train. In addition to the cargo, in the place where the *Strzelec* exercise was to take place, inscriptions were left: the Falanga symbol, swastikas, SS symbols, and the inscriptions: "Slava Donbas."<sup>110</sup> Despite the expulsion, however, Falanga members do not abandon their links with paramilitary organisations. They established cooperation with another paramilitary organisation (Józef Piłsudski's Rifle Association *Strzelec* in Rzeszów). They created their first branch<sup>111</sup> and initiated the Krakow section of the Polish hand-to-hand combat system Haller, a paramilitary organisation started by the pro-Russian milieu of the weekly *Myśl Polska*.<sup>112</sup>

Over time, the international inspirations of the leaders and the military preparation of the Falange members led them to outright political violence and terrorism. On the night of 3 February 2018, the building of the Society of Transcarpathian Hungarians – the Association of Hungarian Culture in Uzhhorod<sup>113</sup> burned down. Uzhhorod is the administrative centre of Ukrainian

Zakarpattia Oblast. This region has been, since the Middle Ages, a part of the Hungarian kingdom and has a mixed Hungarian-Ukrainian population. One hundred and fifty thousand Hungarians live in the area. It has become a part of the USSR after WWII, and after its dissolution, part of Ukraine. The year 2018 saw a conflict between Budapest and Kyiv over the Ukrainian Education Act, which, according to Hungary, seriously violated the rights of national minorities regarding education in their native language. There were tensions and demonstrations in the region organised by the Ukrainian nationalists.<sup>114</sup> In response, Hungarian authorities were pressing their Ukrainian counterparts to decisive response in relation to hate speech and actions for violence against the Ukrainian minority. All of this was happening against the backdrop of a vigorous Hungarian policy of “passportisation,” i.e. Budapest eagerly granted Hungarian passports to inhabitants of the region, which Kyiv also perceived as hostile.

In February 2018, Falanga activists Adrian Margielski and Tomasz Szymkowiak went to Transcarpathian Ruthenia as the region is also known. At night, they went to the building of the Hungarian centre. They painted a swastika and the number 88 on its wall which in the neo-Nazi code means the letters HH, i.e. “Hail Hitler.” They tried to set the building on fire using a clumsily prepared Molotov cocktail. They also took photos of the burning building. In Hungary, accusations were made against Bandera’s nationalists who allegedly attacked the Hungarian minority in Transcarpathia. This description of the situation has been claimed by representatives of the Society of Transcarpathian Hungarians who, on 28 February, announced that Ukrainian nationalists were responsible for the attacks and demanded that an OSCE mission be sent to the region.<sup>115</sup> Numerous recordings from CCTV cameras allowed the Polish Internal Security Agency (ABW) to catch the real perpetrators in less than a month. ABW detained five people, including Falanga members (Margielski, Szymkowiak, and Michał Prokopowicz).<sup>116</sup>

Margielski and Szymkowiak gave extensive testimony in exchange for lenient sentencing. Over time, Prokopowicz also began to testify.<sup>117</sup> According to the latter, the entire action was suggested to him by a German journalist, assistant to an Alternative for Germany deputy, Manuel Ochsenreiter. For years, he has been running the German branch of Dugin’s *Katehon*, a think tank sponsored by the Russian millionaire Malofeev,<sup>118</sup> and managing the neo-Eurasian German Centre for Eurasian Studies.<sup>119</sup> He was a nationalist and editor-in-chief of the far-right magazine *Zuerst!* and a correspondent for the Russian television network

RT. Ochsenreiter also belonged to the delegation observing the referendum in Crimea and the elections in Donetsk and Luhansk.<sup>120</sup> Together with Mateusz Piskorski, a longtime stalwart of the pro-Russia scene in Poland, and a former parliamentarian with the far-left and populist *Samoobrona* (Self-Defence) party, they also ran the YouTube channel *Die Guten Menschen!* until 2021, the recordings of which were repeatedly shared by Dugin on his now-defunct Facebook fan page. Ochsenreiter, whom Prokopowicz met in Russia, allegedly suggested to him on Telegram to organise an attack on the Hungarian building in Uzhhorod. The entire action cost one and a half thousand euros. One thousand was to be taken by Prokopowicz and the rest was divided by the direct perpetrators.<sup>121</sup> The aim was to inflame the conflict between Ukrainians and Hungarians and to discredit Ukrainian nationalists. Ochsenreiter was to cover the costs, and Prokopowicz was to find contractors and coordinate activities. If the campaign was successful, further activities were to be pursued.<sup>122</sup> Ochsenreiter denied any connection to the incident.<sup>123</sup>

However, the case files contain call screens confirming that the men were in contact. The testimony of the Falanga members also incriminated Ochsenreiter. After the scandal surrounding the attack carried out by Falanga broke out, and an investigation was launched in Germany, Ochsenreiter left the federal republic and went to Moscow. There, in 2021, at the age of 45, he died suddenly of a heart attack.<sup>124</sup> Prokopowicz was released from custody in 2019. He faced twelve years in prison. In March 2020, he was sentenced to three years in prison. The prosecutor's office considered his actions to be a terrorist crime, the purpose of which was to "publicly incite national hatred between Ukrainians and Hungarians" as well as to cause "disruption of the political system in Ukraine and deepen national divisions between Ukrainians and Hungarians."<sup>125</sup>

Falanga did not neglect their political activities during this time. When, in 2016, the chairman of the pro-Russian party Change, the aforementioned Piskorski, was arrested, the leader of Falanga immediately became one of the contenders to take over his party. In one year alone, he was in Russia three times, meeting there with Dugin<sup>126</sup> and Sviridov.<sup>127</sup> He also gave the latter an interview for *Sputnik*.<sup>128</sup> Bekier also travels a lot around the world. Apart from private vacation trips, his political trips are mainly to places related to Russia and its allies. He visited Chechnya in 2018, where he participated in an MMA gala at the birthday invitation of the head of Chechnya, Ramzan Kadyrov, and spoke in the parliament in occupied Crimea.<sup>129</sup> He was also in Donbas,<sup>130</sup> Syria,<sup>131</sup> Lebanon,<sup>132</sup> Tehran,<sup>133</sup>

and at far-right rallies in Moscow<sup>134</sup> and a journalists' trip in Kaliningrad.<sup>135</sup> In Donetsk, wearing a Polish Army uniform with Polish emblems, he spoke to participants of a pro-Russian rally on Lenin Square, claiming that the Polish nation supports separatists in Donbas.<sup>136</sup> In July 2019, Bekier went to Russia again for the Second International Forum, The Development of Parliamentarism. The host of the meeting was Zhirinovskiy's Liberal Democratic Party of Russia.<sup>137</sup> Bekier himself describes it as a "convention of the anti-liberal international."<sup>138</sup> In his appeal to Putin and the Russian political class in the Duma, Bekier demanded that Poland leave NATO and the EU, demanded the conclusion of a Polish-Russian alliance, the forced federalisation of Lithuania and territorial autonomy for the Vilnius region, the partition of Ukraine, and the annexation of Lviv to Poland.<sup>139</sup>

However, since the beginning of the Russian invasion in February 2022 and the death of Zhirinovskiy in April 2022, Bekier's public activities have significantly weaned. He publishes little, travels frequently around Europe for recreation, and seems to understand that this is not the time for activities sympathetic to Russia. It is possible that the fate of Piskorski and another of the Change leaders Janusz Niedzwiecki, who has been also arrested by Poland's counter-intelligence, ABW – the Internal Security Agency – and placed in custody, is also a reminder for Bekier.<sup>140</sup>

In the context of Bartosz Bekier, we can talk about multi-threaded cooperation with Russian entities. Not only does he take part in official meetings at the invitation of the Russian side, such as the illiberal congress in the Duma (at the invitation of Zhirinovskiy's party), but he also meets with numerous people associated with the most pro-war part of the Russian establishment, such as Alexander Dugin and Ramzan Kadyrov. He also eagerly accepts invitations to Russia, where he takes part in meetings with officials and intellectuals. He visited areas of Ukraine occupied by Russia, such as Donetsk and Crimea. Additionally, Bekier cooperates closely with Russia's allied regimes, such as Syria and Iran. In the context of Russia, it is difficult to talk about any independence from the Kremlin figures such as Kadyrov or Dugin, as their connections with the secret services and ministries of power are broad and direct. At the same time, Bekier's public activity in Poland and his journalism leave no doubt about his praise for Russia and its foreign policy. At the same time, his Falanga group is responsible for the most infamous act of terror committed by Polish citizens in the last twenty years. There are also connections between the perpetrator of this attack,

Ochsenreiter, and Russia, as he immediately fled there and died after the attack came to light. Therefore, this case is a particularly bright example of multi-sectoral cooperation between a Polish politician and the Russian side, and the participation of entities associated with the Kremlin is very visible.

## **Conclusion**

The Polish far-right remains divided on the Ukrainian issue. Neo-fascist and neo-Nazi groups generally take a pro-Ukrainian stance. On the other hand, the far-right Confederation party and national-Bolshevik groups are largely pro-Russian. It should be noted here that the Confederation is a much larger formation and has a much greater political weight than neo-fascist groups. Grzegorz Braun himself is the most visible MP of the Confederation, active in anti-Ukrainian activities, and a frequent guest of the Russian media. His milieu is full of people manifesting their pro-Russian and anti-Ukrainian views, and they are intensively networked with other European politicians from the pro-Russian camp. This group also includes members of the Polish terrorist organisation Falanga, which comprises the most active supporters of Dugin's ideas in Poland. They are networked and cooperate closely with pro-Russian extremists from Donbas, Syria, and Iran. Overall, this leaves a dismal picture of an active and well-networked pro-Russian camp in Poland, especially since the cases of Braun and Falanga are merely part of a much larger whole that deserves a separate, extensive report.

## ***Recommendations***

- Tightening cooperation with social media corporations in order to effectively remove disinformation, Russian propaganda, and hate speech directed against Ukrainians from their Polish-language media, in particular, fake news, the origin or propagation of which is related to the narratives spread by Russia, such as: it was NATO that attacked Russia, the West is ruled by Big Pharma/LGBTQ+/Jewish plutocrats/elite circle of paedophiles, Ukraine is ruled by neo-Nazis, and a great replacement/genocide of the white race/great reset is taking place in Europe.
- Effective enforcement of Polish law against people breaking it in the context of Russia, which is currently not fully used by law enforcement agencies, and, in particular, the initiation of more intensive prosecution of

crimes such as: praising genocide, praising a war of aggression, and inciting hatred on grounds of ethnic, racial, and religious affiliation.

- In cooperation with the services, researchers, and journalists specialising in the subject, creating a “map” of organisations active in spreading Russian narratives and placing them under counterintelligence surveillance.
- In cooperation with services, researchers, and journalists specialising in the topic, create a map of media active in spreading Russian narratives and placing them under counter-intelligence supervision, and, if legally possible, blocking their operations on Polish territory.
- Initiating large scale analysis and research of pro-Russian circles with a particular focus on groups which, because of their geopolitical views, professed ideology, or former alliances, constitute a direct base for establishing contacts with the Russian side. In the case of Poland, this means primarily: national Bolsheviks, religious integralists, anti-vaccination groups, national democrats, national communists, third-position organisations, border revisionist organisations (in the context of Ukraine, Belarus, and Lithuania), and anti-revisionist communists.
- Creation of an inter-ministerial team combining the ministries of justice, interior affairs, the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Digitalisation (responsible in Poland for combating disinformation) and special services, whose task will be to coordinate multi-sectoral activities aimed at tracking, investigating, and effectively responding to contacts of Polish political entities and individuals with the Russian side, with particular emphasis on government-related Russian media and NGOs.
- Taking action to combat Russian influence in coordination with Poland’s NATO and EU allies, in particular, establishing closer cooperation with special services and bodies operating at the EU and NATO levels, including the RAN, NGOs, and think tanks specialising in the topic.
- Due to the existence of clear personal and organisational ties, the establishment of cooperation with the German special services in the context of the cooperation of the Falanga and Grzegorz Braun with their German allies.



<sup>1</sup> *Ex Oriente Lux* is taken from the Latin term to mean *The Light (of Culture) Comes from the East*.

<sup>2</sup> Lech Wyszczelski. “Bezpieczeństwo wewnętrzne Polski lat 1918–1939 jako czynnik bezpieczeństwa narodowego państwa”, [Internal security of Poland in 1918–1939 as a factor of the state's national security] *Bezpieczeństwo. Teoria i praktyka*, 1–2, 2008.

<sup>3</sup> Katarzyna Lechowicz-Dyl. “Polacy popierają członkostwo Polski w Unii Europejskiej” [Poles support Poland's membership in the European Union]. *Bankier.pl*, July 2023. [www.bankier.pl/wiadomosc/Polacy-popieraja-czlonkostwo-Polski-w-Unii-Europejskiej-8579799.html](http://www.bankier.pl/wiadomosc/Polacy-popieraja-czlonkostwo-Polski-w-Unii-Europejskiej-8579799.html).

<sup>4</sup> Adrian Kowarzy. “Murem za NATO. 92 proc. Polaków popiera obecność kraju w Sojuszu [SONDAŻ]” [Committed to NATO. 92 percent Poles support the country's presence in the Alliance [SURVEY]], *Forsal.pl*, April 2023. [www.forsal.pl/swiat/bezpieczenstwo/artykuly/8695723,murem-za-nato-92-proc-polakow-popiera-obecnosc-kraju-w-sojuszu-sondaz.html](http://www.forsal.pl/swiat/bezpieczenstwo/artykuly/8695723,murem-za-nato-92-proc-polakow-popiera-obecnosc-kraju-w-sojuszu-sondaz.html).

<sup>5</sup> See further: Przemysław Witkowski, *Partia rosyjska*. [The Russian party] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Arbitror, 2023), 318–344 and Anton Shekhovtsov, *Russia and the Western Far Right: Tango Noir*, (New York: Routledge, 2017), 101–131.

<sup>6</sup> See further: Przemysław Witkowski, *Partia rosyjska*. [The Russian party] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Arbitror, 2023), 47–84.

<sup>7</sup> Anastasiia Morozova and Konrad Szczygieł. “Skrzynka z planami Kremla”. [A box with Kremlin plans] *Frontstory*, March 2023. [www.frontstory.pl/mateusz-piskorski-mejle-rosja-szpiegostwo-mirzakhania](http://www.frontstory.pl/mateusz-piskorski-mejle-rosja-szpiegostwo-mirzakhania).

<sup>8</sup> Przemysław Witkowski. “Żywot Mateusza”, [The life of Mateusz] *Krytyka Polityczna*, May 2018. [www.krytykapolityczna.pl/kraj/zywot-mateusza-witkowski-piskorski](http://www.krytykapolityczna.pl/kraj/zywot-mateusza-witkowski-piskorski).

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Violetta Baran. “Trolle Putina w Polsce? Mateusz Piskorski dla WP: nie mówię o przeciwnikach agencji CIA”, [Putin's trolls in Poland? Mateusz Piskorski for WP: I'm not talking about opponents "CIA agents"]. *WP*, February 2015. [www.wiadomosci.wp.pl/trolle-putina-w-polsce-mateusz-piskorski-dla-wp-nie-mowie-o-przeciwnikach-agencji-cia-6027742729306753a](http://www.wiadomosci.wp.pl/trolle-putina-w-polsce-mateusz-piskorski-dla-wp-nie-mowie-o-przeciwnikach-agencji-cia-6027742729306753a).

<sup>11</sup> No author, “Prawnicze partactwo, metody z czasów PRL. Rzecznik ONR krytycznie o wniosku PO”, [Legal bungling, methods from the times of the Polish People's Republic. ONR spokesman is critical of PO's application] *Wprost*, September 2016. [www.wprost.pl/kraj/10022038/prawnicze-partactwo-metody-z-czasow-prl-rzecznik-onr-krytycznie-o-wniosku-po.html](http://www.wprost.pl/kraj/10022038/prawnicze-partactwo-metody-z-czasow-prl-rzecznik-onr-krytycznie-o-wniosku-po.html).

<sup>12</sup> See further: Przemysław Witkowski, *Partia rosyjska* [The Russian party]. (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Arbitror, 2023), 318–344.

<sup>13</sup> See further: Przemysław Witkowski, *Partia rosyjska* [The Russian party]. (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Arbitror, 2023), 17–38.

<sup>14</sup> Tomasz Piątek, “Grzegorz Braun na zdjęciach z podejrzanym o szpiegostwo Rosjaninem. Co ich łączy?” [Grzegorz Braun in photos with a Russian suspected of spying. What do they have in common?], *Wyborcza.pl*, January 2019. [www.wyborcza.pl/7,75398,24353855,grzegorz-braun-na-zdjeciach-z-podejrzanym-o-szpiegostwo-rosjaninem.html](http://www.wyborcza.pl/7,75398,24353855,grzegorz-braun-na-zdjeciach-z-podejrzanym-o-szpiegostwo-rosjaninem.html).

<sup>15</sup> Przemysław Witkowski. “Lider faszystycznej Falangi domaga się w Moskwie przyłączenia do Polski Lwowa” [The leader of the fascist Falange demands in Moscow that Lviv be incorporated into Poland], *OKO.Press*, August 2019. [www.oko.press/lider-faszystycznej-falangi-domaga-sie-w-moskwie-przylaczenia-do-polski-lwowa](http://www.oko.press/lider-faszystycznej-falangi-domaga-sie-w-moskwie-przylaczenia-do-polski-lwowa).

<sup>16</sup> See further: Przemysław Witkowski, *Partia rosyjska [The Russian party]*. (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Arbitror, 2023), 113–119; 155–192.

<sup>17</sup> Anton Shekhovtsov. *Russia and the Western Far Right: Tango Noir*, (New York: Routledge, 2017).

<sup>18</sup> See further: Andreas Umland (Ed.), *The Nature of Russian “Neo-Eurasianism”*: *Approaches to Aleksandr Dugin’s Post-Soviet Movement of Radical Anti-Americanism*, (Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, 2009).

<sup>19</sup> See further: Grzegorz Rzeczkowski, *Obcym alfabetem. Jak ludzie Kremla i PiS zagrali podsłuchami* [In a foreign alphabet. How the Kremlin and PiS people played with wiretapping], (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Arbitror, 2019).

<sup>20</sup> See further: Klementyna Suchanow, *To jest wojna. Kobiety, fundamentaliści i nowe średniowiecze*, [This is war. Women, fundamentalists and the new Middle Ages] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Agora, 2020).

<sup>21</sup> See further: Agnieszka Graff and Elżbieta Korolczuk, *Kto się boi gender? Prawica, populizm i feministyczne strategie oporu*, [Who's afraid of gender? The right, populism and feminist resistance strategies] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2022).

<sup>22</sup> See further: Tomasz Piątek, *Macierewicz i jego tajemnice*, [Macierewicz and his secrets] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Arbitror, 2017).

<sup>23</sup> See further: Mariusz Sepioło, *Narodowcy. Z ulic na szczyty władzy*, [Nationalists. From the streets to the heights of power,] (Kraków: Znak, 2023).

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<sup>29</sup> Tomasz Piątek, “Grzegorz Braun na zdjęciach z podejrzanym o szpiegostwo Rosjaninem. Co ich łączy?”, [Grzegorz Braun in photos with a Russian suspected of spying. What do they have in common?] *Wyborcza.pl*, January 2019. [www.wyborcza.pl/7,75398,24353855,grzegorz-braun-na-zdjeciach-z-podejrzanym-o-szpiegostwo-rosjaninem.html](http://www.wyborcza.pl/7,75398,24353855,grzegorz-braun-na-zdjeciach-z-podejrzanym-o-szpiegostwo-rosjaninem.html).

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## **Conclusion: Patterns of Russian Influence**

**Kacper Rekawek**

Writing in 2018, Anton Shekhovtsov outlined the history of post-1945 Soviet and then Russian engagement with the far-right in Europe. Throughout most of that period this “tango noir,” as he referred to it, had hardly been a systematic process and was mostly limited to individual neo-Nazis or fascists in Western Europe who were run by Moscow’s security services.<sup>1</sup> This changed after 1989 and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. Interestingly, the first Russians to forge connections with far-right actors in the West were not emissaries of the Kremlin, but the nationalist opposition to the administration of President Boris Yeltsin,<sup>2</sup> such as Alexander Dugin, the Svengali-like philosopher who later allegedly gained a lot of policy traction with decision makers in the Kremlin, who travelled to different European capitals and also received prominent far-right guests in Moscow. Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, the infamous leader of the Liberal-Democratic Party of Russia, even attempted to form an entity amounting to a far-right international movement.<sup>3</sup> After the ascension of Vladimir Putin as Russian President, the new authorities in the Kremlin did not immediately endorse such contacts and refrained from implementing a wide-ranging outreach to the far-right/REMVE milieu in the West.<sup>4</sup> As is documented by Witold Jurasz, the regime looked for an ideological narrative it could adopt and then re-package as the national or state’s ideology.<sup>5</sup> Only during Putin’s second term as president (2004-2008) and after the Orange Revolution in Ukraine (2004), when Moscow became increasingly defensive and anti-Western on the world stage and more repressive internally, did the Kremlin eventually opt for political conservatism domestically. This provided an opening for an active outreach to far-right politicians in the West which officially commenced after 2012,<sup>6</sup> and the civic unrest which met the announcement Putin would attempt to run for a third presidential term.<sup>7</sup> In such

conditions, the Kremlin closed ranks and sought non-liberal allies both in Russia, as seen with its often bizarre “alliance” with local far-right/REMVE milieu, and abroad.<sup>8</sup> This outreach set the scene for the events and cases discussed in this volume.

The European or Western far-right/REMVE did not necessarily seek Russia’s support. The readiness to accept Russian influence or outright infiltration has rarely been grounded in genuine or ingrained pro-Russianness of a given actor or entity. The impulse behind this readiness, however, comes from the inherent anti-establishment, anti-mainstream, and anti-Western values of different far-right/REMVE actors. In these conditions, the Kremlin barely has to work to convince such potential allies of its genuinely good intentions.

The imagined community of values between Europe’s traditionalists, “patriots” or “conservatives” and Moscow, which is discussed in the introduction to this volume, helps facilitate different relationships and pushes them to another level.<sup>9</sup> Thus, no longer is this just a game of a given Russian security service running or assisting individual assets in the far-right milieu – business cultural, and student ties also come in handy during the process as these allow for winning over a given individual or an entity to Kremlin’s position. In this regard, the development of ties between Russia and the West in the 1990s and 2000s normalised all types of relations, including among extremes. Finally, Russians living in the West, or those who often travel between Russia and the West, also play prominent roles in developing Moscow’s influence in the far-right/REMVE circles. Before 1989/1991 this was hardly possible as the Soviet Union was a closed society, and Russian diasporas in the West were much less numerically significant (few Russian businessmen or students were based there, for example).

All in all, however, the aforementioned factors were superseded by the Russian “political warfare” strategy described in the book’s introduction. In short, as Russia sees itself unjustly and unfairly treated by real or imaginary Western powers, it attempts to respond to this treatment by effectively waging war on the West without declaring it. The anti-establishment, anti-mainstream, disruptive far-right/REMVE milieu neatly fits into this approach as it is equally anti-Western as Moscow, albeit seemingly for different reasons. At the same time, this union becomes more attractive and obvious if both Russia and the European far-right/REMVE find reasons that bind them. As geopolitics can be tricky and not all Western far-right politicians or activists are keen on Russian territorial expansion or broadening of its sphere of influence Westwards, nor are they big

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fans of Russia's socio-economic or political order, the convergence between the two sides takes place elsewhere. Shared anti-Americanism, anti-Atlanticism, and support for the alleged traditional or family values provides both with a springboard for success and allows Moscow to expand the battlefield of its "political warfare." All of the aforementioned issues led to be the development of a multi-faceted Russian influence on the Western far-right REMVE/milieu.

This volume's ten chapters provide insights into the practicalities of this influence. These describe different individuals, based in different countries, working for very different entities, of varying biographies and social backgrounds. Other cases highlighted entities of varying sizes and influence – be it political parties, cultural institutes, networks, paramilitary organisations, or groups of violent activists. Seemingly, very little binds these diverse actors, but clear patterns of how Russia attempts to influence the far-right/REMVE emerge and are visible across many cases. As will be shown below, this influence is often strategic and direct in nature with Moscow actively, via its officials and state bodies, attempting to curry favour with a given far-right/REMVE entity or individual and aiming to convince them to align with Russia's viewpoints on a given issue(s).

Primarily, this influence is often supported by direct transfers of resources or know-how, or contacts to Russia's Western far-right/REMVE ally. Secondly, however, it often resembles an approach akin to that of soft power practiced by different states with less radical or beyond the pale organisations or individuals abroad. In the latter, hardly any favour or money changes hands, in the former Russia has a string of options ranging from direct bank transfers to far less direct forms of influence such as feeding specific disinformation lines to a given "partner" in Europe. In effect, Russian influence is sometimes diluted and thus hard to pin down and demonstrate directly as it is meant to be low key, passive, or indirect. It is, of course, possible to identify proverbial "smoking guns" in the relationship between the far-right/REMVE in Europe and Russia – such cases are discussed for example in the chapters on Slovakia, Sweden, Poland, and Hungary (for violent or espionage related events) or those on Germany, Austria or Italy (for more grandiose, party and business-related connections). At the same time, however, this book, through its discussion of a broad range of cases, demonstrates the complexity of the issue which needs to be discussed beyond the optics of direct connections (as is demonstrated especially in the chapters on Italy, Poland, Czech Republic, Hungary, and France).

Another issue which warrants discussion is Russia's attempts to exacerbate violent far-right extremism in Europe. It is true that the radical right parties and figures, that is, the democratic but nativist and anti-systemic and non-violent, became the focus of Russia's attention. Moscow rightly assumed that working with or via political parties which in the wake of the 2008 financial and 2015 migrant crises who were gaining popularity would bring more benefit than outright support for the non-democratic and violent extreme-right. This book showcases the examples of the former in Austria, Germany, and Italy. At the same time, however, as Moscow wishes to maintain a broad portfolio of disruptors who would be ready to do its bidding in Europe, it has not shied away from considering or giving support to more extreme elements of the far-right/REMVE milieu. A clear-cut case is Serbia where seemingly non-governmental Russian emissaries liaise with the militant and vigilante People's Patrols. Another example comes from Hungary where the Russian security services liaised with some of the country's most rabid extremists. Moreover, other "independent" Russian entities have a track record of training members of extreme-right Western European organisations (as the chapter on Sweden demonstrates). Moscow is also happy to tolerate conspiracies which effectively lead to attempted terrorist attacks conducted by its clients, such was the case with the multi-layered Polish-German and anti-Ukrainian plot, which ended with an attempted terrorist attack (see: Polish chapter of this volume). Russia's real and imagined might and martial posturing also positively predispose some of the most extreme far-right conspirators towards it. This is most evident in the French and German chapters where violent coup-plotting extremists either seek Russian help or use their alleged connections to Russia to drive recruitment. The Russian macho-militarism also fascinates some Czech or Slovak radicals/extremists and even some of the Austrian identitarians. The following sections enumerate and briefly discuss ten patterns of Russian influence vis-à-vis Europe's far-right/REMVE.

### **Influence via Official Contacts**

Influence via official contacts is the most explicit way of influencing far-right/REMVE actor(s) by Moscow. In short, it entails pairing a political party (most usually) or any other entity from the West with its Russian counterpart and signing an agreement or memorandum of cooperation between the two. Such a move provides the Kremlin with a veneer of deniability as it can maintain the

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pairing is a decision of an entity seemingly independent of Russia. The pairing is accompanied or effectively conducted through public ceremonies, which usually take place in Moscow, such as photoshoots and the establishment of joint expert groups on different issues. Effectively, these may not amount to much in practical terms but tie down or compromise a given Western politician or activist as Russia's ally. At the same time, these could also effectively pave the way for the blossoming of business ties between the two entities or Russian loans and other perks to Western far-right/REMVE officials. These perks range from invitations to meetings or "congresses" in the likes of Moscow or St. Petersburg, to meetings with high-level Russian officials, tours of the country, and presence in Russia state-owned media which also beam its news to international audiences in languages including English. Such developments are covered in chapters on Germany, Austria, and Italy but its traces, on a smaller scale and related to less high-profile European far-right individuals, are also found in the chapters on Poland or Sweden.

### **Influence through Foreign Governments**

Influence through official contacts can reach another level when a pro-Russian party gets into government. This is mostly the case with Serbia, which is run by a government dominated by SNS, a post-nationalist party, itself a splinter group from the country's traditional far-right political force, the Serbian Radical Party (SRS) which up to this day is led by Vojislav Šešelj. The SNS seems to balance between engagement with the EU and Russia, and, as Predrag Petrović outlines in his chapter, attempts to play one against the other while maintaining an iron grip on Serbia's politics. In this sense, the Belgrade government both represses and encourages the political forces to its right, including the plethora of parliamentary or extra-parliamentary entities, so that it can then turn around to both Brussels and Moscow and pitch itself as a steady pair of hands to either of the benefactors. Thus, to an extent, all these forces seem to be playing a role in a theatre of "political technology", as devised by president Vučić and his government. Notably, the term "political technology" is associated with Russia and especially Vladislav Surkov who is infamous for his usage of "pseudo-experts, technical parties, fake civic organizations and youth movement [...] and covert media techniques" to animate the Russian political system and provide it with a veneer of genuine competition.<sup>10</sup>



At the same time as Belgrade balances Brussels and Moscow, its security structures, energy companies, state, and private media, generally all either cooperate with their Russian counterparts or craft narratives beneficial to the Kremlin. This acts as another form of insulation for the Serbian government through which it earns Moscow's appreciation. Consequently, it allows for some breathing space in its relations in the EU, especially in relation to the Kosovo issue. In this arrangement, Russia is by no means a passive actor, as it constantly monitors Belgrade's behaviour and effectively threatens to shift its support away from the SNS towards more extreme sections of Serbian nationalism. Moscow signals this possibility while allowing for growing links between Russian far-right, which as has been demonstrated throughout this volume is effectively curated by the Kremlin, and their Serbian counterparts who are not completely under Belgrade's control.

Edit Zgut-Przybylska's chapter on Hungary dissects a similar dynamic in Hungary. Victor Orbán's government also seems to be locked in a love-hate relationship with political forces to its right, previously Jobbik (now referred to as *Mi Hazánk*), which are more radical and effectively, more pro-Russian than Orbán's governing Fidesz party. This allows the government to present a more moderate face to Brussels but also to use the local far-right to test the political waters while, for example, making anti-Ukrainian statements and attempt to curry favour with Moscow. Simultaneously, the government represses acts of far-right militancy but seems to have been caught off guard when some of the militants developed relations with Russian security services. It is becoming clear that for Russia the Hungarian far-right or REMVE militants are useful not as disruptors of Hungary, but more as local proponents of seemingly unconceivable geopolitical changes, such as the redrawing of borders in Europe. This longing for restoration of Greater Hungary turns the Hungarian far-right into plausibly obvious allies of Moscow which itself is intent on striking a blow to geopolitical arrangements which emerged post-1989 in Europe.

### **Influence via Infiltration**

This attempt to influence local far-right/REMVE scenes is modelled on the Soviet/Russian approach to the European far-right/REMVE prior to 2012. In short, it relies on Russian intelligence organisations running single members of the milieu who were found interesting as sources of information or agents of

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influence. Not all of this volume's chapters discuss such cases but one can imagine that this pattern has been represented in many of the Western far-right/REMVE milieus throughout the last decades. Nonetheless, chapters by Zgut-Przybylska and Milo, on Hungary and Slovakia, do provide the readers with examples of Russian espionage operations related to the far-right/REMVE milieu. In the first case, the individual concerned, Béla Kovács, rose to become an MEP in Brussels/Strasbourg. The Slovak case is less high profile but nonetheless testifies to the Russian interest in nationalist or more extreme circles of a given country. Such actions, if they attract too much attention, can go wrong from Russia's point of view. However, they can also provide Russia with genuine knowledge of the ins and outs of the political systems of a given country and, if Moscow's agent is well-positioned and networked, allow it to work towards bringing a given political entity towards more pro-Russian positions, as was the case with the Hungarian party Jobbik.

### **Influence via Ideological Commonality**

As the introduction and especially the chapters on Italy, Germany, Austria, and Slovakia demonstrated, the European far-right/REMVE milieu to a large extent regards Russia as a role model as far as the socio-political organisation of the state is concerned. In this reading of the situation states need strong, nationalistic, conservative, pro-family, traditionalist, anti-modern leaders who proverbially look after their people and oppose the imaginary diktat of the liberal elites. As Russia allegedly delivers this, then it should be of little surprise that some far-right/REMVE leaders effectively became smitten with the country while describing it in almost religious terms while contrasting it with their seemingly declining homelands. Such a perception of Russia is fuelled by its vastness, alleged mysticism, and rawness – all allegedly no longer available in the West. The fact that Russia is repressing its own local right-wing scene, or that the regime is turning into a kleptocracy, does not seem to bother far-right Europeans. In this sense, its otherness, vastness, and removal from Europe or the West works in its favour as it is perceived to be true to its roots and helping to cement a heterogeneity of the world – a cause to celebrate for all far-right/REMVE individuals.<sup>11</sup>

## **Influence via “Imagined” Russia**

As much as Russia looks like a role model of an idealised organisation of the state for far-right/REMVE actors, Moscow is also able to gain seemingly surprising allies outside the radically nationalist milieu who also imagine Russia in a very specific way. In the process, it becomes evident they share a lot with their far-right/REMVE counterparts but also possess a unique perception of the country. These allies are equally anti-immigrant, anti-NATO, anti-EU, anti-liberal and anti-LGBTQ+ as their far-right/REMVE counterparts but would balk at being labelled nationalist or fascist. This is mostly evident in the Czech and Slovak chapter of the volume which describe cases in which different political milieus, akin to the far-right/REMVE, also imagine Russia in a specific way. They idealise the past when the Central-Eastern European countries were joined in a geopolitical bloc with the Soviet Union. This allowed for the construction of an imagined pan-Slavic community under the Soviet, effectively Russian, leadership which opposed capitalism and imperialism. In the eyes of some of the Czech and Slovak militants, this should be continued after 1989 with the Russian Federation as the natural successor to the Soviet Union in this arrangement. These militants, as was shown especially by Milo in the Slovak chapter, do not necessarily see themselves as far-right/REMVE and often perceive themselves more in the anti-imperialist tradition of the far-left. Their ideological stances, however, have a lot in common with those of the milieu that Russia has been engaging with and infiltrating post-2012.

The Russian readiness to engage such militants or activists testifies to Moscow’s ability to tailor its attempts at influencing the country’s political disruptors depending on the local conditions. If it means rekindling the old flame of the Soviet friendship, then the Kremlin will not look unfavourably towards such ideas. This does not mean, however, that all such initiatives end with success. The travails of some of the Czech militants who joined the Russian side in its war against Ukraine as early as 2014 provide a fascinating case study in this respect.<sup>12</sup> These individuals from the Czech pan-Slavic milieu allegedly went there to train in preparation for violent actions at home but found themselves not particularly welcomed by the Russians or Donetsk or Luhansk “People’s Republics,” and then shunned once their ill-coordinated training plan came to light.

### **Influence via Ideological Pioneers**

The far-right/REMVE fascination with Russia partly developed through its engagements not with the Russian government, which started around 2012, but with seemingly independent far-right/REMVE Russian figures. They were the pioneers in winning accolades of their Western colleagues who were later provided with a toolkit, be it financial, cultural, or personal, to direct their fascination towards the Kremlin. None played (or plays) this role better than Alexander Dugin, and he is often made into a Svengali-like figure who whispers into the ear of Vladimir Putin,<sup>13</sup> and some regard him almost as a towering intellectual.<sup>14</sup> In fact, he is a child of the Soviet establishment who rebelled against it, was a far-right outcast in the early years of the Russian Federation, later found himself employed in the Russian academia, also by its military institutions, and effectively became more influential as a philosopher and a thinker abroad than at home.<sup>15</sup> After 1989 he build up a sizeable following in the West and cast himself as the all-knowing, prophet-like, keeper of wisdom unavailable to mortals who were blinded by their belief in Fukuyama's "end of history." He appealed to both the far-right and the far-left and could attempt to claim independence from the Kremlin, which strengthened his anti-systemic credentials to different European radicals.

This volume amply demonstrates Dugin's outreach and standing he enjoyed among the far-right/REMVE in the West. It is not so much that they cooperated with him, but referenced his ideas and related their geopolitical analyses to his. A great example is the Falanga milieu in Poland discussed by Witkowski. Interestingly enough, Dugin seemingly fell out of favour with the Kremlin in 2014, when his anti-Ukrainian radicalism was too much even for Russian standards, a mere two years after Moscow's decision to engage far-right/REMVE milieu in the West.<sup>16</sup> Nonetheless, the legacy of his presence on the far-right lecture circuit in Europe prior to 2012, and that of his publications, still lingers in the milieu and allows Russia (which has seemingly washed its hands off him) to still refer to him as an alleged reference point or even a role model while communicating with some of the anti-Western radicals of Europe. Consequently, Moscow is able to build up its influence in these circles.

### **Influence via the Media**

Russia invests in its media conglomerate so that it can extend beyond the country's borders. After 2012, and prior to the commencement of the full-scale war between Russia and Ukraine in February 2022, state-controlled media like Russia Today and Sputnik freely beamed Russian propaganda across different European countries.<sup>17</sup> For reasons outlined in this volume, these channels attract viewers or listeners who rejected the mainstream or traditional media, regarded as compromised or non-objective. The value of such channels to far-right or anti-government individuals in Europe was exacerbated by the fact that Russia's messaging came in different shapes and forms. This included not only the two aforementioned channels, which had their "national" services, but also local news, websites and finally multilingual channels on social media which effectively acted as disinformation or "re-information" media. Russia co-sponsored these or lent elements of its state media infrastructure to boost their coverage or increase their professionalism and outreach. Such "media" were then tasked with promoting certain speakers or talking heads – local pro-Russian far-right/REMVE individuals featured prominently in these. This arrangement created a dynamic of dependency between the two as only these "media" were keen on giving unrestricted access to such political leaders or operators. The latter were grateful for such opportunities and have a track record of pandering to the most anti-systemic views to satisfy the disinformation or "reinformation" urges of listeners and viewers of such "media" outlets.

### **Influence via Far-Right/REMVE Militants**

Russia's image, and that of President Putin as the world's last standing strongman seemed to have played a role in situations in which Moscow was not actively attempting to influence the local far-right/REMVE milieu but was instead courted by courtiers of that scene who expected Russia to offer assistance to their political projects. Such was the case with the seemingly outlandish coup plots in France, as detailed by Nicolas Hénin, and Germany, as outlined by Anton Shekhovtsov. These plotters sat at the intersection of the far-right and the anti-government (AGE)/anti-systemic milieus, which might have complicated their potential for outreach and forging of relations with Moscow.<sup>18</sup> As was discussed, Moscow has an impressive track record of liaising with the far-right, a process which intensified after 2012, but seems to be yet finding its feet while dealing with the

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post-COVID-19 militants of the AGE type. This might be the reason why it largely spurned the overtures of the German plotters and hardly even registered the fanciful French attempt.

Russia might not have been interested in liaising with the German or the French far-right coup plotters but is not averse to infiltrating the far-right paramilitary organisations of Europe. Moreover, it also is open to discussions, often via seemingly independent proxies, with the most extreme and violent elements of a given country's far-right/REMVE scenes. This has been the case with Sweden where it deputised the Russian Imperial Movement to liaise with the Nordic Resistance Movement or its German proxies to enlist the co-operation of individual members of the Polish Falanga for nefarious purposes in Ukraine. Such moves provide the Kremlin with a wider portfolio of entities it can potentially call upon from a given far-right/REMVE milieu. Such moves, however, come at a price when the foreign partner decides to conduct violent or even terrorist operations of their own volition. This was the situation in Sweden where the militants of the Nordic Resistance Movement, who trained in Russia in facilities run by the Russian Imperial Movement, effectively went rogue and organised a string of bombings without the knowledge or approval of their Swedish or Russian patrons. Probably for this reason, as Russia wishes to avoid diplomatic fallout from such incidents, the practice of providing Russian territory to scores of far-right/REMVE militants for "training" is less widespread than one might suspect.<sup>19</sup> Nonetheless, such a channel has been, and could potentially be used, by Moscow to again influence developments in a given Western country.

### **Influence via the Paramilitaries**

Moscow also seems to have developed a soft spot for the not only more radical but also action oriented members of different far-right/REMVE scenes. This is clearly visible in its attempts to infiltrate the far-right paramilitary milieu of Hungary, as documented by Zgut-Przybylska, or its indirect drawing on members of this milieu in Poland to stage a terrorist attack in Ukraine, as outlined by Witkowski in his chapter. The Hungarian paramilitaries might have been interesting to Moscow due to their long-standing and high-level political and social connections, and in the Polish case as they could have been more easily manipulated to act against the hated "Banderites" (a slur term for Ukrainians favoured by the Kremlin).<sup>20</sup> At the same time, Moscow's connection was also

evident in the development of Slovak Conscripts (SB), as described by Milo in his chapter on Slovakia. This was a seemingly non-far right organisation, but if one was to scrutinise its anti-immigrant and anti-EU/NATO but pro-Russian messaging, then it would not be far-fetched to assume its members would have felt at ease amongst some of the REMVE individuals described in the volume's other chapters. Russia, a disruptor, a seemingly "active" force in international politics, looked like an obvious choice for a youngster, and SB founder, who attempted to find a practical but also a political inspiration for his actions.<sup>21</sup>

### **Influence via Exiles**

As was demonstrated in the volume, with France as the most obvious case, Russia hosts individual figures of the European far-right/REMVE and refuses to send them back to their countries of origin. These individuals act as "refugees" who are running away from partisan authorities back at home as these are intent on allegedly imprisoning them because of their views. Russia refuses to extradite these and some, like the Frenchman Joël Sambuis, are beaming anti-Western and pro-Russian messages into the online sphere. Their standing and reach may not be as wide as they had been before their escape to Russia, but their functioning in Moscow attests to the latter's image of a protector and provider for like-minded anti-systemic forces of the world. This is exacerbated by the presence in Russia of figures such as Rinaldo Nazzaro, the former leader of The Base – a group designated as a terrorist organisation in the likes of Canada or the UK.<sup>22</sup> These individuals could potentially be useful to the Kremlin if it ever decided to proverbially activate them as agents of its influence in different far-right/REMVE milieus of the West.

### **Conclusion**

As the types and scale of Russian infiltration of the European far-right/REMVE milieu are multifaceted, albeit far from comprehensive in certain cases, a discussion on relevant countermeasures is often challenging. There is no one quick fix nor one-size-fits-all type of a scenario which could be implemented immediately. The book's national chapters all include sections devoted to recommendations and ways forward, and these present a case for a thorough and ambitious policy response. Moreover, they also indicate areas of transnational

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commonality, i.e. approaches and solutions which could be replicated across different European countries.

The central message of these recommendations is the need to own up to the damage Russia has been able to inflict upon Western polities via different means. These need to be enumerated and described in detail so that a meaningful process of change could be then ignited. A few chapters include ideas on the establishment of parliamentary or extra-parliamentary investigative committees to dissect connections between authorities, government parties, and other institutions in Russia. Their development, however, would be hampered by the fact that, as this book demonstrated, in certain cases, those who fear exposure via such committees or commissions are often either in or around power in a string of European states. Of course, the full-scale Russian aggression against Ukraine allows for a political climate in which Moscow's former allies or benefactors would be forced to distance themselves from Putin's regime, but this is often only temporary or cursory in nature. Nonetheless, any platform or avenue which highlights findings on Russia's infiltration of a given Western country, should be taken into consideration, and used to its utmost capacity in an attempt to block further Russian activities.

Such platforms also allow for a more selective "naming and shaming" of given cliques or groups. A lot of ire is concentrated on politicians who, for example, benefited from Moscow's largesse. Equally critical voices could be raised in relation to the media in general and journalists in particular as these shape opinion in different countries. On many occasions, especially among the less professional so-called "media influencers" or "alternative media," these played malign roles in an unquestioning transmission of pro-Russian or anti-Western talking points.

Many chapters also include calls to beef up (counter-)intelligence funding so that the security services have more resources to monitor Russian activities. Given the reality of the aforementioned aggression, such calls should not fall on deaf ears, nor should they be seen as extravagant. Of course, how this money is spent will depend on a given country as some seem better prepared to counter Russian disinformation or "hybrid" operations, whereas others still lag behind in this field. One difficulty, however, while contemplating such an increase in funding is the issue of its immediate efficacy. Many of the cases described in this book touch upon situations in which a given Western individual, group, party etc. did nothing outwardly illegal. At the end of the day, going to Moscow for a "conference" or a "study trip" is not criminal. Neither is signing an association agreement with a



seemingly comparable Russian organisation. In this sense, more resources and consequently, more monitoring of such activities will not produce, or will not automatically produce, criminal cases or prosecutions. It will, however, strengthen the understanding of how Russia operates via its favourite disruptors of the last decade – far right/REMVE activists and politicians – and should thus be supported.

Seemingly, this is a straightforward case as one would have to describe and then sell, from a public relations point of view, the stories of Russian dealings with the local far-right. Unfortunately, in today's political climate, the proverbial "far-right" is often considered part of the political mainstream, and it remains highly sensitive to any accusation connecting it with foreign influence. In this sense, provision of smoking guns as described in previous chapters – the Ibiza video (attack), the Uzhorod attack (Poland) or the Garbar recording (Slovakia) which embarrassed elements of a given country's far-right – help pave the way for a more robust and direct communications policy on the scale of Russian attempts to work with or through the local extreme elements.

A lot of the suggested countermeasures centred on the issue of disinformation through which Russia concretises its foreign policy narratives, and where it socialises its fans, supporters, admirers etc. into these. Suggestions to block foreign sponsored disinformation through the banning and blocking of websites and profiles spreading serious, foreign-funded disinformation or engaging in Foreign Information Manipulation and Influence (FIMI) stood out. The creation of rapid response strategic communications teams also stood out, which would be activated during given social, political, economic or health crises in a given country. Their task would be to proverbially "flood the airwaves" with truthful narratives to oppose Russian disinformation which thrives on crises and division.

Finally, some diverging recommendations come from countries in which the Russia-far-right axis is also joined, more or less willingly, by the local governments, which themselves either pander to the far-right sentiments or are politically radical. These governments should be deprived of EU funds, which is a process more straightforward in the case of EU candidates and not EU Member States. At the same time, European institutions, and other allied governments, such as the U.S. or Canada, if providing funding to any policy initiatives in such countries, should target actors operating locally and independent of these governments.

## CONCLUSION

The broad scope of the recommendations included in this volume not only testifies to Russia's multifaceted attempt to work with or via the European far-right/REMVE, but also to a broader socio-political malaise now plaguing the West. It is now evident that cosyng up to Moscow and aligning with itself on a broad range of issues, from foreign policy stances to social issues such as one's views on LGBTQ+ community, has now been normalised and mainstreamed. Thus, naming and shaming, strengthening one's security structures, or better countering disinformation may not suffice to stop Russia's influence operations with Europe's disruptors. In this sense, not only does the West need to “disrupt the disruptors” but also accordingly address the problem at its source in Russia. This, however, could be the topic of the next volume on the Russia-far-right/REMVE axis in Europe.

<sup>1</sup> See Chapter 3 of this book by Anton Shekhovstov.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 55.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71.

<sup>4</sup> For a reconstruction of how Russia attempted to work with and through the Western far-right/REMVE, and for appreciation that Moscow first zoomed in on the process of creating “the Russian world” as an antecedent to all this, see: Michel Eltchaninoff, *Inside the Mind of Vladimir Putin*, London: Hurst, 2018, pp. 157-71.

<sup>5</sup> Witold Jurasz, *Demony Rosji* [Demons of Russia], Warszawa: Czerwone i Czarne, 2022, kindle edition, loc. 485.

<sup>6</sup> Shekhovtsov, pp. 85-7.

<sup>7</sup> See: Masha Gessen, *The Future Is History. How Totalitarianism Reclaimed Russia*, New York: Riverhead Books, 2017, pp. 360-465 for an account of these protests.

<sup>8</sup> See: Robert Horvath, *Putin’s Fascists. Russkii Obraz and the Politics of Managed Nationalism in Russia* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2022).

<sup>9</sup> See, e.g. Jean Thiriart, *Europe. An Empire of 400 Million*, London: Arktos, 2021.

<sup>10</sup> See: Sanshiro Hosaka, “Welcome to Surkov’s Theater: Russian Political Technology in the Donbas War,” *Nationalities Papers*, Volume 47, Special Issue 5: Special Issue on the Donbas Conflict, September 2019, pp. 750 – 773.

<sup>11</sup> See: Kacper Rekawek, *Career Break or a New Career? Extremist Foreign Fighters in Ukraine*, April 2020, Berlin: Counter Extremism Project, [https://www.counterextremism.com/sites/default/files/CEP%20Report\\_Career%20Break%20or%20a%20New%20Career\\_Extremist%20Foreign%20Fighters%20in%20Ukraine\\_April%202020.pdf](https://www.counterextremism.com/sites/default/files/CEP%20Report_Career%20Break%20or%20a%20New%20Career_Extremist%20Foreign%20Fighters%20in%20Ukraine_April%202020.pdf).

<sup>12</sup> Kacper Rekawek, *Foreign Fighters in Ukraine. The Brown-Red Cocktail*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2023, pp. 176-82.

<sup>13</sup> For a more realistic presentation of Dugin, his philosophy and his actual influence on the Russian domestic or foreign policy, see: Andreas Umland, “Post-Soviet ‘Uncivil Society’ and the Rise of Aleksandr Dugin: A Case Study of the Extraparliamentary Radical Right in Contemporary Russia,” Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of Social and Political Sciences of the University of Cambridge for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, January 2007, <https://deliverypdf.ssrn.com/delivery.php?ID=757114096124124125090095003015089023030092050084043069014030069120089117098113070110018011103047026000040101126113083005127121045037034011050080082083067096090081007063022004068112064000006110023119082064119020066010106112126030067084069027124120006086&EXT=pdf&INDEX=TRUE>.

<sup>14</sup> See: Tei Benjamin R. Teitelbaum, *War for Eternity: The Return of Traditionalism and the Rise of the Populist Right* (London: Penguin, 2020).

<sup>15</sup> For Dugin’s early years see: Gessen.

<sup>16</sup> Dugin openly incited to violence or mass murder of Ukrainians in an interview. See: Charles Clover, *Black Wind, White Snow. The Rise of Russia’s New Nationalism*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016, p. 327.

<sup>17</sup> As was demonstrated by RFE/RL, the ban on these two media, introduced in early 2022, is far from perfect two years later as their services are accessible to viewers from Brussels. See: Gjeraqina Tuhina, “Two Years Into EU Ban, Russia’s RT And Sputnik Are Still Accessible Across The EU,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 3 February 2024, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-rt-sputnik-eu-access-bans-propaganda-ukraine-war/32803929.html>.

## CONCLUSION

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<sup>18</sup> On AGE – anti-government extremism see e.g.: Bàrbara Molas, “A Comparative Assessment of Anti-Government Attacks in Germany, the US, and Brazil,” *ICCT Policy Brief*, September 2023, <https://www.icct.nl/sites/default/files/2023-09/Molas%20-%20The%20Insurrection%20Wave%20final%20to%20publish.pdf>.

<sup>19</sup> Kristie Pladson, “German neo-Nazis trained in Russia: report,” *DW*, 6 May 2020, <https://www.dw.com/en/german-neo-nazis-trained-at-russian-camps-report/a-53692907>.

<sup>20</sup> Alexander J. Motyl, “The Language of Russia’s War on Ukraine,” *Foreign Policy*, 13 March 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/03/13/putin-ukraine-russia-war-language-shibboleth-palyanitsya/>.

<sup>21</sup> For more on this concept see: Rekawek 2020.

<sup>22</sup> BBC News, “Neo-Nazi Rinaldo Nazzaro running US militant group The Base from Russia,” 24 January 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-51236915>.



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# RUSSIA AND THE FAR-RIGHT INSIGHTS FROM TEN EUROPEAN COUNTRIES

Russia's influence over far-right/ racially or ethnically motivated violent extremist (REMVE) milieus in Europe is multi-faceted and complex. It involves direct activities, such as financing or political support, as well as indirect activities, such as disinformation campaigns. In some cases, Russia was associated, albeit remotely, to some far-right violent incidents in Europe, including the alleged coup attempt by the sovereign movement Reichsbürger, in Germany. Recognising the increasingly confrontational policy of Russia vis-à-vis Europe, and the growing threat from far-right extremism in Europe, this book thoroughly and systematically reviews Russia's relationship with diverse far-right actors in ten European countries over the past decade. The countries covered in this book include Austria, The Czech Republic, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Poland, Serbia, Slovakia, and Sweden. The chapters are authored by some of the world's most authoritative experts on extremism and Russian influence.

Overall, this edited volume is the first such comprehensive attempt at mapping the scope and depth of Russian influence over far-right extremism in Europe, resulting in the identification of key patterns of influence and offering some possible recommendations to counter it. This book is both a leading scholarly work, as well as a wake-up call and guide for action for European policy-makers.

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