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Russia and the rise of the radical right

di Sam Freedman

Over the years Russia has tried to destabilise other countries by funding politicians from across the political spectrum. Its attempts at election interference and industrial scale troll factories have had much the same purpose: to cause trouble rather than support any particular ideology.

But alongside these general attempts to undermine political systems they have, in more recent years, sought to build relationships with radical right parties across Europe. They have provided significant support to Marine Le Pen's National Rally (formerly National Front) and Matteo Salvini's Lega, amongst others.

In the UK, the various parties led by Nigel Farage have, officially, kept more distance. There is still, though, a relationship. Farage was paid to be a regular contributor on Russia Today between 2010-2017 – and Russian agents bribed UKIP (and later Reform's) leader in Wales, Nathan Gill, to provide assistance in the European Parliament.

Russia's interest stems partly from these parties' value in weakening European integration and stability. But there is also a growing ideological affinity where influence has run in both directions. Putin's own rhetoric has become increasingly fixated on the failure of western liberalism, using talking points developed by radical right parties in the west. This ideological shift was a response to the "colour" revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine, as well as rising opposition at home, most visible in the 2011 protests against his proposed return to the Presidency.

We can't know if the stuff Putin spouts about the decadent, homosexual, liberal west is purely cynical or if he believes any of it. But either way it comes from a very real ideological movement within Russia led by true believers. Perhaps the most

influential is Aleksandr Dugin, whose book "Foundations of Geopolitics" has been used to train army officers, and whose rhetoric peppers Putin's post-2014 speeches.

The symbiotic relationship between Russian ultranationalists like Dugin and the global radical right goes back a long way - emerging as Russian politics split into an array of competing factions after the USSR collapsed. As Russia found itself increasingly isolated from mainstream parties in the west these connections became more important to Putin and his intelligence agencies. They also became more valuable to radical right parties across Europe, as they started to make major electoral breakthroughs in the 2010s.

After the invasion of Ukraine in 2022, these parties, at least in western Europe, have had to back off from vocally supporting Russia due to public outrage. But that doesn't mean they share the outrage, and with the prospect of some winning power over the coming years that represents a real threat. We've seen the importance of European leaders' commitment to Ukraine in their dealings with Trump. Radical right parties would not need to explicitly support Russia to help Putin out by reallocating resources to domestic priorities.

So in the rest of this post I'm going to trace the history of these relationships from the 1990s onwards, and how they became more important after Putin's shift to a more illiberal ideology and critical to the rise of the radical right. I'll finish by considering the longer-term risks this creates.

First steps

Dugin was one of the first Russians to make contact with the broader European far right. He had spent time in a series of neo-fascist and antisemitic groups that emerged in the late 1980s as the Soviet Union fell apart. Through these organisations he developed an interest in writers like Julius Evola, whose writings influenced the development of pre-war Italian fascism.

In either 1989 or 1990 (sources differ) he was introduced to the leader of the French new right, Alain de Benoist, who had been involved in the emergence of Jean-Marie Le Pen's national front, and developed the modern form of ethnonationalism that is now so prevalent (I wrote more about de Benoist in this post). This was a critical

influence on Dugin's thinking. He translated French new right, and Italian far right, literature into Russian, and published a journal under the same name (Elements) as De Benoist's. Their hostility to American cultural influence helped Dugin blend his existing anti-liberal philosophy with an emerging theory of multipolarity, in which Russia offered an alternative power base to the US. In 1992 De Benoist visited Moscow, speaking with senior politicians and the General Staff Academy of the Armed Forces where Dugin was a guest lecturer.

Another important early conduit for the western far right into Russia was Vladimir Zhirinovsky, an extreme nationalist who established the first opposition party in Russia, the comically misnamed Liberal Democratic Party. It's unclear how independent this party was. There is some evidence it was initiated as a KGB project to create a managed opposition (in the way that become the norm under Putin). He was considered something of a clown in the west for his bizarre rhetoric and manifesto promises to distribute free vodka, but his party were briefly the most successful in Russia, coming top in the 1993 parliamentary elections. He was also advised by Dugin.

Zhirinovsky sought support from far-right parties across Europe in building his fledgling party. He met with Jean-Marie Le Pen in 1992 and the French National Front provided resources including computers and fax machines. A few years later Le Pen held a press conference in Moscow with Zhirinovsky in which they talked of a pan-European alliance of far-right parties.

By 2002, Putin was President and Zhirinovsky's prospects of serious power had long faded but he was still Vice Chair of the State Duma (Russia's lower house of Parliament) and hoped to be of value to the new regime by building this pan-European alliance. In September of that year he bought together leaders of the French National Front and Lega Nord from Italy, along with far-right leaders from Germany and Japan to launch the World Congress of Patriotic Partries. When they met the following year, 44 far right parties were represented from across the world and signed a declaration of mutual assistance. This was the first time there had been any coordination of ethnonationalist movements at this scale.

Apart from solidarity the other purpose of the Congress was to oppose America's invasion of Iraq. This was something Zhirinovsky was personally invested in. He had close links to Saddam Hussein's regime and was almost certainly being bribed to act as an international lobbyist. Iraqis may have even funded the Congress event. It's certainly the case that other far right European leaders were also being used by Hussein, including Le Pen and the Austrian Jörg Haider, who achieved one of the earliest radical right breakthroughs by coming second in their 2000 elections.

As with everything in Putin's Russia, Zhirinovsky's activity was sanctioned and there was wider government interest in maintaining these alliances with the far right. But at the time Putin was still trying to work with mainstream western governments. His now infamous state visit to the UK took place a few months after Zhirinovsky's Congress. So the initiative largely fizzled out but lines of communication remained in place.

Putin embraces ultranationalism

At the start of his Presidency Putin made a point of emphasising pragmatism over ideology. With the Russian economy still fragile, and his own regime not yet entrenched, he focused on strengthening alliances with the US, UK and others. Despite evidence from the start of Putin's disdain for human rights, Bush, Blair and other world leaders argued it made sense to keep him in the tent.

But after the colour revolutions in Georgia (2003) and Ukraine (2004), Putin's mindset shifted, becoming increasingly suspicious of western sabotage and determined to maintain Russia's sphere of influence over former Soviet countries. After his 2007 speech to the Munich Security Conference, in which he lambasted western hypocrisy, relationships deteriorated further. Western governments started, slowly, to up their criticism after the Russian invasion of Georgia during the Beijing Olympics in 2008, and the death in custody of anti-corruption activist Sergei Magnitsky in 2009.

Putin was particularly shaken by mass protests in the run up to his return to the Presidency in 2012, and by the war that had engulfed his ally Bashar Al-Assad in Syria. The fall in oil and gas prices after the financial crisis had damaged his narrative of prosperity and he shifted instead towards increasingly nationalistic and authoritarian

rhetoric – contrasting his vision for Russia with the supposed failure of the multicultural west. This helped him justify further crackdowns on independent media and opposition leaders.

There is much debate over the influence Dugin had on this change in thinking. Certainly Putin's hostility towards Ukraine increasingly matched Dugin's longstanding belief that:

"The existence of Ukraine within its current borders, and with its current status as a 'sovereign state,' is tantamount to delivering a monstrous blow to Russia's geopolitical security."

Putin's language about the spiritual unity of Russia also echoed Dugin's mysticism, which in turn reflected earlier French and Italian far right texts. Dugin was given a chair at Moscow University (though he later appears to have been fired from it) and was made editorial director at Tsargrad TV. This station is linked to the orthodox church, which Putin was trying to associate himself ever more closely with, and bankrolled by Konstantin Maloveev, who was a major funder of separatist groups in Eastern Ukraine. Dugin never had any formal government role but his work was widely read and he became one of the loudest advocates for the invasion of Crimea in 2014.

Backing the radical right

As Russia's relationship with the mainstream west deteriorated, the networks initially established by Dugin and Zhirinovsky were reactivated. In France, Francois Hollande's criticism of Russia's involvement in the Syrian civil war, after he was elected in 2012, led to a breakdown in relations between the two countries, and a shift towards more open support for the National Front, now run by Marine Le Pen. She visited Moscow in 2013 meeting with close Putin ally Sergey Naryshkin, after which she criticised the EU for "leading a Cold War against Russia" and spoke of "common strategic interests".

Le Pen's efforts paid off in the form of two loans from Russian banks, which the National Front desperately needed given their precarious financial situation and the unwillingness of French banks to lend to them. In 2014 Jean-Marie Le Pen received a €2 million loan from the subsidiary of a Russian state bank for his organisation

Cotelec, which provided election funds for National Front candidates. The same year another Russian bank loaned €9 million to the party directly. Without this money they would have struggled for financial survival and certainly not been able to fund their campaigns at the same level.

Le Pen has always denied any quid pro quo for this money, but she became ever more vocal in her support for Russia during and after discussions around the loan. She repeatedly opposed sanctions following the Crimea invasion and insisted that Crimea was Russian territory, repeating Kremlin talking points. In the run-up to the 2017 Presidential election Russia briefly backed off, thinking that another potential ally, the Republican François Fillon, would end up in the run-off against Emmanual Macron. But then Fillon was caught up in an embezzlement scandal and Le Pen was quickly invited back to Moscow for a photo opportunity.

Russia's other main partner in western European was Lega Nord (now Lega), which is currently the junior member of the coalition running the Italian government. Again there were longstanding relationships built by Dugin and Zhirinovsky, and, as with France, the inherent anti-Americanism of the Italian right made it more fertile ground for Russian contacts. These relationships were reactivated and placed on a more formal footing after 2013 when Matteo Salvini became leader (he's now Italy's deputy Prime Minister).

In 2014, a Lega Nord member established a series of "cultural association" organisations to build links with Russia, backed by Malofeev. Dugin became the honorary President of the Piedmont branch. This included business conferences in the newly occupied Crimea to take advantage of potential financial opportunities. Salvini met with Putin in 2014, beginning a close relationship between their respective parties that culminated with a 2017 deal to collaborate on international relations and economic policy. None of this was subtle: Lega Nord also established a "Friends of Putin" group in the Italian parliament.

Unlike in France, Italian law prevents parties from taking money from international sources so Lega couldn't take cash directly. But in 2019 an audio recording was released of a close aide to Salvini, Gianluca Savoini, meeting with unidentified Russian

men, discussing a deal whereby Lega would skim off money from discounted oil sales, as a way of illicitly providing funding. There is no evidence such a deal took place and Salvini has denied receiving any money. But whether for mercenary or ideological reasons Lega was, like the French National Front, quite happy to repeat Kremlin lines on Crimea and oppose EU sanctions.

Historically, Russia had weaker links with far right movements in northern European countries due to their closer links with America. In the UK the BNP's Nick Griffin acted as an "election observer" for rigged elections in Russia, but beyond that links were minimal. Likewise, in Germany there had been some links with fringe far right groups – who were part of Zhirinovsky's gathering, but the AfD, when originally founded, was more focused on opposition to Angela Merkel's economic policy and not particularly pro-Russian.

But in more recent years Russia had built wider connections with the radical right world. Farage was regularly used as a Russia Today commentator. His last appearance was in 2017 when, in a bizarre skit, he was "knighted" by a child dressed as the Queen, who then when off-script and told him "my mummy says you hate foreigners". As with other radical right figures across Europe, the opportunity to appear regularly on Russia Today honed Farage's rhetorical skills on subjects like the failure of multiculturalism and liberal decline, while providing a useful income stream. He also bolstered Putin's argument that the west was failing.

We now know that Russia corruptly funded at least one Reform MEP. Nathan Gill was paid to speak in European Parliament debates, arguing against Ukrainian attempts to shut down TV stations run by Viktor Medvedchuk who is a close ally of Putin (the President is his daughter's godfather). Gill also arranged meetings with Medvedchuk and other MEPs.

There is no evidence of other senior members of Reform has taking money from Putin's agents but, like the National Front and Lega, Farage's parties did have a record of supporting Russian positions in the European Parliament. In 2015 UKIP MEPs voted against a resolution condemning Russian human rights abuses, which also called for

a ban on non-EU political actors funding parties in the EU. As late as 2019, Brexit MEPs voted against a resolution to tackle Russian propaganda.

Similarly the AfD became more valuable to the Russians after the party split in 2015, with those whose concerns were primarily economic leaving after a takeover by ethnonationalists. As with Reform, Medvedchuk seems to have been involved in providing payments to MEPs Maximillian Krah and Petr Bystron, though these allegations have not been proven. Since 2015 the AfD have reliably taken pro-Kremlin lines, and unlike other western radical right parties are still doing so despite the war. Earlier this year party leader Alice Weidel argued for the end of sanctions and the restoration of relations with Russia.

The radical right in power?

Most western radical right parties have backed off explicit support for Russia since the 2022 invasion. Le Pen has been critical of the war, Salvini has stood by as his senior coalition partner, Giorgia Meloni, has participated in European efforts to keep the US supporting Ukraine. Farage has been quiet on the subject since his ill-judged interview during the 2024 election campaign in which he claimed Russia had been provoked into attacking Ukraine. It halted Reform's momentum during the campaign and may have been the critical factor in keeping the Conservatives as the official opposition ahead of the Liberal Democrats.

As a result Russia has had to rely more on eastern European support, where overt backing for the Kremlin is less unpopular – and they have been more successful in interfering with elections. Viktor Orbán in Hungary has been their main ally within the EU, with Robert Fico, the Prime Minster of Slovakia, now also in a position to help. Orban's interventions have delayed aid to Ukraine and forced the EU leadership to find workarounds, but they haven't been terminal. Support from most member states including, critically, France and Germany, has been robust (as it has been from the UK working closely with the EU on this issue).

But then, with the exception of Italy, the radical right has been kept out of power in the larger EU states. Things could look very different in a few years' time. In France, Macron is in serious trouble, and may be forced to hold another round of

parliamentary elections in which Le Pen's National Rally would likely improve their position significantly. She is also comfortably leading polls for the next Presidential election, which has to happen by 2027 (if she remains barred from running Jordan Bardella would be the candidate and he polls just as well).

In Germany, the AfD's path to power is further away, given the refusal, to date, of other parties to work with them. But they are leading some polls now. The FPÖ in Austria, which has very strong historic links to Russia, is currently miles ahead in polls there, after being frozen out of power in last year's elections. Reform are, of course, also in a strong position in the UK.

To date most of the concern around Ukraine's international support has centred on Trump. Huge efforts have been made to keep him on board, and the threat of complete US withdrawal has so far been avoided. But his arrival has put a lot more pressure on Europe, which is having to cover more of the costs, including for American weapons. The risk should European unity fracture is now severe.

In the near term the biggest danger is in France. Le Pen's long-standing relationship with Russia may be on hold for electoral reasons, but it's hard to see her or Bardella being anything like as committed to Ukraine as Macron has been. It's easy to imagine a National Rally government arguing that France's domestic challenges must be put first, and finding reasons to undermine EU efforts to provide support. Like Trump she doesn't need to overtly support Putin to make his life easier.

Longer-term, it seems inevitable that the radical right will win more often, as they have largely replaced the centre-right in multiple countries. It is possible that parties in power will shift towards more pragmatic positions, as Meloni has (though she was never anywhere near as pro-Russian as Salvini). But it's going to make it increasingly difficult to maintain stable positions on foreign policy. All the more reason for Europe's leaders to do everything they can now to boost Ukraine's position, before it's too late.