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Russia, Europe and the Far Right

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Russia's Bedfellowing Policy and the European Far Right

By Marlene Laruelle, Washington DC

Abstract

Vladimir Putin's trip to Budapest in February 2015, followed by his visit to the newly elected Greek prime minister Alexis Tsipras in April have caused a lot of ink to be spilled and triggered anxiety in European leaders and institutions of the European Union. These trips are only the tip of the iceberg of Russia's increasing influence in Europe and its policy of looking after new allies inside the EU. Contrary to what many pundits claim about Russia's being outside Europe, Russia is *in* Europe, through a good many channels. One of them is its influences, both old and new, among certain countries and political parties.

Historically, the Balkan region has been an area of Russian influence since the nineteenth century, when Russia acted as the torchbearer for Orthodox peoples in their struggles for national liberation from Ottoman domination, and more recently in the 1990s, when Russia's position on the Yugoslav crisis and its support for Serbia led Slavophile and pan-Orthodox feelings in the region. Today, Russia is able to count on the support of Serbia and Montenegro but also of Bulgaria, Greece, and Cyprus. In Central Europe, the Visegrad countries are divided in their attitude toward Russia. Although Poland stands proudly in the camp of those strongly opposed to Russia—and is aligned with the Baltic states—the other three countries, Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary, are more nuanced. Their pro-NATO postures from the 1990s and 2000s have weakened, and their economic ties to Russia are now pushing them to soften their positions. Hungary stands out for its vibrant pro-Russia policy, atypical for a country that has vivid memories of its socialist decades as Moscow's stronghold, most notably the Soviet invasion in 1956, and which has long seen itself as a part of the West. However, the atmosphere changed with the global financial crisis of 2008. Russia now benefits from double support in Hungary: from the far right party Jobbik, and from Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and his Fidesz party.

In Western Europe, France and Italy have been two of the main outposts of Russian influence, likely for a combination of reasons: traditional Russophilia linked to the dominant role of the Communist parties in French and Italian intellectual life, and a lack of historical conflicts or direct economic dependency on Russia. However, the situations of the pro-Russia groups differ significantly in the two countries. In Italy, Vladimir Putin has built close personal and family ties with Silvio Berlusconi and his business partners. The Northern League, which advances an agenda of conservative moral values, has always displayed pro-Russian stances and has provocatively asked for Russia to join the EU. Moscow does not have the same range of allies in France. Although some in the French economic circles close to Nicolas

Sarkozy's Union for a Popular Movement are major players on the Russian market (the defense industry, investment funds, and communications), Russia does not have a Berlusconi equivalent to promote its interests in France. However, Moscow has played its card in the form of its support for the National Front (FN), which in a few years has risen in prominence, and several other figures on the radical right such as Philippe de Villiers. Almost everywhere else in Europe, but to a lesser extent, pro-Russian voices are now also being increasingly heard.

How are we to apprehend this new aspect of the Europe–Russia relationship? What does it tell us about changes in European political culture, and about Russia's soft power? These questions are the topic of a new edited volume, *Eurasianism and European Far Right: Reshaping the Europe–Russia Relationship* (Lexington, 2015).

Russia's Vision of a New World Order

In the past, Soviet Union built up a vast community of bedfellows all over the world, and relied on a very structured network of friendship associations, front organizations, twin cities, and movements with declared political goals (peace promotion, etc.) seen as supporting its overall agenda. However, this form of public diplomacy quickly fell apart following the onset of perestroika and the collapse of the USSR, and took some time to be rebuilt. It re-emerged during Vladimir Putin's second mandate (2004–2008), at a time when Russia's strategy of embracing globalization was at its strongest. The country's economy was flourishing, its authorities were confident in its new-found power and its attempts to reintegrate Russia back into global economic and political processes. But they had to contend with the challenges of colored revolutions and with mounting criticisms of the country's domestic evolutions.

It was during this second mandate that the new methods of public diplomacy were taking shape. In 2004 Moscow launched the Valdai Club, a platform to create a dialogue of international experts on Rus-

sia; in 2007, it founded the Institute for Democracy and Cooperation, in order to advance its own perception of the values of human rights and democracy, ones that agreed with the 'sovereign democracy' crafted by Vladislav Surkov; in 2008, the Public Diplomacy Foundation was launched, and in 2010 the Russian Council on International Affairs, another expert platform on international affairs was established. At the same time Russia also invested massive sums in its information space by launching many new media initiatives both for Russian-speaking audiences as well as for the international community, such as Russia Today or Russia Beyond the Headlines.

This 'bedfellowing' policy has been built on an ideological agenda that has taken some time to develop. It can be briefly defined as follows: Russia denounces the hypocrisy and double standards of the Western world order, which pretends that Western countries, and especially the United States, promote an idealist agenda of democracy promotion, human rights, and the right to interfere on humanitarian grounds. However, Washington's foreign policy, Russia insists, is in fact shaped by purely realistic, strategic interests: it aims to preserve the supremacy of its military, financial and industrial capabilities, to maintain its allies—Europe, Japan, Israel—in a situation of security dependence, and to ensure that no competition emerges from other countries or regional blocks.

Russia states that US dominance is structural to the world order as it has been constructed: laws have been made in favor of the US's zigzagging interpretations; the dollar-based, world trade system and the loan system of the international financial institutions cement US financial supremacy; and the information space and the Internet are under hidden US control, as shown by the geographical location of servers and providers, and so on.

In turn, Russia seeks to denounce this form of realpolitik, and to establish alternatives to American global dominance. These alternatives are made up of several elements, including: respect for state sovereignty in a Westphalian sense (Russia considers the cases of Georgia and Ukraine to lie outside this norm because their sovereignty is deemed false, for several reasons on which I will not dwell here); an emphasis on the UN General Assembly as the sole authentic bearer of world opinion; a promotion of alternate regional platforms such as BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) or the Shanghai Cooperation Organization; a delegitimization of NATO as a symbol of Western unilateral interference; a refusal to support any US policy of overthrowing current regimes in the name of democratic claims (a lesson learnt from the Arab Springs, and the management of the Libyan crisis, and

which is expressed through Russia's infallible support for Bashar Al-Assad in Syria); the gradual building of an alternate financial order (BRICS' New Development Bank, non-dollar based mutual energy deals, currency swaps and foreign direct investment); and policies to challenge US supremacy over the information space and the digital world.

Russia's call for a new world order obviously serves its own strategic goals: it slows down the drop in Moscow's international leverage, consolidates its power in the region, its political regime, and postpones the need for economic reforms. In its strategy, Russia looks to China as its main ally, as only China's financial and economic clout can make this alternative plausible. The alliance is nonetheless ambivalent for two main reasons: firstly, Beijing may share with Moscow the same final goal, but its means of reaching it are different, less immediate and less confrontational; and 2. the long-term balance between the two countries does not play in Russia's favor—indeed, it is difficult to envisage what place and status Russia would have in a China-dominated world.

Russia's New Friends in Europe

Russia has also discovered new allies in Europe. Its agenda in Europe is part of its broader perception of how it would like the international order to be remade: Europe is urged to distance itself from the United States and establish its own diplomatic and defense structures, ones that are less trans-Atlantic, and perhaps even anti-NATO; to develop a continental geopolitical axis embodied by the Paris–Berlin–Moscow Triangle; whilst discouraging the extension of EU membership to countries in the 'shared neighborhood' with Russia. Moscow's vision of Europe would also reduce the supranational and normative agenda of European institutions and give priority to a 'Europe of nations', where the diversity of nation-states would be maintained and in which Europe would not try to export its values and norms to the rest of the world.

Two political tendencies in Europe share a similar agenda: the radical left, whether ex-communist or not; and the extreme right. The prospects of the former being able to leverage influence across Europe are rather limited, even if some left-leaning groups have recently gained some influence in Southern Europe (Greece, Spain, Italy); while forecasts for the latter being able to disrupt the European scene are much stronger and more realistic. Moreover, part of the agenda of the radical left is critical of the nature of Russia's political regime, and puts forward a libertarian vision of society in terms of values (recognition of all sorts of minorities, in particular sexual, the promotion of the right to difference, participatory democracy, theories of degrowth, etc.), which is

not at all to Moscow's taste. On the contrary, the European far-right endorses a conservative model of society, including: respect for traditional social and religious, and therefore of political, hierarchies; retaining a conventional family model; reinforcing the role of a strong state and of the personality of the state leader, which is currently also viewed positively in Russia. The Political Capital Institute, a Hungarian think tank, has noted in a study of Russian connections to Europe that the only extreme-right parties hostile to Moscow are situated in countries that border Russia and have a long historical memory of conflict with their much-larger neighbor. For Finland, Latvia, and Romania, nationalism can only be anti-Russian.¹ For all the others, being Russophile can be inscribed without much trouble within their own agenda and narrative.

The Kremlin's strategy of 'bedfellowing' with the European far right strongly corresponds with Europe's current weaknesses and internal contradictions. Yet, it also comes with its own two considerable drawbacks.

1. The European left's old Russophile tradition stems from its earlier links and connections with communist parties allied or at least sympathetic to the Soviet Union (even if anti-communism also shaped some European lefts, especially those marked by anarchism, and then by Trotskyism and Maoism), but the Russophile tradition on the European far right is far more ambivalent. It is not, however, nonexistent: from the start of the 1920s, the so-called German 'Conservative Revolution', calling for a fascist regime inspired by Mussolini's Italy, was also looking towards the East. In some Italian and German fascist movements, Bolshevik Russia—before the Stalinist 'Great Turn' of 1929—engendered admiration for its ability to generate revolutionary violence and to effectuate the necessary *tabula rasa* required for the birth of a new mankind. However, the racist policy of Nazism, which considered the Slavs to be an inferior race and the USSR as the mortal enemy of the Third Reich, put an end to this tradition. In the postwar years, only a few minority groups on the European far right, the so-called National-Bolsheviks, have remained supporters of a 'Europe of nations from Dublin to Vladivostok', such as that of Jean-François Thiriart, who stated in the early 1980s: "If Moscow wants to make Europe European, I preach total collaboration with the Soviet enter-

prise. I will then be the first to put a red star on my cap. Soviet Europe, yes, without reservations."²

2. Maybe more importantly, the marriage between the Putin regime and European far right is in many ways one of convenience. On the one hand, these two camps do indeed share the same enemies: EU institutions, liberalism in terms of moral values, individualistic values, and the "loose consensus" of parliamentary democracy. However, on the other hand, the Kremlin is currently seeking to establish a brand for Russia that depicts it as a torchbearer of European conservatism. However, it has not extensively tried to recruit support in the more mainstream conservative circles (e.g., the CDU/CSU in Germany, the UMP in France, and the Conservative party in the UK) except in Hungary with Fidesz, but rather among the more extreme fringes of the right. Despite promoting an ideology of stability, the Kremlin cooperates with parties that are still partly inspired by twilight ideologies. It was unable to find any allies in conservative European circles and had no choice but to consolidate ties with the only groups that were ready to create a tactical alliance with Moscow, i.e., the far right. By being formalized at a high level by major Russian political figures, these dangerous liaisons have become partly "normalized." They have lost their subversive and revolutionary character in order to acquire a façade of respectability. The willingness of most, but not all (and there are many divisions), far-right movements to join the politically correct mainstream—Marine Le Pen's Front National being the most striking example—undoubtedly assists the Kremlin's efforts to make these connections politically suitable in the European arena.

Conclusion

Adept at *realpolitik*, Moscow plays the game it thinks is best adapted to Russia's current situation. It has cultivated the distinct interests of some EU member states in order to weaken the European construct, hopes to reduce Europe's attractiveness to the peripheries that Europe and Russia share, and created new allies among the most fragile or disgruntled countries and within anti-mainstream movements. In a matter of mere years, Moscow succeeded in conflating Russophilia and Euroskepticism as two sides of the same coin, positioning Russia as Brussels' opposite. It looks appealing to European parties and countries that feel themselves to be victims of the European Union "technocracy," and that search for new allies to denounce the current "mainstream"

1 "The Russian connection. The Spread of Pro-Russian Policies on the European Far Right," *Political Capital Institute Papers* (March 14, 2014): 7. Accessed February 19, 2015, <http://www.riskandforecast.com/useruploads/files/pc_flash_report_russian_connection.pdf>.

2 Jean Thiriart, "L'Europe jusqu'à Vladivostok," *Nationalisme et République*, no. 9 (1992).

and its austerity policy, and call on the “periphery” to resist the “system.”

The Kremlin is thus performing a difficult balancing act. It denounces the role of ultra-nationalism in the Euro-Maidan revolution and the influence of neofascist groups in Ukraine, while parties with a similar, but pro-Russia, ideology are held up as the authentic representatives of European conservative values. The search for allies in Europe—a legitimate course for a country like

Russia—threatens the European project and brings to light internal dissent within the continent that elites in Brussels would rather keep quiet. If there is a conclusion to be drawn from this broad overview, it is that Russia is far from being an epigone in Europe. Rather, Russia is a central player. Its own development mirrors Europe’s ideological quest and political construction, successes and failures.

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ANALYSIS

Russia’s Far-Right Friends in Europe—Hungary

By Péter Krekó, Lóránt Győri and Attila Juhász, Budapest

Abstract

This article examines the ideological and other linkages between Putin’s Russia and Hungarian right wing political parties, and, in particular, Jobbik. It outlines how Jobbik has become a strongly ally of the Putin regime, working to promote its policies and interests in both Hungary and the European parliament, including by supporting the Russian position on the Ukraine crisis.

The case of Hungary is an interesting example of how the foreign policies of popular political parties can distract from the demands of public opinion. Despite the continued existence of some nostalgia for the communist era, the negative role played by Russia in Hungarian history has made contemporary Hungarian–Russian relations somewhat tense. Russia’s role in putting down Hungarian freedom movements (1848, 1956) and installing communist dictatorships in the 20th century (Hungarian Soviet Republic in 1918, as well as the Rákosi and Kádár regimes after WWII) as well as decades of Russian military occupation have obviously not helped to improve Hungarian–Russian relations. It is not surprising, therefore, that Hungarian public opinion—according to every available poll—is predominantly Western-oriented, and feels much stronger sympathies towards countries such as Germany, Great Britain and the US than to Russia.

At the same time, currently the two most popular political parties in Hungary (the populist right governmental party *Fidesz* and the ultranationalist right-wing *Jobbik*) are emphasizing the need for an Eastern Opening, involving closer ties with Russia and the frequent use of euro-sceptic and Western-critical tones. The

interesting thing is that both parties have changed their position towards Russia. Viktor Orbán, who started his career as an anti-communist hero, was one of the fiercest critiques of Vladimir Putin’s Russia until 2009, when he, while preparing to become Prime Minister, met with Putin at a non-official meeting at a party congress of the United Russia party. In 2010, having become Prime Minister, Viktor Orbán announced the so called ‘Eastern Opening’ foreign policy doctrine, and Russia became an ‘illiberal’ role model for his government.¹ But of course, a government with a pro-Putin outlook is not a new feature of Hungarian politics: a significant opening towards the Kremlin was made by the former socialist PM Ferenc Gyurcsány, who signed the South Stream gas pipeline agreement with Russia in 2008 and was also a supporter of the Paks Nuclear capacity-building project. The ideological dimension of the connection between the Putin regime and the Orbán government is, however, somewhat new. And, indeed, such an ideological link is even more vocal in the case of the *Jobbik* party, whose leader, Gábor Vona recently said in an interview: “I am Eurasian”.

1 “Orbán: Magyarország illiberális állam”, *nol.hu*, July 26, 2014.

The Beginning of a Beautiful Friendship

The pro-Russian stance of the Hungarian far-right is based on contacts established between Russian and Hungarian paramilitary forces following the regime change from state socialism to democracy in 1989–1990, the spiritual tradition of Turanism (i.e. the idea of kinship between Hungarians and Eastern peoples) and the ultra-right ideologically-driven uncritical attitude towards Russia as the counterbalance of the West. Nevertheless, the connection between the Kremlin and the Hungarian far-right was elevated to a new level, and even institutionalized, with the emergence of the new far-right party *Jobbik* within Hungarian politics in 2003.

Jobbik gradually became a supporter of Russia. Yet, its pro-Russian trajectory was not at all foreordained given the party's anti-communist stance, opposing all remnants of the Communist regime in Hungary and being harshly critical of Russia in its early years. *Jobbik's* foreign policy agenda took a slow turn with a new party member, Béla Kovács, who joined the party in 2005 and quickly became the head of the party's Foreign Affairs Cabinet and a Member of the European Parliament (MEP) after the 2009 European elections (currently, he is under investigation in the European Parliament and Hungary over alleged espionage for Moscow). Kovács turned out to be not only a generous financial sponsor to the party, but also someone with excellent business ties in Russia having worked and lived there between 1988 and 2003. In 2008, he arranged the first trip to Moscow for the party president, Gábor Vona, which paved the way for *Jobbik's* rapprochement with Russia. In subsequent years, Vona and Kovács worked together to build-up *Jobbik's* successful pro-Russian stance on many policy issues. From 2008 onwards (beginning with the Georgian crisis), *Jobbik* became a party that uncritically supports Russian foreign policy and energy policy interests. At the same time, *Jobbik* has become more and more popular—they received only 2% of the vote in the 2006 parliamentary elections, but this rose to 17% in 2010 and more than 20% in 2014—, making it an even more attractive partner for Putin's Russia.

Radical organizations in Europe can fulfill three major functions for Putin's Russia: destabilization of member states within the EU and the transatlantic alliance; provision of external legitimization for the Russian regime (e.g., through political support, such as "observation" of elections); and serving as sources for communicating information and misinformation (e.g., transmitting Russian propaganda to EU member states and gathering intelligence). All these functions are evident with regard to *Jobbik*, which supports and legitimizes Russian territorial aggression in Eastern Ukraine and openly admires the Putin regime's promotion of its Eurasian ideology.

Eurasian Foreign Policy in Action

The first sign of the *Jobbik's* pro-Russian shift became apparent at the time of the 2008 Russia–Georgia conflict, with *Jobbik* politicians taking Russia's side, and, after some hesitation, media affiliated with *Jobbik* took a position against Georgia as the "Jewish mafia state" and the "fortress of Israel" in Europe. As a consequence of the improving relations between the Putin regime and *Jobbik*, party president Gábor Vona in December 2008 even traveled to Russia where he delivered a speech to members of the United Russia Party, entitled "Is there a Europe without Russia?"

The party's economic program in 2010 and 2014 openly called for an opening-up to Eastern markets, maintaining that Hungarian products should be sold in Russia, China and even Iran, instead of in the European Union. In energy policy, it advocated South Stream, the pipeline preferred by Russia, in preference to the Union-sponsored Nabucco gas line. It also argued for the extension of a nuclear power plant to be carried out by Rosatom (the only opposition party to do so, with the rest of the opposition parties all rejecting this unpopular investment).

Jobbik have become vocal supporters of Russian interests in Hungarian and Russian public discourse alike. In 2013, the year before local and EU parliamentary elections, Gábor Vona gave a lecture at Moscow's Lomonosov University, on the invitation of head Eurasianism ideologist, Alexandr Dugin, and depicted Russia as the protector of European traditions, as opposed to a "traitorous" Europe. Béla Kovács, as the co-chair of the EU-Russian Interparliamentary Work Group in 2013, asked a representative of the Russian Federation Council at a meeting in Kaliningrad: "What is the future possibility of an EU member state initiating accession talks with the Eurasian Union?" In October 2013, the Group's third meeting in Moscow was chaired by Béla Kovács, and in November of the same year *Jobbik* organized a gas conference with the participation of Gazprom, Russian parliamentary delegates and representatives of Russian companies, where Gábor Vona expressed his support for gas-powered transportation.

Pro-Eurasianism is ideologically well established in *Jobbik* statements. In an extensive interview with the Russian news agency REX (iarex.ru) in 2014, Gábor Vona described Hungary as "a gateway and a bridge for Moscow to the West", whereas Russia could act as "a counterbalance against a lopsided Euro-Atlantism". In Vona's view, "for Hungary Euro-Atlantism has caused an economic, political and cultural crisis, and therefore we have to reassess our international position". In this way, he embraces the ideology of Eurasianism and its "advantages of preserving the autonomy of various regions, and

of being built on some sort of continental cooperation, in opposition to exploitation by the EU".²

At the same time, *Jobbik* politicians have participated in Russia's efforts to legitimize its action in the on-going Ukraine crisis. Béla Kovács acted as an international observer of the March 2014 referendum in Crimea that saw it secede from Ukraine and join the Russian Federation, justifying this Russian act of territorial aggression. In the fall of 2014, as a member of an international observation team, Márton Gyöngyösi—the secretary of the party's Foreign Affairs Cabinet and vice chairman of the Hungarian Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee—monitored the presidential election for the self-proclaimed Donetsk Republic, although officially he did not cross the Ukrainian–Russian border.³ The legitimacy of this election was widely rejected, including by the United States, European Union and even the UN. *Jobbik*, however, recognized the legitimacy of the election in a statement and the party indicated that they would “respect the results”.⁴ Subsequently, both Béla Kovács and Márton Gyöngyösi were banned from Ukraine. Furthermore, extreme right groups closely related to *Jobbik* (Betyársereg and HVIM) organized networks and rallies in Transcarpathia in support of the pro-Russian separatists, and also organized a boycott against chocolates produced by the company of Ukrainian President, Petro Pososhenko.

Jobbik's Voting Patterns in European Institutions

While Marine Le Pen, leader of the French *Front National* party, refused to consider formally aligning herself with *Jobbik* and Greece's *Golden Dawn* party within the European Parliament on the grounds that they are anti-Semitic and neo-Nazi,⁵ *Jobbik* regularly votes together with other radical left and radical right/populist right-wing parties in the European Parliament against the mainstream position on issues that are important to Russia, such as the Ukrainian War and Western sanctions on Russia. *Jobbik* took a stand against the 2014–2015 resolutions condemning Russia's role in annexation of Crimea and the conflict in Ukraine. This included, for example, the April 17, 2014 resolution on “Russian pressure on Eastern Partnership countries and

in particular destabilisation of eastern Ukraine”⁶ and the EU–Ukraine Association Agreement.⁷

Extreme and Mainstream

While the Orbán-cabinet pursues pendulum politics, it is of utmost importance for the Kremlin to exert influence on the Hungarian far right and especially on *Jobbik*. In addition, the Kremlin has a vested interest in pushing the Hungarian political spectrum in a more Kremlin-friendly direction and exacerbating public discontent with the West. In this way, the Russian regime aims to indirectly put pressure on the Hungarian government and destabilize the European Union and the region.

While in foreign policy, *Fidesz* and *Jobbik* display many similarities (in fact, the Eastern Opening was originally a policy advocated by *Jobbik*), some important differences remain between them. While both parties and their leaders are useful allies for Vladimir Putin's Russia, *Fidesz* as a governmental party is keeping the pro-European mainstream line over the decisions regarding Russia (voting in favor of sanctions, supporting resolutions on Ukraine's territorial integrity, and voting for Ukraine's Association Agreement to the EU). At the same time, *Jobbik* is putting pressure on the government, calling for it to abandon its NATO and EU duties towards Ukraine.

The Russian influence in Hungary does not only target the extremes of the political spectrum. Aside from the far-right media, Russian influence is also evident in some mainstream media organizations. For example, among the staff of some news organizations, one finds journalists who regularly attend various political events in Moscow, aside from openly expressing pro-Kremlin positions. There is growing evidence that the Russian regime's efforts at exerting political influence are not limited to extremist circles. The Russian leadership has the general objective (mainly ineffective up to now) of stirring up anti-Western sentiments in a wide spectrum of the population. In the meantime, whether intentionally or by accident, the Hungarian government is more likely to promote, rather than hinder, Russian propaganda efforts through its policy measures and political discourse. *Jobbik*'s role has been evident in this context as well; the far-right party regularly tries to steer the government in the direction of pro-Russian policies, especially when it comes to the Ukraine crisis. Moreover, as the largest opposition party, *Jobbik* poses a political risk to the current ruling party.

Information about the authors is on the next page.

2 “Lider partii ‘Jobbik – Za luchshuyu Vengriyu’ Gabor Vona o yevroatlantizme, Rossii, Gruzii, rusinakh, Transilvanii i Serbii” *iaex.ru*, January 22, 2014, accessed October 20, 2014.

3 “International ‘observers’: Moscow – Rostov – Donetsk”, *Anton Shekhovtsov's blog*, November 8, 2014, accessed December 12, 2014.

4 “*Jobbik: Tiszteletben tartjuk a választás eredményét*”, *alfahir.hu*, November 3, 2014, accessed December 12, 2014.

5 David O’Riordan, “Le Pen says no deal between National Front and *Jobbik*”, *Politics.hu*, June 6, 2014.

6 *Russian pressure on Eastern Partnership countries and in particular destabilisation of eastern Ukraine – joint motion for a resolution – ECR, ALDE, Greens/EFA, EPP*, April 17, 2014

7 *EU–Ukraine association agreement, with the exception of the treatment of third country nationals legally employed as workers in the territory of the other party*, September 19, 2014

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ANALYSIS

The Italian Russophile Rightist Parties: a New Love for Moscow?

By Giovanni Savino, Moscow/Naples

Abstract

With the 2014 Ukrainian crisis, the traditional Italian–Russian good relationship came to an end. Italian Far-Right parties, like Lega Nord and Forza Nuova, sided with Moscow, advocating solidarity with Putin and asking to remove sanctions against Russia. The new turn of these organizations, and the wave of Russophilia in the Far Right, is connected to the image of the Kremlin as the bastion of traditional values, conservative policies and anti-US forces.

In the last 20 years, Italian governments of different political orientation have maintained a good relationship with Moscow. The interests of big state-owned companies (ENI and Ansaldo) in Russia were crucial in the construction of this partnership, and the growing investments by other sectors of the Italian economy opened the way for thousands of firms to enter the Russian market. Silvio Berlusconi's special friendship with Vladimir Putin was only an aspect of a more complex framework, in which different actors (officials, state managers, entrepreneurs) played and still play a role. The reshaping of Italian politics, and the crisis of Berlusconi's *Forza Italia*, has had an influence in the foreign strategies of Rome, and the 2014 Ukrainian crisis has also had an impact, with Matteo Renzi's government trapped between the huge economic and trade interests of Italian business and EU and NATO policies.

Whereas the Italian government does not currently have a clear position in its relations with Moscow, and *Forza Italia* is in deep crisis, other forces within Italian politics, attracted to the traditional values and authoritarianism promoted by the Russian regime, are currently seeking to fill this gap.

The Northern League as Pro-Putin Force in Italian Politics

In 2014, the Northern League (*Lega Nord*), which had been in crisis over recent years, was able to recover a political consensus thanks to the leadership of Matteo Salvini, via anti-immigrant rhetoric and a turn towards Putin's Russia. The 2014 Ukraine crisis and the EU–US

sanctions, as well as Moscow's bans on European products, was an occasion for Salvini and his party to present themselves as the defenders of the Italian business community. Always between secessionism for Northern Italy and participation in Berlusconi's cabinets, the Northern League remains a regional party, but it scored a significant victory in the 2014 European elections, sending Mario Borghezio to the European parliament to represent Central Italy. Borghezio, an *Ordine Nuovo* militant in the 1970s,¹ has remained close to Neofascist circles.² Borghezio's activities within the Northern League have always been provocative, such as assaulting a Moroccan child in 1991³ and setting fire to a migrant camp in 2000.⁴ His election is the product of a pact between the Northern League and *Casa Pound*.⁵

1 On July 11, 1976, Borghezio was arrested at the French Border zone in Ventimiglia, for possessing a threatening postcard addressed to Judge Luciano Violante and signed by Ordine Nuovo. A. Custodero, "Borghezio, una vita da Haider padano tra ronde tricolori e il mito di Evola," *La Repubblica Inchieste*, June 5, 2012. Accessed January 7, 2015, <http://inchieste.repubblica.it/it/repubblica/rep-it/neonazismoeuropeo/2012/06/05/news/borghezio_1_haider_padano-36606062/>.

2 S. Ferrari, "Borghezio Story: Da Ordine Nuovo alla Lega Nord. Il percorso esemplare di un razzista," *Osservatorio democratico*, December 2, 2012. Accessed January 7, 2015, <http://www.osservatoriodemocratico.org/page.asp?ID=2506&Class_ID=1004>.

3 "Leghista violento su minore," *Corriere della Sera*, June 23, 1993.

4 M. Travaglio, "Il leghista Borghezio rischia il carcere," *La Repubblica*, March 12, 2002.

5 "Borghezio (Lega) eletto al Centro con i voti di CasaPound," *Il Secolo XIX*, May 26, 2014. Accessed July 10, 2014, <<http://>

The efforts of the Northern League to take over the Italian right are connected with the Circle Taliban (*Circolo Il Talebano*, not related to the Afghan Taliban) think tank, headed by Vincenzo Sofo, a former coordinator of the Milan branch of the Italian Youth, a wing of *La Destra* (The Right).⁶ He was not alone in joining the party; Fabrizio Fratus—a leading anti-evolutionist activist, a past personal secretary of *Forza Italia* MP Daniela Santanché, and a leading figure in Fiamma Tricolore—also joined the Northern League.⁷ Fratus is the ideologue of the League's Talibans and has been evidently inspired by Traditionalism, the German Conservative Revolution, and Jean Thiriart's theories. He authored the white paper presented by the Talibans at the 2013 Northern League's congress, which analyzes the Italian and European context and raises the question of a "reconciliation" between the conservative right and the anti-capitalist left, charting a new course for the League.⁸ The document outlines a new political and ideological project around a new "Europe of the fatherlands," against bureaucratic Brussels.

The historical arguments adopted by Fratus and his co-thinkers are typical of the traditional neo-fascist interpretation of the past: a sharp rejection of Enlightenment ideas, seen as the root of the degradation of modern society and globalism; and support for the old order of the tripartite society, a scheme usually used by Evola and other traditionalists in representing the world before the French Revolution and seen as the foundation of European civilization.⁹ They regard Thiriart as the prophet of a new European alliance of nations, in which a pro-Russia stance is the linchpin. The bid for a common European space, a kind of alliance among various regions united by tradition and using local currencies, is the plan of the League's Talibans, who are trying to resurrect the old project for an independent *Padania* (Northern Italy), with the ambition of building up a national force in Italy.¹⁰ The contradiction between the myth of Italian-ness and the League's traditional secessionism is lifted by a reference to Evola's anti-provincialism, in an attempt to position the nationalist extreme right with the *Padania* movement.¹¹ One of the most important

personalities inside the extreme right, Roberto Jonghi Lavarini, also oriented his political group, *Progetto Nazionale*, toward the League and Dugin, and he met the Russian thinker in Milan in July 2014.¹²

An important turning point in the League's shift to a pro-Russian extreme right was a mass anti-immigration demonstration in Milan on October 18, 2014, involving the Northern League, *Casa Pound* and other neo-fascist organizations. During the demonstration, the crowd displayed posters hailing Putin and flags of the Donetsk People's Republic. The protest culminated a week of League activities, beginning with Matteo Salvini and his entourage traveling to Moscow and the Crimea, where they met Aleksei Pushkov, chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Duma, and leaders of the Crimean government. During a break at the Asia-Europe summit in Milan, on October 17, Salvini met Putin for a 20-minute talk. The Northern League took a position in the Italian and Russian press against EU sanctions on Russia and presented itself as the defender of Italian business interests.¹³ Speaking to Itar-TASS afterward, Salvini reaffirmed his goal of revoking EU sanctions against Russia.¹⁴

This pro-Russian stance also gave birth to the Lombardia-Russia Society, which seeks to promote a neo-Eurasianist attitude inside the economic and political circles of Northern Italy. It was enthusiastically supported by the Northern League and the local institutions it controls. The honorary president of the Lombardia-Russia Society is Alexey Komov, the Russian representative of the World Congress of Families and a colleague of Dugin's.¹⁵ The Society has provided regular articles and interviews with Dugin,¹⁶ Komov,¹⁷ and the presi-

www.ilsecoloxix.it/p/speciali/2014/05/26/AR8cW8Q-borghezio_casapound_eletto.shtml.

6 Information taken from his site *Vincenzo Sofo, il talebano della Lega*, <<http://vincenzofofo.net/>>.

7 Fratus part of the Fiamma Tricolore list for the 1997 Milan elections. "Lista del Movimento Sociale Fiamma Tricolore," *Corriere della Sera*, April 16, 1997.

8 F. Fratus et al., "Documento di Idee," *Il Talebano.com*, July 2014, 1–2. Accessed January 7, 2015, <https://iltalebano.files.wordpress.com/2014/07/documento-di-idee_iltalebano.pdf>.

9 *Ibid.*, 27–28.

10 *Ibid.*, 12.

11 *Ibid.*, 13.

12 "Roberto Jonghi incontra Alexander Dugin," Roberto Jonghi Supporters website, July 7, 2014. Accessed July 10, 2014, <<http://jonghisupporters.blogspot.ru/2014/07/roberto-jonghi-incontra-alexander-dugin.html>>.

13 G. Polli, "Sanzioni alla Russia, Salvini sta con Zaia: Ora la Lombardia," *La Padania*, October 6, 2014, Accessed July 10, 2014, <http://www.lapadania.net/Detail_News_Display?ID=4644&typeb=0&Sanzioni-alla-Russia-Salvini-sta-con-Zaia-Ora-la-Lombardia>.

14 "Salvini: 'L'Europa torni a dialogare con Mosca,'" *La Padania*, October 15, 2014. Accessed October 15, 2014, <http://www.lapadania.net/Detail_News_Display?ID=4906>.

15 Komov is working on his kandidat dissertation at the Department of Sociology at Moscow State University, under the direction of Anatolii Antonov. "Ob avtore," *Blog Alekseya Komova*. Accessed January 7, 2015, <<http://alexeekomov.ru/ob-avtore-3>>.

16 "I gruppi del potere mondialista vogliono una Guerra globale," *Lombardirussia.org*, May 10, 2014. Accessed January 7, 2015, <<http://www.lombardirussia.org/index.php/component/content/article/56-categoria-slide/291-i-gruppi-del-potere-mondialista-vogliono-una-guerra-globale>>.

17 "Ecco perché la mia Russia, a un passo dal suicidio umano e demografico, ha deciso di dire sì alla vita," *Lombardirussia.org*,

dent of the Russian–Italian Youth, Irina Osipova, a student of Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration, who now is involved in different initiatives in the defense of traditional values and the so-called Russian way of life.¹⁸ A regular contributor is Alfonso Piscitelli, a journalist linked with the Julius Evola foundation and contributor of the website *Russia.it*. Osipova is very active in promoting contacts between Italian and Russian far rightists. She, for instance, arranged the September 2014 trip to Moscow of some members of the Lombardia–Russia Society and representatives of other neo-fascist movements, including Mauro Antonini,¹⁹ a leader of “III Millennium-Fascist” *Casa Pound*.²⁰ The young Russian representative turned her association into a more political organization and now tries to give space to rightist forces from Italy in different settings, from universities to the press.²¹

The 28th February *Lega Nord* demonstration in Rome with Casa Pound was not a success: the party had estimated 100,000 participants, but in the end only 10,000 people took part in the meeting. Russian flags and St. George’s ribbons were together with Celtic crosses and Venetian flags, in a square that was the *summa* of different political platforms.

The Strategic Turn of Forza Nuova to Russia

The ultra-Catholic and neo-fascist party *Forza Nuova* has also become a Russophile framework. In the first months of 2014, *Forza Nuova*, linked with Nick Griffin’s British National Party, made a considerable shift in its strategic alliances in Eastern Europe. Roberto Fiore, the head of the organization, had maintained close ties

with the Ukrainian far right party *Svoboda* since the mid-2000s. In October 2013, a meeting between representatives of *Forza Nuova* and *Svoboda*’s deputy chairman, Andriy Mokhnyk, and the head of the party’s international department, Taras Osaulenko, took place in Kyiv, confirming the collaboration between the two far right parties.²² Fiore praised the Ukrainian Revolution of early 2014 as an insurrection against a corrupt government, but, in a letter addressed to *Svoboda* leader Oleh Tyahnybok, he expressed his concerns about the risk involved in putting Ukraine into the hands of the “anti-Christian and Masonic lobbies” of the EU, NATO, and United States. The letter is no longer available on *Forza Nuova*’s website, but can be found on other neo-fascist resources.²³

However, with the beginning of the hostilities in Donbass, Fiore made a considerable shift to the pro-Russian camp, aided by his contacts with Komov, united by their shared anti-abortion and anti-homosexuality battles.²⁴ Fiore participated in the August 31, 2014, international conference “Russia, Ukraine, New Russia: Global Problems and Challenges” in Yalta, with Luc Michel and other European far right representatives.²⁵ A delegation of *Forza Nuova* and the Pro-Vita society also took part in the International Forum of Families in Moscow on September 10–11, 2014.²⁶

Fiore was a key protagonist of the International Russian Conservative Forum in St. Petersburg on 22nd March, as president of the new Alliance for Peace and Freedom, a European umbrella-organization, which includes far-right and neo-fascist parties, as *Forza Nuova*,

Accessed January 7, 2015, <<http://www.lombardiarussia.org/index.php/component/content/article/56-categoria-slide/244-lecco-perche-la-mia-russia-a-un-passo-dal-suicidio-umano-e-demografico-ha-deciso-di-dire-si-alla-vita>>.

- 18 “Irina Osipova: identità russa e dialogo europeo,” *Lombardiarussia.org*, April 10, 2014. Accessed January 7, 2015, <<http://www.lombardiarussia.org/index.php/eventi/263-irina-osipova-identita-russa-e-dialogo-europeo>>.
- 19 Antonini did not publicize his visit in Moscow, but there are various pictures in Facebook and on his public page. Accessed January 7, 2015, <<https://www.facebook.com/476190805849328/photos/a.479846748817067.1073741828.476190805849328/517975395004202/?type=1&theater>>.
- 20 Casa Pound started as Neo-Fascist squatters’ movement in Rome, taking over various abandoned state-owned building in the city. Then, the “Fascists of Third Millennium” (as usually refer to themselves) organized a political movement, called Casa Pound Italia, expanding their activities in other Italian regions, with many clashes with antifascist forces.
- 21 G. Savino, “L’infatuazione putiniana della Lega, tra neofascisti italiani e Dugin,” *MicroMega Online*, October 22, 2014. Accessed October 22, 2014, <<http://temi.repubblica.it/micro-mega-online/infatuazione-putiniana-della-lega-tra-neofascisti-italiani-e-dugin/>>.

- 22 Andriy Mokhnyk met with representatives of the *Forza Nuova* party. *Svoboda Official Site*, October 14, 2013. Accessed October 10, 2014, <<http://en.svoboda.org.ua/news/events/00001771/>>.
- 23 R. Fiore, “Lettera aperta al Segretario Nazionale del Partito Nazionalista Ucraino Svoboda, Oleg Tyahnybok,” *Atuttadestra.net*, February 27, 2014. Accessed October 10, 2014, <<http://www.atuttadestra.net/index.php/archives/235095>>.
- 24 B. Frigerio, “Ecco perché la mia Russia, a un passo dal suicidio umano e demografico, ha deciso di dire sì alla vita,” *Notizie Pro Vita*, March 7, 2014. Accessed October 10, 2014. <<http://www.notizieprovita.it/notizie-dal-mondo/ecco-perche-la-mia-russia-a-un-passo-dal-suicidio-umano-e-demografico-ha-deciso-di-dire-si-alla-vita/>>.
- 25 R. Zunini, “L’internazionale fascio-comunista di Putin,” *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, September 3, 2014. Accessed September 3, 2014, <<http://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2014/09/03/internazionale-fascio-comunista-di-putin/1107567/>>.
- 26 “Mosca, Forza Nuova al Forum internazionale della famiglia,” *Atuttadestra.net*, September 9, 2014. Accessed October 10, 2014, <<http://www.atuttadestra.net/index.php/archives/259601>>; “Vtoroi den foruma ‘Mnogodetnaya semya I budushchee chelovechestva,’” *Tsentr Natsionalnoi Slavi*, September 16, 2014. Accessed October 10, 2014, <<http://www.cnsr.ru/press-tsentr/novosti-fonda/vtoroy-den-foruma-mnogodetnaya-semya-i-budushchee-chelovechestva/>>.

Golden Dawn, the Spanish National Democracy, the British National Party and the Bulgarian *Ataka*. The *Forza Nuova* leader sees in Russia the new hope for the defense of Christian Europe against immigration and ISIS,²⁷ and he declared himself to be in touch with important Russian far-right intellectuals like Alexander Prokhanov and Oleg Platonov.

Further Developments: Russia as Conservative Bastion

The instability of Italian economics and the transformation of the country's political system make it difficult to predict future events. The pro-Russian stance too is also subject to these circumstances, and the main actors

are not always stable in their views. Salvini faces accusations from even more extremist critics to be ready to build contacts with Israel's *Likud* and US Republicans;²⁸ the Northern League fraction in the Milan city council proposed a resolution, modeled on the new Ukrainian law against the Soviet past that forbade Communist symbols and parties.²⁹ *Forza Nuova* tries to pose as more pro-Russian, in a fight for the control of the Italian Far Right, but the role of the League, and the presence of Salvini in the mass media make the efforts of Fiore more difficult. The new Italian friends of Moscow are trying to reshape themselves, in an attempt to be a kind of National Front, but without the roots and the impact of Marine Le Pen's party.

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27 A. Cullison, *Far-Right Flocks to Russia to Berate the West*, *The Wall Street Journal*, March 23, 2015 <<http://www.wsj.com/articles/far-right-flocks-to-russia-to-berate-the-west-1427059613>> (Last access: April 13, 2015)

28 F. Boezi, *Il complesso leghista e gli "ambienti che contano"*, *L'Intellettuale Dissidente*, April 3 2015, <<http://www.lintellettualeludisidente.it/italia-2/stare-simpatici-a-tutti-pure-agli-israeliani/>> (Last access: April 13, 2015)

29 *Lega Nord propone messa al bando dei comunisti in Italia* "Consiglieri leghisti: L'Italia metta al bando il comunismo e i suoi simboli", *Milano Today*, April 10 2015, <<http://www.milanotoday.it/politica/lega-bando-comunisti.html>> (Last Access: April 13, 2015)

ABOUT THE RUSSIAN ANALYTICAL DIGEST

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