RUSSIAN INTERFERENCE, AND WHERE TO FIND IT

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Introduction

After 2016, when Russian trolls and hackers meddled in the 2016 US presidential election,[1] and apparently in the Brexit referendum,[2] the notion of Russian interference became increasingly routinised in the mainstream media. The more information Facebook and Twitter revealed about the misuse of their services by Russian actors and the more details Robert Mueller's investigation uncovered,[3] the more axiomatic and mythological the concept of Russian interference became. Today, few would (dare to) challenge this "new normal": it is taken for granted that Russia meddles in Western electoral processes.

However, each case of Russian interference is special and quite the opposite of routinised practice. Each case is a juncture of unique conditions that themselves

1 Scott Shane, Vindu Goel, "Fake Russian Facebook Accounts Bought $100,000 in Political Ads", *The New York Times*, 6 September (2017), https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/06/technology/facebook-russian-political-ads.html; Martin Matishak, "What We Know about Russia's Election Hacking", *Politico*, 18 July (2018), https://www.politico.com/story/2018/07/18/russia-election-hacking-trump-putin-698087; Scott Shane, Sheera Frenkel, "Russian 2016 Influence Operation Targeted African-Americans on Social Media", *The New York Times*, 17 December (2018), https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/17/us/politics/russia-2016-influence-campaign.html.

2 Carole Cadwalladr, Peter Jukes, "Revealed: Leave.EU Campaign Met Russian Officials as Many as 11 Times", *The Guardian*, 8 July (2018); Manuel Roig-Franzia, Rosalind S. Helderman, William Booth, Tom Hamburger, "How the 'Bad Boys of Brexit' Forged Ties with Russia and the Trump Campaign – and Came under Investigators' Scrutiny", *The Washington Post*, 28 June (2018), https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/how-the-bad-boys-of-brexit-forged-ties-with-russia-and-the-trump-campaign--and-came-under-investigators-scrutiny/2018/06/28/6e3a5e9c-7656-11e8-b4b7-308400242c2e_story.html; Matthew Field, Mike Wright, "Russian Trolls Sent Thousands of Pro-Leave Messages on Day of Brexit Referendum, Twitter Data Reveals", *The Telegraph*, 17 October (2018), https://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/2018/10/17/russian-iranian-twitter-trolls-sent-10-million-tweets-fake-news/.

3 William P. Barr, "Letter to Congress Detailing Robert Mueller's Findings in the Russia Investigation", https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/5779699-Letter-to-Congress-detailing-Robert-Mueller-s.html.

derive from various factors reflecting realities in Western nations and Russia. I will argue that when assessing Russian meddling we need to consider the following five factors:

- Putin's regime is not satisfied with the prevailing political attitudes towards Russia in Western Country X.
- There are political forces in Country X that are significant enough and are ready to cooperate with Russian pro-Kremlin actors.
- Meddling in the elections in favour of particular political forces does not clash with other, non-political interests of Putin's regime in Country X.
- Russia has relevant human and structural resources to interfere in the electoral process in Country X.
- Political culture in Country X is conducive to Russian influence.

This article discusses elections in France, Norway, Germany, Austria, Italy, Hungary, and Sweden that took place in 2017-2018, and shows how different combinations of the above-mentioned factors produced different outcomes in terms of Russian meddling. Three important caveats must be taken into consideration before starting our discussion. First, the fact of interfering in the elections does not necessarily imply that this meddling had any tangible impact on the results of the elections. Second, interfering in electoral processes is not identical with Moscow's more general attempts to influence political developments in European societies through informational, military, economic, and other measures. Third, the evidential basis of the analysis presented here is limited to publicly available information and cannot take into account any confidential data that may or may not contradict the main arguments of the report.

French Presidential Election

23 April and 7 May 2017

France is one of the leading EU member states, and its position on the sanctions imposed by the EU on Russia in response to its annexation of Crimea and the start of the Russian-Ukrainian war, remains one of the most influential. In 2014-2015, under the presidency of François Hollande, France even declined to deliver two Mistral-class ships to Russia, the construction of which had already been paid by Russia.[4] Modifying attitudes of the French establishment towards Putin's Russia was a top priority for Moscow.

Moscow was closely following the political developments in France in 2016. The situation seemed favourable to the Kremlin. Hollande's ratings were low, and he would eventually abandon the idea or re-election. Public opinion polls conducted at the end of 2016 showed that the next French president would be either the centre-right candidate François Fillon or the far-right candidate Marine Le Pen. Both Fillon and Le Pen were friendly towards Putin's regime and criticised the EU's sanctions against Russia,[5] while a Russian bank provided a €9 million loan to Le Pen's National Front for its campaign for the 2015 regional elections.[6] However, the situation changed in the beginning of 2017, when public support for Fillon dramatically decreased and Moscow-sceptic Emmanuel Macron (nominated by the centrist "En Marche!" movement) "pushed" Fillon

4 "Ukraine Crisis: France Halts Warship Delivery to Russia", *BBC*, 3 September (2014), https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-29052599.

5 "France's Fillon Says Russia Sanctions Pointless, Dialogue Needed", *Reuters*, 23 January (2017), https://www.reuters.com/article/us-france-election-fillon-russia-idUSKBN1571SY; "France's Marine Le Pen Urges End to Russia Sanctions", *BBC*, 24 March (2017), https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-39375969.

6 Marine Turchi, "Le Front national décroche les millions russes", *Mediapart*, 22 November (2014), www.mediapart.fr/journal/france/221114/le-front-national-decroche-les-millions-russes. For details about the relations between the National Front and Russia, see Anton Shekhovtsov, *Russia and the Western Far Right: Tango Noir* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), pp. 189-205.

François Fillon

© Tobias SCHWARZ / AFP. Source: https://www.europe1.fr/politique/le-micro-parti-de-francois-fillon-continue-dencaisser-des-dons-2967689

out from the polls on the second round: they predicted that Macron would win the presidency against Le Pen.

In contrast to the end of 2016, the situation looked grim for Moscow. The Kremlin needed to damage Macron in order to either "return" Fillon to the prospective second round in which he would contest the presidency against Le Pen, or secure Le Pen's victory against Macron.

Russian state-controlled media hit the stage. RT played the anti-globalist and anti-Semitic card as it reported on Macron's highly paid position at Rothschild & Cie Banque controlled by the Rothschild family.[7] Sputnik combined left-wing populism and homophobia as it communicated the allegations of Nicolas Dhuicq, a French centre-right MP and a member of the board of the French-Russian Dialogue Association, that Macron was "an agent of the big American banking system" and was backed by a "very wealthy gay lobby".[8] The French editions of

7 "'Il n'y a pas une culture française': Macron s'attire les foudres de la droite", *RT*, 6 February (2017), https://francais.rt.com/france/33569-il-n-a-pasculture-francaise-macron-attire-foudres-droite; "Dupont-Aignan soupçonne Macron de conflits d'intérêts et veut qu'il clarifie 'ses financements'", *RT*, 11 February (2017), https://francais.rt.com/france/33829-dupont-aignan-soupconne-macron-conflitinterets-clarifie-financements.

8 "Ex-French Economy Minister Macron Could Be 'US Agent' Lobbying Banks' Interests", *Sputnik*, 4 February (2017), https://sputniknews.com/analysis/201702041050340451-macron-us-agent-dhuicq/.

Marine Le Pen meeting Vladimir Putin in Moscow
Source: http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/54102/photos

RT and Sputnik also spread the claims that Julian Assange of the notorious WikiLeaks allegedly had some compromising materials that would supposedly discredit Macron.[9] (These "materials" were never published and perhaps never existed.) It is difficult to assess the efficiency of the Russian media attacks against Macron, but his ratings did drop by a few percent in mid-February 2017, although he quickly restored and strengthened them by the end of the same month.

In March 2017, a month before the first round of the presidential election, Marine Le Pen went to Moscow and met with Vladimir Putin. Although it was not directly articulated by either party, the meeting implied that, in the situation where it was clear that Macron and Le Pen would contend the second round, Le Pen was Moscow's candidate. At the end of the same month, the Russian state made yet another effort to influence French public opinion: the French edition of Sputnik published results of a misleading opinion poll that suggested

9 "Assange: des révélations sur Macron dans les mails de Clinton", *Sputnik*, 3 February (2017), https://fr.sputniknews.com/international/201702031029930563-wikileaks-revelations-macron/; "Assange: WikiLeaks a trouvé des informations sur Macron dans des emails de Clinton", *RT*, 3 February (2017), https://francais.rt.com/france/33403-wikileaks-macron-clinton-email-assange.

that Fillon was the front runner of the elections.[10] These results contradicted those of reputable polling organisations, which correctly placed Fillon third in the polls, and even evoked a warning from the French polling watchdog that suggested treating Sputnik's publication with caution because of its "non-representative nature".[11]

Apart from the Russian media attacks, Macron's campaign was a target of cyber-attacks. Already in February 2017, Macron's team complained that their campaign website and databases were subject to hundreds or even thousands of cyber-attacks emanating from various locations in Russia.[12] Two days before the second round, which saw Macron facing Le Pen, a 9 Gb trove of e-mail messages and files related to the Macron campaign appeared on the anonymous document sharing website Pastebin.[13] Investigative journalists who analysed those files discovered that some of the leaked Excel documents had been modified using the Russian version of Excel and Russian-language computers. Furthermore, at least one document had been modified by a user named Georgiy Petrovich Roshka, who was later identified as an officer of the main centre of the special cryptography service of Russia's Main Intelligence Directorate.[14]

10 "Présidentielle 2017: Fillon donné favori selon une étude des réseaux sociaux", *Sputnik*, 29 March (2017), https://fr.sputniknews.com/france/201703291030674491-france-presidentielle-etude-des-reseaux-sociaux-fillon/.

11 David Chazan, "French Polling Watchdog Issues Warning after Russian News Report Claims Francois Fillon Regains Lead", *The Telegraph*, 2 April (2017), https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/04/02/french-polling-watchdog-issues-warning-russian-news-report-claims/.

12 "France Condemns Alleged Russian Cyber Attacks Targeting Presidential Candidate Macron", *France24*, 19 February (2017), https://www.france24.com/en/20170219-france-condemns-cyberattacks-targeting-presidential-candidate-macron-points-russia.

13 Eric Auchard, Bate Felix, "French Candidate Macron Claims Massive Hack as Emails Leaked", *Reuters*, 6 May (2017), https://www.reuters.com/article/us-france-election-macron-leaks/french-candidate-macron-claims-massive-hack-as-emails-leaked-idUSKBN1812AZ.

14 Roman Dobrokhotov, "Roshka the Bear: How French President's Mailbox Was Hacked by Russian Intelligence", *The Insider*, 28 October (2017), https://theins.ru/uncategorized/76960?lang=en.

Norwegian Parliamentary Elections

11 September 2017

Norway is a member of NATO and the European Economic Area, but not a member of the EU, which makes it difficult for the country to influence the EU's common foreign policy positions. In relation to Russia, Norway essentially follows the EU's line: it adopted the same sanctions against Russia as the EU did. The sanctions were adopted by the minority government formed by the centre-right Conservative Party and right-wing Progress Party that ruled Norway since 2013, with support from the centre-right Christian Democratic Party and the centrist Liberal Party. Public opinion polls conducted in the months leading to election day in September 2017 showed that the government parties enjoyed steady support, while the popularity of the major opposition force, the Labour Party, slightly declined.

The Labour Party, however, was not a feasible ally of Putin's Russia: it is pro-NATO, pro-EU, and highly critical of the Kremlin's actions. Needless to say, the Labour Party supported the sanctions against Moscow. The feeling is mutual: in the beginning of 2017, Norwegian police registered a cyber-attack on the Labour Party that was eventually credited to hackers in Russia.[15]

The Kremlin lacks trusted political allies in Norway. Potentially, it could rely on the right-wing Progress Party, which in the 1990s was considered a far-right party but since then has moved closer to the political centre. Several high-ranking members of the Progress Party, such as Christian Tybring-Gjedde and Bengt Rune Strifeldt, have called for the lifting of the "anti-Russian" sanctions,[16] which reflected Moscow's aspirations. However, the "Russia issue" was hardly

15 Cathrine Eide, Geir Solaas Moen, Stål Talsnes, Kjell Persen, "Arbeiderpartiet utsatt for fiendtlig hackerangrep", *TV 2*, 2 February (2017), https://www.tv2.no/nyheter/8902520/.

16 Atle Staalesen, "Norway's Rightwing Progress Party Wavers over Russia Sanctions", *The Barents Observer*, 7 August (2017), https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/2017/08/norways-rightwing-progress-party-wavers-over-russia-sanctions.

Christian Tybring-Gjedde
Source: https://www.aftenbladet.no/lokalt/i/0LPWE/Tybring-Gjedde-Frp-bor-ut-av-regjeringen

a challenge to either Norway's foreign policy position, which was (and still is) firmly in the hands of the Russo-sceptic Conservative Party, or to the cohesion of the coalition government, in which the Progress Party was a minor partner. Moreover, and annoyingly for Moscow, the Progress Party is a staunch supporter of the country's membership in NATO and the development of transatlantic relations. In other words, despite a few convergences, the Progress Party is not open to cooperation with the Russian pro-Kremlin actors and will not gamble with its government participation over the "Russia issue".

Most importantly, it is not Norway's alignment with the EU's foreign policy approach to the sanctions that enormously irritates Russia, but rather the country's active engagement in the activities of NATO. In this regard, Russia is powerless: all significant Norwegian parties back NATO membership. Ironically, Jens Stoltenberg, the Secretary General of NATO since 2014, is a Norwegian. This is a double irony, because as a young member of the far-left Red Youth group, Stoltenberg had contacts with the KGB in the 1970s and 1980s.[17]

17 "Kodenavn 'Steklov'", *VG*, 24 October (2000), https://www.vg.no/nyheter/innenriks/i/kaJoOj/kodenavn-steklov.

Russia also lacks any meaningful instrument of influencing Norwegian politics and society. Moscow had a Norwegian edition of the Voice of Russia radio station and a companion website until 2014, when the Voice of Russia radio service was replaced by Radio Sputnik, while the Voice of Russia website was replaced by the Sputnik International website. Russia launched the Norwegian edition of the Sputnik website in 2015 but closed it down a year later, along with the Danish, Finnish, and Swedish editions – too few people visited them.[18] There has never been a Norwegian edition of RT. Tellingly, when the Russian Embassy in Norway decided to criticise the allegedly Russophobic stance of the mainstream Norwegian media, it suggested as informative reading – in addition to three English-language Russian resources (RT, Sputnik, and the English version of the Russian Foreign Ministry website) – three Norwegian far-right websites and two marginal but openly pro-Kremlin Norwegian blogs.[19]

Taking all these factors into account, Russia lacked both political allies and media/influence tools to meddle in the 2017 parliamentary elections in Norway.

18 "Russian News Agency Sputnik Closes All Nordic Language Services", *High North News*, 15 March (2016), https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/russian-news-agency-sputnik-closes-all-nordic-language-services.

19 Russian Embassy in Norway, "Russland i norske media", *Facebook*, 21 February (2018), https://www.facebook.com/notes/russian-embassy-in-norway/russland-i-norske-media/1578728845581803/.

German Parliamentary Elections

24 September 2017

Like France, Germany is one of the leading and most influential EU member states, and Chancellor Angela Merkel's resolve to maintain the sanctions against Putin's Russia is one of the key reasons why the sanctions regime still holds. Unsurprisingly, since 2014 – when the first Ukraine-related sanctions came into force – Russia has been trying to influence the process of decision-making in Germany.

Moscow has prominent political allies among the German elites. For example, former German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder is an influential lobbyist of Russian economic and political interests. Since 2006, he has been the chairman of the shareholders' committee of Nord Stream AG,[20] whose majority shareholder is the Russian gas giant Gazprom. In August 2017, just over a month before the German parliamentary elections, Russia nominated Schröder to serve as an independent director of the board of its biggest oil producer, Rosneft, that was at that time already under Western sanctions – he officially took up this position right after the elections in September. By coddling Schröder, Russia pursued two aims: to advance Russian interests in the German business community, and to strengthen the Russia-friendly group within the Social Democratic Party (SPD), which Schröder led in 1999-2004.

Schröder is arguably the most high-profile representative of the so-called *Russlandversteher* (literally "Russia understanders"), i.e. politicians who are friendly towards Putin's Russia. Yet another *Russlandversteher* is Horst Seehofer, who at the time of the 2017 elections was still the leader of the Christian Social Union (CSU), the sister party of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), then led by Merkel. In 2017, a few months before the elections, Seehofer travelled to Moscow with a 60-strong delegation and met with Putin, aiming to re-build

20 "Our Shareholders' Committee", *Nord Stream*, https://www.nord-stream.com/about-us/our-shareholders-committee/.

Gerhard Schröder at Vladimir Putin's inauguration ceremony
Foto: dpa. Source: https://www.tagesspiegel.de/politik/deutschland-und-putins-russland-abschied-vom-erbe-gerhard-schroeders/21253198.html

business relations between Germany and Russia damaged by the EU's sanctions against the latter.[21]

Because the *Russlandversteher* are part of the German elites, pro-Kremlin narratives are a legitimate part of Germany's diverse political culture. This is an outcome of the confluence of two specifically German traditions. One is the tradition of guilt towards Russia because of the Nazi crimes;[22] the other is the so-called *Ostpolitik*, a Cold War policy of rapprochement between West Germany and East European countries.[23] This explanation obviously favours political

21 Stefan Wagstyl, "Horst Seehofer's Trip to Russia a Challenge to Angela Merkel", *Financial Times*, 15 March (2017), https://www.ft.com/content/2ca94528-08bc-11e7-97d1-5e720a26771b.

22 Robert Coalson, "Berlin, Moscow, and War Guilt: Why Germany Accommodates Russia", *RFE/RL*, 4 June (2014), https://www.rferl.org/a/berlin-moscow-and-war-guilt-why-germany-accommodates-russia/25409920.html.

23 Jakob Mischke, Andreas Umland, "Germany's New Ostpolitik", *Foreign Affairs*, 9 April (2014), https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/western-europe/2014-04-09/germanys-new-ostpolitik.

values, but *Russlandversteher* views can be underpinned by economic interests, too. It is not surprising that many *Russlandversteher* who serve on the boards of German companies such as Eon, RWE, and Siemens have extensive investments in Russia. German non-mainstream parties have their own rationales for a friendly approach towards Putin's regime. The far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) sees in Putin's Russia an ally in its fight against liberal democracy and the EU, while the far-left Left Party seems to be charmed by Moscow's antagonism towards NATO and the US.

Since the *Russlandversteher* can be found in several German parties, it makes it difficult for Moscow to navigate between inflicting damage to some parties and providing various forms of support to others. This difficulty may explain the reason why the Russian actors who hacked the Bundestag in 2015, stealing sensitive data,[24] did not publish it to influence the elections, as was expected after the Clinton- and Macron-related leaks. The publication of the data stolen from the Bundestag might have directly or indirectly damaged the *Russlandversteher* and, thus, alienated them from Moscow. Yet given the perceived unfavourable approach of the German government formed in 2013 by the CDU/CSU and SPD, Russian actors nonetheless tried to meddle in the elections, although they were limited in the scope of their influence operations.

Opinion polls conducted in the run-up to the elections projected six political forces entering the Bundestag: CDU/CSU, SPD, AfD, Free Democratic Party (FDP), The Left, and the Greens. The Greens were seen as the party least friendly towards Putin's Russia, the AfD and The Left were considered the friendliest, while the FDP – although ideologically liberal and pro-Atlanticist – in fact flirted with the *Russlandversteher* foreign policy platform.[25]

Many experts predicted, albeit wrongly, that after the elections the CDU/CSU, FDP, and the Greens would form the so-called "Jamaica-coalition government".[26] Such a government would run counter to the Kremlin's foreign policy interests – despite the FDP's pro-Kremlin flirtations – as it would combine Merkel's resolve to keep the anti-Moscow sanctions with the stark criticism of Putin's illiberalism coming from the Greens.

24 Patrick Beuth, Kai Biermann, Martin Klingst, Holger Stark, "Merkel and the Fancy Bear", *Zeit Online*, 12 May (2017), https://www.zeit.de/digital/2017-05/cyberattack-bundestag-angela-merkel-fancy-bear-hacker-russia.

25 "Germany's FDP Urges New Approach to Russia's Annexation of Crimea", *Reuters*, 5 August (2017), https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ukraine-crisis-germany-party/germanys-fdp-urges-new-approach-to-russias-annexation-of-crimea-idUSKBN1AL0IR.

26 Philip Oltermann, "German Coalition Talks Collapse after Deadlock on Migration and Energy", *The Guardian*, 20 November (2017), https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/nov/19/german-coalition-talks-close-to-collapse-angela-merkel.

The strategy that pro-Kremlin Russian actors adopted in the months leading to the elections was to attack Merkel and her government, advance the AfD and The Left, and avoid excessive bashing of the CDU/CSU and SPD.

Attacking Merkel and advancing the AfD was an uncomplicated task: after Merkel's controversial decision to open Germany's borders to more than one million refugees during the 2015-2016 refugee crisis,[27] she became an easy target for conservatives and the far right. Thus, German editions of RT and, especially, Sputnik, published vast numbers of anti-immigrant and anti-refugee stories that attacked Merkel and simultaneously promoted the AfD. Pro-Kremlin bots amplified these stories on social networks.[28] Apart from the nativist narratives, the Russian state media and pro-Kremlin bots pushed the message that the AfD would become a victim of electoral fraud. The first wave of these allegations came in May 2017, and the second in September that year.[29] In relation to the second wave, Russian and Western far-right users produced a Twitter storm using a hashtag #wahlbetrug (electoral fraud), thus insinuating that the forthcoming elections would be rigged by the establishment parties. Some Russian stakeholders also attempted to secure funding and media support for individual AfD members who ran for parliament: a journalistic investigation revealed that a plan to support a pro-Kremlin AfD candidate, Markus Frohnmaier, was submitted to the Russian Presidential Administration a few months before the elections.[30]

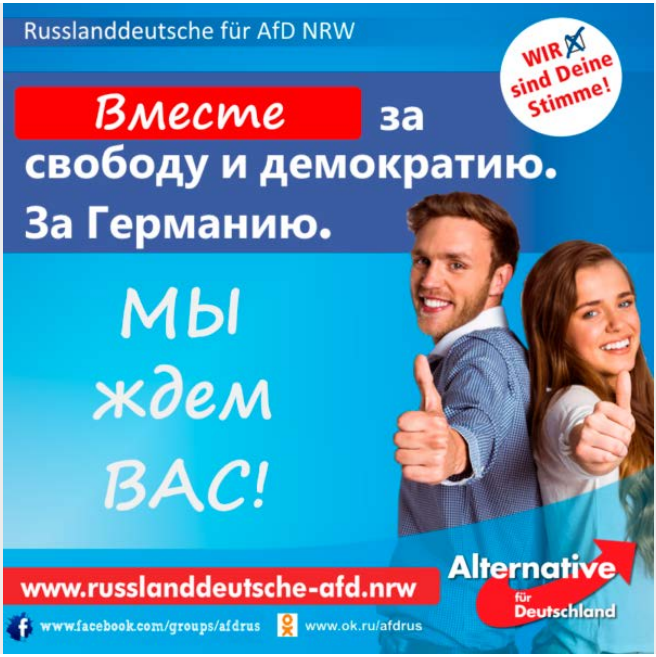
Furthermore, Russian language media such as First Channel, RTR-Planeta TV, and RIA Novosti helped the AfD to mobilise the so-called *Russlanddeutsche*, i.e. ethnic Germans who were born and resided in the Soviet Union but eventually moved to Germany, and non-German Russian-speaking immigrants who managed to acquire German citizenship. The AfD was essentially the only German

27 "Merkel's Refugee Policy Divides Europe", *Spiegel*, 21 September (2015), http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/refugee-policy-of-chancellor-merkel-divides-europe-a-1053603.html.

28 Anne Applebaum, Peter Pomerantsev, Melanie Smith, Chloe Colliver, "*Make Germany Great Again*": *Kremlin*, *Alt-Right and International Influences in the 2017 German Elections* (London: ISD, 2017), https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Make-Germany-Great-Again-ENG-061217.pdf.

29 "Russisches 'Bot'-Netzwerk verbreitet Beiträge von AfD-Unterstützern", *Focus*, 24 September (2017), https://www.focus.de/politik/deutschland/bundestagswahl_2017/bundestagswahl-analyse-hunderte-fake-twitter-profile-verbreiten-beitraege-von-afd-unterstuetzern_id_7631486.html.

30 Melanie Amann *et al*., "Wie Putin die AfD für seine Zwecke benutzt", *Spiegel*, 5 April (2019), https://www.spiegel.de/plus/wie-putin-die-afd-fuer-seine-zwecke-missbraucht-a-00000000-0002-0001-0000-000163279501.



The AfD tried to mobilise the Russlanddeutsche
Source: https://russlanddeutsche-afd.nrw/ru/news/2016/07/russlanddeutsche-fuer-afd-nrw/

party that strove to lure in the *Russlanddeutsche*, who, according to various estimates, account for 2.5-3 million people.[31]

However, Russian actors seemed to have failed to advance The Left. One explanation for this would be the lack of Russian left-wing oriented international media resources – both RT and Sputnik are clearly right-leaning media. But pro-Kremlin actors took note of their own shortcomings: just three days after the elections, a new Berlin-based left-wing media project was launched, Redfish, that turned out to be a subsidiary company of Ruptly GmbH, owned by RT.[32] Perhaps taking inspiration from the popularity of "riot porn" among the far left, Redfish appealed to the left-wing audiences by focusing on police violence.

31 Jürgen Streihammer, "Deutschland: AfD, die Alternatiwa für Russlanddeutsche", *Die Presse*, 19 September (2017), https://diepresse.com/home/ausland/aussenpolitik/5288575/Deutschland_AfD-die-Alternatiwa-fuer-Russlanddeutsche.

32 Jan-Henrik Wiebe, Russlands heimliche Medienzentrale in Europa, t-online, 16 November (2018), https://www.t-online.de/nachrichten/deutschland/id_84584050/mitten-in-berlin-russlands-heimliche-medienzentrale-in-europa.html.

Austrian Parliamentary Elections
15 October 2017

Austria is a member of the European Union since 1995, but not a member of NATO: Austria's militarily neutral status ("permanent neutrality") is fixed in the country's constitution. Austria's post-EU accession foreign relations are best understood in terms of distinguishing between their political and economic aspects. The political aspect of Austrian foreign policy is in line with that of Germany, but Austria sees the economic aspect of foreign relations as more important than the political one and remains fully in charge of it. This is reflected in the thriving economic relations that Austria had with the Soviet Union: in 1968, Austria became the first Western country that started importing Soviet gas. The gas contract with the Soviets made Austria a key country in the European natural gas network.[33]

The distinction between the political and economic aspects of foreign relations was manifested in the Austrian authorities' approach towards Russia. On the one hand, in 2014, during the rule of the coalition government formed by the two historically major parties, the centre-right People's Party (ÖVP) and the centre-left Social-Democratic Party (SPÖ), Austria supported the imposition of the EU's sanctions against Putin's Russia. On the other hand, the Austrians used every opportunity they could find to go back to business-as-usual with Russia, as high-profile members of both major parties have links to businesses that have dealings with Russia – for example, the Austrian oil and gas company OMV, and Raiffeisen Bank International. Furthermore, like in Germany, both major political forces have *Russlandversteher* among their ranks. Among them are former Chancellor Alfred Gusenbauer (SPÖ), a member of the supervisory

33 "50th Anniversary of the Gas Supply Contract", *OMV*, 1 June (2018), https://www.omv.com/en/blog/50th-anniversary-of-the-gas-supply-contract.

Alfred Gusenbauer speaking at an event organised by the Dialogue of Civilisations think-tank founded by Vladimir Yakunin

Source: https://doc-research.org/our-events/lecture-dr-alfred-gusenbauer-world-crossroads-decisive-shifts-international-policies/

board of the pro-Kremlin think-tank Dialogue of Civilisations,[34] and former Vice-Chancellor Reinhold Mitterlehner (ÖVP), who was awarded the Order of Friendship of the Russian Federation in 2016.[35] The *Russlandversteher*, nevertheless, are still a minority within the ÖVP and SPÖ.

This, however, cannot be said about the third major Austrian party, the far-right Freedom Party (FPÖ), which has been openly pro-Kremlin in its foreign policy positions since at least 2008, and has consistently opposed any sanctions against Russia since 2014. The party finds Putin's right-wing authoritarian

34 Simone Brunner, "Der lange Schatten nach Moskau", *Wiener Zeitung*, 5 April (2017), https://www.wienerzeitung.at/nachrichten/politik/europa/884082-Der-lange-Schatten-nach-Moskau.html.

35 Eduard Steiner, "Siegfried Wolfs russische Mission", *Die Presse*, 16 February (2016), https://diepresse.com/home/wirtschaft/international/4926536/Siegfried-Wolfs-russische-Mission.

Heinz-Christian Strache, the leader of the Freedom Party of Austria, after signing a cooperation agreement with the "United Russia" party.

Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fdlZi8QDSjM

regime politically attractive, and even signed a coordination and cooperation agreement with the ruling Russian party, "United Russia," in December 2016.[36]

In the beginning of the election year, the FPÖ led the polls, followed by the SPÖ and the ÖVP. However, when the popular Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sebastian Kurz, became the leader of the ÖVP in May 2017, the party swiftly leapt to the top of the polls. Kurz, who was known for his tough position on immigration[37] – and hence was able to "steal" a large number of voters from the far right – was

36 For more details about the relations between the FPÖ and Russia, see Shekhovtsov, *Russia and the Western Far Right*, pp. 164-175.

37 Ralph Atkins, "Austrian Foreign Minister Sebastian Kurz on Migrants and Far Right", *Financial Times*, 3 November (2016), https://www.ft.com/content/e9c1897c-8bad-11e6-8cb7-e7ada1d123b1.

reluctant to continue a coalition with the SPÖ and considered building a coalition with the FPÖ after the parliamentary elections.

The Kremlin was satisfied with the expected outcome of the elections: while it could not expect that Austria would challenge the EU's consensus on the sanctions, it understood that few things would change if the ÖVP either continued the coalition with the SPÖ or built a coalition with the FPÖ. No matter what major parties formed a coalition government, Austria would not change its pragmatic approach towards Russia, and the latter was content with the situation. The only development that could potentially unnerve Moscow was the prospect of the ÖVP forming a coalition with three smaller parties – the centrist NEOS, centre-left List Pilz, and the Greens – that were much more sceptical of Russia than the other prospective coalition partners. However, a coalition between the ÖVP and those three parties (reminiscent of the hypothetical "Jamaica-coalition government" in Germany) was very unlikely, and Russian actors did nothing to cripple electoral support for the smaller parties. Neither did Russia provide any media support to the far-right and blatantly pro-Kremlin FPÖ, despite the availability of German editions of RT and Sputnik, as well as a range of Austrian far-right media, such as *Alles roger*?, *Contra Magazin*, *Info-Direct*, and *Wochenblick*, all of whom would have been happy to communicate Moscow's narratives to the Austrian public.

Italian Parliamentary Elections
4 March 2018

Like Austria, Italy enjoyed good relations with the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Austria started importing Soviet gas in 1968, and the Italian oil and gas company Eni signed a contract for importing Soviet natural gas the following year. Meanwhile, the Italian-Soviet contract on importing Soviet oil had been signed already in 1960. Despite the fact that Italy and the Soviet Union were on opposite sides of the barricade after the Second World War, Moscow exerted a strong influence on the Italian politics through the Italian Communist Party, arguably the strongest communist party in the Western bloc during the Cold War.

Italy and Russia maintained privileged economic and political relations after the fall of the Soviet Union. Political relations were strengthened in recent times thanks to the friendship between Putin and four-time Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi. In 2014, when the EU imposed sanctions on Russia, Italy – under the premiership of Matteo Renzi, then the leader of the centre-left Democratic Party – was the second largest export partner of Russia in the EU and the third largest import partner.[38] Not only Eni, but other major Italian companies such as the Intesa banking group and the Italian oil and gas industry contractor Saipem, had extensive relations with Russia.[39] Hence, Italy's initial reluctance to join the EU's sanctions against Russia was not surprising,[40] and it was obvious

38 "Where Does Russia Export to? (2014)", *The Observatory of Economic Complexity*, https://atlas.media.mit.edu/en/visualize/tree_map/hs92/export/rus/show/all/2014/; "Where Does Russia Import from? (2014)", *The Observatory of Economic Complexity*, https://atlas.media.mit.edu/en/visualize/tree_map/hs92/import/rus/show/all/2014/.

39 Henry Foy, Rachel Sanderson, James Politi, "The Ties that Bind Italy and Russia", *Financial Times*, 29 October (2017), https://www.ft.com/content/ffbe03c0-b976-11e7-8c12-5661783e5589.

40 Rachel Sanderson, Christian Oliver, "Italy Accused of Blocking Tougher Sanctions on Russia", *Financial Times*, 13 July (2014), https://www.ft.com/content/ad743cae-0a8a-11e4-be06-00144feabdc0.

Silvio Berlusconi and Vladimir Putin in Russia-annexed Crimea
Source: http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/50267/photos

that the country eventually joined the sanctions regime out of solidarity with its European partners rather than out of devotion to specific political values.

By the time Italy held its 2018 parliamentary elections, the popularity of Renzi's Democratic Party had dramatically declined as a result of the refugee crisis and the defeat of the constitutional referendum he had proposed.[41] The massive influx of non-European refugees into Italy shaped the political debate in the country, and this strengthened support for four Italian parties that were highly critical of the governing Democratic Party's ability to handle the crisis: Berlusconi's centre-right "Forward Italy", far-right Norther League (LN) and Brothers of Italy (FdI), and populist Five Star Movement (M5S).

Moreover, the four parties were also known for their friendly approach towards Putin's regime. For example, Berlusconi called the annexation of Crimea a "democratic" development and even illegally visited Crimea together with Putin in 2015.[42] The M5S harshly criticised the EU's sanctions against Russia and echoed

41 Steve Scherer, Gavin Jones, "Renzi to Resign after Referendum Rout, Leaving Italy in Limbo", *Reuters*, 4 December (2016), https://www.reuters.com/article/us-italy-referendum-idUSKBN13T019.

42 Steve Scherer, "Italy's Berlusconi Says Crimea Split from Ukraine Was Democratic", *Reuters*, 27 September (2015), https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ukraine-crisis-berlusconi-idUSKCN0RR0MW20150927.

The leader of the Northern League Matteo Salvini (left) signing a cooperation agreement with the "United Russia" party.

Source: https://libmod.de/anton-shekhovtsov-vertraege-mit-einiges-russland-putins-helfer-in-europa/

Russia's narratives on "aggressive" NATO.[43] The FdI pledged to work on lifting the "anti-Russian" sanctions and reconstructing economic and security partnerships with Russia.[44] But the most pro-Kremlin party out of the three was the LN, led by Matteo Salvini: not only did members of the LN travel to Crimea and Russia numerous times in 2014-2017, organise anti-sanctions protests both in Italy and Russia, and promote Russian foreign policy interests through the party's media project Lombardy-Russia Cultural Association, they also signed a coordination and cooperation agreement with "United Russia" in 2017 – the same agreement that was signed between "United Russia" and the Austrian far-right FPÖ in 2016.[45]

The Italian edition of Sputnik seemed to have greatly contributed to the Italian debate on migration and refugees during the year 2017, and Sputnik's stories were shared and amplified by legions of Internet trolls and bots. However, there was no increase in anti-immigrant or anti-refugee stories in the Italian edition

43 Jason Horowitz, "Will Russia Meddle in Italy's Election? It May Not Have to", *The New York Times*, 1 March (2018), https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/01/world/europe/italy-election-russia.html; "Italy's Five Star Movement Lambasts NATO Policy toward Russia", *Sputnik*, 12 March (2018), https://sputniknews.com/analysis/201803121062445950-five-star-movement-russia-nato/.

44 "Brothers of Italy: Technocratic Elite Threatens Rome's Sovereignty, Not Russia", *Sputnik*, 2 March (2018), https://sputniknews.com/europe/201803021062164540-italy-russia-elite-rome-sovereignty-threat/.

45 Shekhovtsov, *Russia and the Western Far Right*, pp. 175-189.

of Sputnik in the period close to election day. Moscow seemed to be comfortable with the falling support for the Democratic Party and the rise of the right-wingers and populists. At the same time, it most likely felt that giving preference to any particular force challenging the rule of the centre left would be a tactical mistake, hence it did not venture to support the anti-establishment forces (LN, M5S, and FdI) against the mainstream "Forward Italy" party headed by Putin's friend Berlusconi.

It should be stressed that "Forward Italy "and M5S themselves ran successful media campaigns. "Forward Italy" expectedly relied on Berlusconi's media empire. The M5S used its massive Internet presence: the internet played a huge role in the party's electoral success already in 2013.[46] The LN's use of social and traditional media was less extensive, but it demonstrated a rather creative approach to online propaganda: it turned many of its supporters into "selfbots" – Twitter users who agreed to lend their accounts to be used for automatic tweeting of pro-LN messages – although there is no evidence that this strategy bore fruit.[47] The cause of the LN's success in the 2018 election lies elsewhere: in the decline of the centre left and the inability of the mainstream centre right ("Forward Italy") to take the lead in the debate on refugees and immigration.

46 Jamie Bartlett, "How Beppe Grillo's Social Media Politics Took Italy by Storm", *The Guardian*, 26 February (2013), https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/feb/26/beppe-grillo-politics-social-media-italy; Mariangela Sapere, "Beppe Grillo & Italian Internet Politics", *IDG Connect*, 28 August (2014), https://www.idgconnect.com/idgconnect/analysis-review/1017531/beppe-grillo-italian-internet-politics.

47 Ben Nimmo, Anna Pellegatta, "#ElectionWatch: Italy's Self-Made Bots: How the Lega's Followers Automate Themselves", *DFRLab*, 25 January (2018), https://medium.com/dfrlab/electionwatch-italys-self-made-bots-200e2e268d0e.

Hungarian Parliamentary Elections

8 April 2018

Since 2010, Hungarian politics has been dominated by the Fidesz party led by current Prime Minister Viktor Orbán. Having its origins in the centre right political family, Fidesz has moved to the far right since rising to power and securing the constitutional majority in the parliament.[48] While Orbán's party is still a member of the conservative European People's Party, in its ideology and policies it is much closer to the far-right Europe of Nations and Freedom political group, known for its generally pro-Kremlin foreign policy positions.

Although Fidesz lost its constitutional majority (but retained parliamentary majority) in 2015, by that time it had managed to subdue the Constitutional Court and the media, while replacing independent officials in many other state offices and institutions by Fidesz loyalists.[49] In other words, the changes that Orbán's government had introduced in 2010-2015 secured Orbán's almost unlimited power in the country beyond 2015. Hungary became a captured state.

While Orbán's Hungary never questioned its membership of NATO or the EU, its leadership often voiced explicitly pro-Kremlin narratives and harshly criticised the EU's sanctions imposed on Putin's Russia.[50] Orbán's apparent political rapprochement with Russia was accompanied by the deepening of economic relations. In the beginning of 2014, Hungary and Russia struck a deal on the expansion of the Hungarian Paks nuclear power plant.[51] For this project, Hungary

48 Cas Mudde, "Is Hungary Run by the Radical Right?", *The Washington Post*, 10 August (2015), https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2015/08/10/is-hungary-run-by-the-radical-right/.

49 Anton Shekhovtsov, "Is Transition Reversible? The Case of Central Europe", *Legatum Institute*, January (2016), pp. 3-9.

50 "Hungary PM Orban Condemns EU Sanctions on Russia", *BBC*, 15 August (2014), https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-28801353.

51 "Hungary PM to Meet Russia's Putin, Nuclear Deal Likely", *Reuters*, 13 January (2014), https://www.reuters.com/article/us-hungary-russia-nuclear/hungary-pm-to-meet-russias-putin-nuclear-deal-likely-idUSBREA0C0PM20140113.

would receive a loan of 10 billion euros from Moscow, the first tranche of which Orbán accepted in 2015. Fidesz decided to classify all material related to the nuclear deal for 30 years.[52] One of the Hungarian officials who promoted the deal was Ernő Keskeny, then deputy chairman of the Hungarian-Russian Intergovernmental Commission on Economic Cooperation. Keskeny had personally known Putin since the 1990s, when Keskeny lived in Saint Petersburg.[53]

It would be wrong, however, to perceive Orbán as a devoted Moscow ally. As the years passed since his rise to power in 2010, Orbán became increasingly ambitious and started to promote a pan-European ideological alternative to European liberal democracy – one based on populism, nativism, and authoritarianism. This automatically brought him into proximity with Putin's right-wing authoritarian regime, which often serves as a model for far-right politicians in Europe. Yet Orbán's end goal is not rapprochement with Russia but ideological domination in Europe, and he is using Putin's Russia as an instrument to achieve this objective.

At the same time, it would be difficult to deny that the Hungarian government has mimicked a number of infamous illiberal developments in Russia. One of the leading universities in Russia, the European University at Saint Petersburg, had its license suspended in 2016 in what was seen by many as a political attack on the university's liberal traditions; the following year, Hungarian authorities started a process of "expulsion" from Hungary of the renowned Central European University, considered one of the major academic centres of liberal thought in the country.[54] In 2017, the Fidesz-controlled parliament passed a law imposing strict restrictions on NGOs that received foreign funding[55] – a law that clearly echoed the Russian "foreign agent" law adopted in 2012. Russia followed up, in 2015, with the "undesirable organisations" law, effectively banning George Soros' Open Society Foundations, among others, from operating in

52 Zoltan Simon, "Orban's Party to Make Russian Nuclear Deal a 30-Year Secret", *Bloomberg*, 27 February (2015), https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-02-27/orban-s-party-makes-hungary-russia-nuclear-deal-a-30-year-secret.

53 "The Man behind the Russian-Hungarian Rapprochement: Ernő Keskeny", *Hungarian Spectrum*, 24 February (2015), http://hungarianspectrum.org/2015/02/24/the-man-behind-the-russian-hungarian-rapprochement-erno-keskeny/.

54 "The Central European University Is Moving to Vienna", *The Economist*, 5 December (2018), https://www.economist.com/europe/2018/12/05/the-central-european-university-is-moving-to-vienna.

55 Krisztina Than, "Civil Organizations in Hungary Brace for Government Crackdown on NGOs", *Reuters*, 25 April (2018), https://www.reuters.com/article/us-hungary-orban-ngos/civil-organizations-in-hungary-brace-for-government-crackdown-on-ngos-idUSKBN1HW1ZN.

Viktor Orbán meeting Vladimir Putin in Moscow.
Source: http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/58003/photos

Russia; in 2017, Orbán started vicious attacks on Soros,[56] and the Open Society Foundations had to move from Budapest to Berlin in 2018.[57]

The majority of other Hungarian parties – possibly with the exception of the right-wing Jobbik – do not share Orbán's enthusiasm for pro-Kremlin narratives, which reflects the deeply-rooted mistrust of the Hungarians towards Russia. Until very recently, Jobbik was considered a far-right party, but with Fidesz moving from the centre right to the far right and literally stealing ultranationalist votes from Jobbik, the latter attempted to move closer to the centre right vacated by Fidesz and managed to press several radical right-wingers from the party. In its foreign policy orientations, Jobbik was also the most pro-Russian party in Hungary, but its fascination with Russia waned together with its right-wing radicalism. Neither Jobbik, nor major centre-left parties such as the Hungarian Socialist Party, Democratic Coalition, or "Politics Can Be Different", could fundamentally challenge Fidesz at the 2018 parliamentary elections: according

56 "The Genesis of Orbán's Anti-Soros Campaign", *Hungarian Spectrum*, 15 January (2019), http://hungarianspectrum.org/2019/01/15/the-genesis-of-orbans-anti-soros-campaign/.

57 "The Open Society Foundations to Close International Operations in Budapest", *Open Society Foundations*, 15 May (2018), https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/press-releases/open-society-foundations-close-international-operations-budapest.

The anti-Soros campaign in Hungary

Source: https://www.newsweek.com/why-israels-netanyahu-backing-hungarys-anti-semitic-posters-against-george-634718

to public opinion polls, around 50% of the voters would support Fidesz, while its nearest competitor, Jobbik, polled around 20%. The only mystery about the elections was whether Fidesz would secure a constitutional majority or just a parliamentary one.

Russia does not have either a Hungarian edition of either RT or Sputnik, although it used to have a Hungarian edition of the Voice of Russia radio station and website until 2014. When Russia put Radio Sputnik and the Sputnik website into operation as a replacement for the Voice of Russia, no Hungarian service reappeared. The obvious reason for this was that by that time Orbán had already built his own propaganda machine, which included popular print and online media such as *888.hu, Magyar Nemzet*, *Origó*, and *Mandiner*. Russian media did not have to relaunch their Hungarian editions to "force feed" the Hungarian public with pro-Kremlin narratives, illiberal hysteria, conspiracy theories, and fake news: Hungarian state-funded and pro-government media delivered much of that – and more – on their own. The situation with the elections was the same: Moscow was more than happy with Orbán's electoral perspectives and did not feel the need to interfere in any way.

Swedish Parliamentary Elections

9 September 2018

Sweden is a member of the EU, but not a member of NATO, the latter being a result of the neutralist tradition laid down in the beginning of the 19th century and held up by the centre-left Social Democratic Party (SAP) that led the country's government for most of the 20th century and secured Sweden's neutrality during the Second World War and Cold War (a position Sweden abandoned in 2009). NATO membership remains a divisive issue in Sweden.[58] The country cooperates with the Alliance on many programmes and exercises, much to the annoyance of Russia, which has frequently tried to dissuade Sweden (and Finland) from joining NATO, sometimes even resorting to threats.[59]

Sweden supported the introduction of the EU's sanctions against Russia under the premiership of Fredrik Reinfeldt, then the leader of the centre-right Moderate Party, who headed the coalition government that also featured Sweden's other major centre-right parties, such as the Centre Party, Liberal People's Party, and the Christian Democrats. The country upheld its support for the sanctions under the centre-left minority coalition government of the SAF and the Green Party, which replaced Reinfeldt's government in October 2014. This cross-party support for the EU's sanctions reflects Sweden's general scepticism towards Russia, a scepticism underpinned both by the historical military strife between Russia and Sweden over the centuries, and by more recent developments related to Russia's war against Ukraine.

The only major Swedish party that is, to a certain degree, ambivalent towards Russia is the far-right Sweden Democrats (SD), but it is not ready to cooperate

58 Bruce Stokes, "NATO's Image Improves on Both Sides of Atlantic", *Pew Research Center*, 23 May (2017), https://www.pewglobal.org/2017/05/23/natos-image-improves-on-both-sides-of-atlantic/.

59 "Russia Threatens Counter-measures if Finland and Sweden Join Nato", *Yle*, 25 July (2018), https://yle.fi/uutiset/osasto/news/russia_threatens_counter-measures_if_finland_and_sweden_join_nato/10321784.

Jimmie Åkesson, the leader of the Sweden Democrats
Source: https://nationalinterest.org/feature/whos-afraid-sweden-democrats-30977

with Russian or non-Russian pro-Putin actors with the aim of advancing Russian foreign policy interests. Moreover, while the SD officially rejects NATO membership (a position that can only be welcomed by Russia), it nevertheless never opposed Sweden's cooperation with the Alliance in any substantial way. The SD did have a youth wing that, in addition to being too extreme for the party, openly manifested pro-Kremlin views, but the SD's leadership expelled several major members of the youth wing in 2015. The expelled members formed their own party, Alternative for Sweden (AfS), modelled on the AfD, that can be described – in relation to its foreign policy positions – as a pro-Kremlin party. However, the AfS has enjoyed only fringe support.

The refugee crisis, Islam, and non-European immigration to Sweden dominated the Swedish political debates in the run-up to the elections, and the SD benefited from these debates despite the fact that the centre-left government led by the SAP's Stefan Löfven reverted Sweden's "open-door policy" towards refugees to the EU minimum at the height of the refugee crisis[60] (followed by the

60 David Crouch, "Sweden Slams Shut Its Open-door Policy towards Refugees", *The Guardian*, 24 November (2015), https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/nov/24/sweden-asylum-seekers-refugees-policy-reversal.

adoption in 2016 of a highly restrictive reunification and asylum law[61]). By that time, Russian actors had apparently gotten frustrated with the SD's reluctance to parrot the Kremlin's disinformation or propagandistic narratives.[62] The SD's position was understandable: for years, the party had been undergoing the process of almost forced mainstreamisation in order to become a suitable partner for a coalition government, and the SD would not dare to antagonise – by embracing pro-Moscow policies – other major Swedish parties that are all sceptical towards Russia.

In recent years, the Russian state-controlled international media has turned Sweden into a symbol of failed multiculturalism and the problems challenging the EU. However, Russia has no media instruments to operate in Sweden itself: there is no Swedish edition of RT; the Swedish version of the Sputnik website, launched in 2015, survived only a year. The number of Russian online information warriors who can speak Swedish also seems very low, which is apparently the case with Norway, too. Furthermore, Russian and non-Russian pro-Kremlin actors willing to operate in Sweden would encounter a highly hostile environment: almost 80% of the Swedish population view Russia unfavourably.[63]

This creates a painful paradox for Moscow: many Swedes may oppose NATO membership, be anti-American or anti-EU, or be dissatisfied with Muslim migration to Sweden – all the phenomena that the Kremlin tends to contaminate in other countries to push forward its own agenda – but that does not translate into pro-Kremlin positions to any meaningful degree. Thus, while in the run-up to the Swedish parliamentary elections, Russian international media continued communicating Sweden-related anti-refugee and anti-immigration narratives, they could hardly hope to influence the political developments in the country.

61 Admir Skodo, "Sweden: By Turns Welcoming and Restrictive in its Immigration Policy", *Migration Policy Institute*, 6 December (2018), https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/sweden-turns-welcoming-and-restrictive-its-immigration-policy.

62 "True Colors: Nominally Populist Sweden Democrats Help Ratify NATO Deal", *Sputnik*, 27 May (2016), https://sputniknews.com/europe/201605271040338849-sweden-democrats-nato-deal/.

63 Margaret Vice, "Publics Worldwide Unfavorable Toward Putin, Russia", *Pew Research Center*, 16 August (2017), https://www.pewglobal.org/2017/08/16/publics-worldwide-unfavorable-toward-putin-russia/.

Conclusion

In July 2018, commenting on an article on how Denmark was preparing for possible Russian interference in the general elections in 2019,[64] the Russian Embassy in Denmark tweeted in bad English: "Since there is no difference in russophobic approach between #DK Government and opposition, meddling into DK elections makes no sense".[65]

The review of Moscow's approaches to the electoral processes in seven European countries that took place in 2017-2018 (see Table 1) shows that the tweet of the Russian Embassy in Denmark is not far from the truth. When Russia does not meddle in elections in European countries, this happens for one of two reasons: either it *cannot* interfere, or it *does not have to*. What the Russian Embassy in Denmark most likely implied was the fact that Russia would be *unable* to meddle in the Danish elections because it lacks both the instruments of interference and significant political allies on the ground.

A discussion of Russian interference in electoral processes in European nations ought to go beyond the problem of meddling as such and lead us to consider the erosion of liberal-democratic values and/or conflict of political and economic interests. This discussion also raises the question of what is more detrimental to the liberal-democratic values: Russian interference in electoral processes, or political developments in European societies that make Russian meddling excessive and needless?

We see that Moscow did not have to interfere in the elections in Austria, Italy, and Hungary because the Kremlin was satisfied with the political situations

64 Ida Nyegård Espersen, Henrik Jensen, "Danmark forbereder sig på russisk påvirkning", *Berlingske*, 23 July (2018), https://www.berlingske.dk/samfund/danmark-forbereder-sig-paa-russisk-paavirkning.

65 Embassy of Russia, DK, "Since there is no difference in russophobic approach…", *Twitter*, 24 July (2018), https://twitter.com/RusEmbDK/status/1021688735677734912.

Table 1. The Kremlin's (non-)interference in the electoral processes in France (FR), Norway (NO), Germany (DE), Austria (AT), Italy (IT), Hungary (HU), and Sweden (SE) in 2017-2018.

	FR	NO	DE	AT	IT	HU	SE
Moscow's satisfaction with the situation	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Significant political allies	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Clashes of political interests	No	N/A	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	N/A
Human and structural resources	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No
Conducive political culture	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Interference in the electoral process	**Yes**	**No**	**Yes**	**No**	**No**	**No**	**No**

in those countries: their political culture is conducive to the general Russian influence, and their political elites believe in the primacy of economic interests (and, hence, economic cooperation with Russia) over liberal-democratic values, making them conscious or unwitting allies of the Kremlin. One constraining factor in the Austrian and Italian cases was the availability of multiple political allies: siding with one of them would necessarily alienate the others, and that would be an unwanted move on the part of the Kremlin.

The same restraining factor was in place in the German case, but – in contrast to the three above-mentioned countries – the Kremlin was not satisfied with the situation in Germany and wanted to modify Berlin's approach towards Moscow. The restraining factor, however, prevented Russian actors from providing full-fledged support to any specific political force. In France, in its turn, there was no clash of political interests, and – while being dissatisfied with the prospective outcome of the presidential election – Moscow fully supported one of the presidential candidates.

A totally different picture could be found in Norway and Sweden: the Kremlin was not satisfied either with Oslo's or Stockholm's attitudes towards Moscow, or with the expected outcomes of the elections in these two Nordic countries, but their political culture did not allow Russian or non-Russian pro-Kremlin actors to win over any significant political forces. Putin's Russia is toxic in those countries, and any connections to Moscow are politically detrimental.

The availability or non-availability of media instruments of interference (for example, national editions of RT and Sputnik) seems to play a secondary role in Russian interference. Media instruments are useful when Russian actors strive to meddle in electoral processes (France, Germany), but Moscow understands that these instruments are powerless against deeply embedded scepticism

towards the Kremlin's domestic and international politics (Norway, Sweden). This scepticism, which is rooted in Nordic political culture, coupled with the lack of Russian information warriors who speak Norwegian and Swedish, make it very difficult for Moscow to exert influence on these countries.

Finally, a word of caution. Political situations in European democracies are always dynamic, and what was true for the year 2017 or 2018 may not be true for subsequent years.

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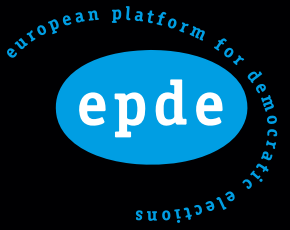

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