Russia “Understanders” in Europe: Discourses, Communication, Consequenc

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The Ukraine conflict reinforced the desire of Kremlin policymakers to establish connections with a range of anti-status-quo groups in Europe. Moscow’s broad aim is to catalyze support for and legitimize Russian sovereignty (and hegemony) and, perhaps, even the dissolution of the European Union project. The Kremlin has made ties with a variety of Russia sympathizers (“understanders”) in Europe a priority, and these groups and Moscow have found pragmatic use for each other’s platforms. Russian policymakers, however, seem to be aware that over-association with controversial European groups contains risks, particularly if Russian public perception views such connections as disagreeable.

The Structure of Putin’s Support

There are four groups of “Russia understanders” in Europe:

The first group is a pragmatic one, with members mostly prevalent in Germany, France, Italy, Finland, and the Baltic states. Members of this group are connected to the economic and political interests of businesses looking for new opportunities in Russian markets. “Russia understanders” in Germany are especially keen to reproduce the ideological mantras of modernization theory, based on a particular interpretation of the end of the Cold War that considers the latter a result of Germany’s economic engagement with the Soviet Union.

In the second group are those that have political identities largely based on ethnic and/or civilizational affinity with Russia. These are most prevalent in places like Latvia and Estonia, but also in pockets across Europe such as Bulgaria and Greece.

The third group includes some leftist, neo-Marxist, and communist parties in Western Europe, such as the Left Party in Germany and Italian and French Communists. These see the struggle between Russia and the West as one of two competing hegemonies. They tend to favor insurgents in eastern Ukraine in their alleged struggle against “fascism.”

The fourth group comprises far right parties such as the National Front in France, Vlaams Belang in Belgium, Jobbik in Hungary, Ataka in Bulgaria, the National Democratic Party in Germany, the Northern League and Forza Nuova in Italy, the Freedom Party in Austria, Golden Dawn in Greece, and the British National Party. Their common denominator seems to be a strong appeal to the nation-state; they stand against supranational authorities they lambast for their alleged pro-U.S. stance and immigration-friendly policies. This last group is perhaps of greatest interest given the rise of social conservatism and nationalist agendas in both Russia and Europe today.

Russia’s Discourses: Convenient Common Causes[1]

Though it may sometimes seem the opposite, the Russian political mainstream is not strictly anti-European. In spite of many advocates for a Russian U-turn from Europe to Asia, Moscow does not seek to disrupt Russian connections with the EU but instead to open up the idea of Europe (“from Lisbon to Vladivostok”) to include contemporary Russia. As Russian political scholar Vasily Zharkov argued in early 2016 at the peak of Russia’s confrontation with Europe:

> **“The Russian capital looks nothing like a besieged fortress….There is nothing to suggest a desire of Russians to turn away from Europe. On the contrary, Moscow has perhaps never looked as European as today….The existing conflict with the West can be explained as a natural continuation of the unceasing Europeanization of Russia. Moreover, it will result not in a turn away from the West but, most likely, an even closer coming together.**

A few months earlier, Russian political analyst Gleb Pavlovsky wrote of “Russia’s unbreakable bond with Europe”:

> **“A…sizzling and demonically passionate bond. No European nation… could share or comprehend this passion. Russia does not just impose itself on the West. It is convinced that the West can and should be resolving its problems, live with them, and live with Russia too.…The new Russia did not want to defeat the West but to join it. In our dreams we had “already” joined, thanks to the dollarization of everyday life, politics, and economics....The long list of clear “evidence” made the West’s refusal to regard us as equals appear incomprehensible and malicious.”**

At the same time, narratives of Russian national identity have long held to the notion of "two" Europes. Norwegian political scientist Iver Neumann has discussed the century-long Russian distinction between "true" and "false" Europe. This dichotomy also existed during the Cold War era, when Eastern Europe was posited as an alternative, Russia-friendly Europe. A more recent example is the headline "Yet, There Is a Different Europe," which appeared in 2014 in the Russian far-right newspaper *Zavtra* for an article about the Italian Northern League party.

Nowadays Putin propagandists seek to inscribe Russia within a wider European trend of EU-skepticism and anti-migration sentiments. The ideologies of European far-right parties accommodate three major elements of the Kremlin's ideal vision:

First, Kremlin policymakers believe there is no place for supranational institutions such as the EU, which Moscow lambasts for its bureaucratic inertia and financial inefficiency. As *Voice of Russia* political analyst Dmitry Babich wrote:

> **"In a way it's reminiscent of the Middle Ages, when Orthodox Russia's relations with individual European states could be better or worse, depending on realpolitik, but its relations with the Vatican were invariably frozen and full of ideological distrust. Today, the EU obviously aims to be the new Holy Roman Empire, taking on the role of moral arbiter and central authority. This is something that both Russia and Great Britain have always found hard to accept..."**

Second, in the Kremlin's reasoning, Europe should be cleansed of its liberal emancipatory agenda, which is incompatible with growing conservatism inside Russia and causes harm to EU-Russia relations. The Kremlin concluded early on that the more the EU emphasizes liberal values, the lesser the chance for Russia to be accepted as an equal partner. This explains Moscow's insistence on depoliticizing foreign policy (understood in the narrow sense of ridding it of liberal connotations).

Third, the Kremlin feels that Europe needs to distance itself from the United States as an "extra-regional force." Since Russia was unable to integrate with Euro-Atlantic structures, Western institutions, particularly NATO, are viewed in Moscow with suspicion, if not disgust.

On all three counts, European far right parties may be counted as supporters of the Putin regime's Eurosceptic, anti-liberal, and U.S.-critical attitude. They share the view that there is a "Europe of banks" and a "Europe of peoples," that the EU's overly supranational nature decreases its democratic legitimacy, that there needs to be a revival of the nation-state, and that Europe is under excessive U.S. influence. They also tend to share the Kremlin's sympathy for homophobic sentiment and its support of traditional family values.

Through all of this, Kremlin ideology also has a practical side. Russia is eager to destabilize the EU from within, weaken the Euro-Atlantic nexus, and undermine U.S. hegemony under the aegis of multipolarity and equality. This can give Russia a chance to "re-nationalize" Europe and re-define it in anti-liberal terms. On this basis, it seeks to re-position Russia as a full-fledged European power and forge a "concert of great powers" mostly representing "good old Europe."

Russia's Communication Strategies

Russia has messages to convey to its supporters in Europe, but these messages still need to be properly communicated. There are two interesting aspects about the communications between Putin's regime and far-right parties in Europe.

First, there has only been a gradual – and largely indirect – accommodation of Russian elites to liaisons with European far-right parties. Initial connections did not even involve the Kremlin. For example, Sergey Baburin, head of the "All-Russian Union" party, has claimed that in 2006 he invited former National Front leader Jean-Marie Le Pen to Russia. This triggered tensions even among Russian nationalist figures. According to Baburin, he was expelled from the Rodina faction in parliament by its leader Dmitry Rogozin for initiating Le Pen's visit. A few years later, Rogozin, as deputy prime minister, met Le Pen in Moscow.

Neither Putin nor Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev have publicly revealed any of their own direct linkages to like-minded Europeans. Formal communication develops through people like Rogozin or others in parliament. Informal contacts are sustained by people like Alexander Dugin or Sergey Markov who are outside the government's inner circle. When Bulgarian Ataka party leader Volen Siderov travelled to Moscow in 2012 to celebrate Putin's birthday, reportedly at his own expense, the Kremlin wished to keep this liaison only at a "personal" level. Initial contacts with Greece's left-wing Syriza party were established by the pro-government Russian Institute for Strategic Studies (RISI).

Second, the Russian mainstream media, when reporting about far-right parties' support for Putin (including their role as "international observers" of the referendum in Crimea), prefer to present them as "European politicians" without mentioning their party affiliation. This suggest the Kremlin is interested in demonstrating an acceptance of Russia's policies within Europe rather than displaying ideological affinities with partners having potentially questionable reputations.

Moscow thus acts rather cautiously in its pursuit of two major goals—cultivating a stronghold in Europe and legitimizing connections with new European partners through relatively low-profile events (such as public lectures or at the Valdai Club forum). To a large extent, Putin uses a resource similar to that practiced by the West: soft power. Examples include charities, such as the Great Saint Basil Foundation, sponsored by the conservative Russian tycoon Konstantin Malofeev, and non-commercial organizations, such as the Center of the National Glory of Russia, whose chairman is former Russian Railways chief Vladimir Yakunin.

The Kremlin also utilizes some Western entities—for example, the U.S.-based World Congress of Families, which has made statements such as: "At a time when Western governments are moving backward to a pagan worldview, Russia has taken a leadership role to advance the natural family." Experience sharing is important: referring to the anti-abortion bill passed in 2011, Lyubov Erofeeva, executive director of the Russian Association for Population and Development, said: "everything was copied from the experience of American fundamentalists and conservative circles of several European countries where abortion is forbidden or restricted severely."

One major problem with Russia's communication strategy is that too close an association with far-right parties can be interpreted as political support for a number of issues that are controversial for Russia. This includes Islamophobic and anti-Semitic attitudes within the European right, which the Kremlin officially rejects. As per a May 2014 article in *Time*:

> **"That is the crux of the Kremlin's European dilemma. Its economic interests dictate the need to spread discord inside the EU, but its natural allies in this effort are exactly the kinds of political forces that the Russian people have long been taught to detest. Right wing parties like Jobbik in Hungary and the National Front in France are the offspring of the political tradition that Russia defeated in World War II, and the cult of that victory still lies at the core of Russia's sense of self. No less importantly, nationalism in Russia is broadly seen as a dangerous centrifugal force, one that could tear the country apart if it spreads to Moscow's ethnically distinct dominions."**

Overplaying far-right ideology could also be dangerous due to the fact that it is Ukraine's far-right that is most determined to militarily resist Russia's Ukraine policies (as evidenced by the role and character of Ukraine's Azov division).

Conclusion

Russia is a trans-ideological actor that pragmatically transcends, if not disregards, ideological divides. In Putin's trans-ideological project, all identities are instrumental tools for legitimizing Russia's hegemony and grounded in claims that Russia is protecting its sovereignty and fighting neo-fascism. Yet, domestically, the Kremlin's trans-ideological mix might be uncomfortable for some ideologically explicit groups in Russia that support Putin's policies but dislike, for example, the leftist background of parties like Syriza that share an emancipatory and LGBT-friendly agenda.

The crisis in Ukraine became an important playground for testing Russia's strategy in Europe. Russia's European "understanders" legitimize Moscow's Eurasian ambitions and the right to defend its interests and those of its "compatriots" by force and annexation. Some commentators predict that "a Fifth International, a loose collection of anti–status quo forces, is emerging out of the chaos of the Ukraine conflict." This alliance might be based on solidarity in combatting allegedly pro-Nazi forces in Ukraine or supporting a return from supra-national regulation to a world of sovereign nation states. But such alliances not only threaten to negate Ukraine's European identity. More alarmingly, they can justify a retrograde reinstatement of a "concert of great powers" which in practice can mean a new cycle of spheres of influence in Europe—an option that many in the West would find most unfortunate.

PONARS Eurasia

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[1] This section is partly based on a recently published article: Stefano Braghiroli and Andrey Makarychev, "Russia and its supporters in Europe: a trans-ideology a-la-carte?" *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, Volume 16, Issue 2, March 2016.

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